



DOWNEAST SWAT

TALLIA

LJ VICKERY



TALIA (POLICE AND FIRE: OPERATION ALPHA)

DOWNEAST SWAT

BOOK TWO

LJ VICKERY



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Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

On the outside, Fleet Eggers looks like an extremely competent and highly successful business man. After all, he's run his own sound recording studio for over a dozen years. But on the inside, his confidence is nothing more than cookie crumbs. He's been running scared from having relationships because...? *Oh, yeah.* There was that time, sixteen years ago, when he almost went to prison because of the woman he dared love. He's vowed never to let that happen again.

Talia Spires is thrilled to be part of Downeast SWAT. She's been honing her skills for almost her entire life, first as a champion for her sister, then as a valued member of the Old Town PD. What she doesn't expect to find in her course of work is a man who rocks her world but clearly has problems with her being an alpha female. Can she change his mind about falling for a woman he obviously thinks is overbearing? She has no choice but to attempt it. She's already half in love with him, but she's also not about to change her true stripes for anyone. Even a luscious man conflicted.

CHAPTER ONE

They'd done their knock and announce, receiving no answer, which meant they were about to go in.

"Sound off," Talia barked, ready to breach the one-story building.

"Andera, up," Cisco barked into his mic.

"Lumous, up."

"Nadirm, up."

"Connaret, up."

Doug, Jess, and Azis responded in turn.

Talia looked over her five-person squad, all hyped with adrenaline, and gave the order. "Go, go, go!"

In diamond formation with Talia in the center, the quintet moved forward at a crouch. Cisco wielded the steel battering ram, both hands firm on the large tool, dealing two solid blows to the wooden portal. The door split down the middle, and he used a booted foot to kick the wood clear before moving aside so the rest of the squad could enter.

Doug and Jess went first, aiming their weapons high, as Talia, sandwiched behind and between them, went low with Azis on her six. There was nothing to be seen.

"Clear," she yelled.

"Andera, Nadirm, take left." She pointed her weapon at a room with the door closed. "Lumous, you follow me." There was a corridor to the right that led into the kitchen, then out

the back of the house, according to the building plans they'd studied before beginning the op. "Connaret, stay put and cover our asses from anyone coming up our rear."

Her squad members gave her succinct nods, but before she could move forward, Doug sent her an arrogant look and bypassed her position, taking point and moving forward without permission. Talia growled deep in her chest. It wasn't the first time the asshole had made a show of usurping her authority, but it might just be his last. She'd had it with his attitude. He was such a fucking wild card.

As soon as this was over, Talia was going to kick his ass and read him the riot act. If he thought he'd continue to get away with his bullshit, he was mistaken.

"Clear," she heard from her squad members left behind.

"Clear," Doug said from his position, having moved farther down the hallway from her, barely glancing into the kitchen on his way by. *Talia* entered the kitchen, checking under all surfaces and in cabinets before yanking open what she knew to be a pantry door. There, inside, was their perp.

"On your knees, hands on your head," she ordered, grabbing the perp and lurching him forward until he was in position. She knocked him to his belly and was atop his prone body in less than two seconds, binding his hands behind him with the zip-ties on her belt.

"Kitchen clear. Suspect located and detained," she snarled into her mic, angry as hell at Doug. She got to her feet and looked down the hallway where he'd disappeared. He'd opened the back door, against orders, and was now nowhere to be seen.

"Okay. We're done here," she growled. "Everybody out front."

Leaving the dummy on the ground in the mocked-up kitchen that had been configured for their day's drill, Talia stomped back through the sparse living room and back out into the daylight of their training grounds. She was furious. Beyond furious, but she needed to get a handle on her anger before

addressing her squad. With the exception of Doug, they'd done well, performing competently and in synch. She had to remind herself of that before she blew a gasket and got labeled, "hysterical female" by the bane of her existence; a term she'd heard a number of times from him over the past few weeks, albeit always under his breath.

Her chief, Mason, must have seen the frustration on her face before she could clear it, because he strode over to her and gave a chin thrust toward the command bus. "Join me before you debrief," he ordered.

"Squad E, clear," she remembered to say so the drug-house scene could be reset for Squad F to do their thing. Then she followed Mase at a trot. His legs were about twice as long as hers, and he wasn't cutting her any slack. Just the way Talia liked it. She was five foot two, but that didn't mean she was "less" than anyone else.

"What happened in there?" Mason clipped as soon as they were on the bus and away from the curiosity of her peers. "The back door alarm sounded before the perp in the kitchen was secured."

Talia knew they had cameras inside, showing every part of the home's interior so Mason and the tech crew could monitor the drills. He knew exactly what had gone down. That he wanted her to rehash it, didn't bode well.

"Doug again, sir," Talia huffed, frustrated that she'd have to deal harshly with her recalcitrant squad member for the second time today. The first instance where he'd gone rogue, they'd been mimicking a highway traffic shut-down, searching for a kidnapped child—a dummy like the one she'd taken down in the kitchen. Doug had drawn his gun on one of the drivers before they'd ascertained he was the actual kidnapper. It had been a rookie move, and Talia had dragged him over the coals for it.

Mason continued. "If you can't keep him in line, Talia, your squad will be useless to me on call-outs. We can't have any wild cards on our team messing things up. Say the word, and he's gone."

Mason had made the offer before, the previous month during drills when Doug had done a few things that were equally as bone-headed, but Talia had fought to keep her squad together, certain she could get him under control. Maybe Mason was right, but she wasn't quite ready to give up on Doug, yet.

"Let me talk to him one more time. After we have a word, I'll sideline him for the next drill, and let him cool his heels. It'll either get him thinking about his behavior, or walking out, because he's going to be spitting mad."

"Not an attitude we need when we're trying to work as a cohesive unit, Talia," Mason warned. "Tell him, from me, if he can't keep his shit together, he's finished."

"Yes, sir," Talia acknowledged, not letting her frustration show as she walked off the bus, but she was...pissed. Doug was decent when he played by the rules, and she had no doubt he'd perform admirably for what he considered the *right* squad leader; a *male* squad leader, so she needed a new approach. Rather than dressing him down, she had to make him understand the gravity of his position.

"A word, Talia?" Cisco, Doug's best friend approached her as she chewed up ground toward Doug with her size six combat boots.

She stopped, but not happily.

"Unless you have something useful to say about Doug's blatant disregard for protocol, you should make good use of your break to hydrate and regroup," she told him pointedly. "I need to have a word with him."

"Yeah. About that." Cisco, who could be as big a jerk as Doug at times, actually looked uncertain of himself. "Can we speak someplace privately?"

Talia didn't trust Cisco. Not exactly. But he wasn't as big a question mark as Doug. If he had intel that would help her deal with her "problem-child" she was open to that. With a tip of her head indicating he should join her, she stomped off toward the tree-line, not waiting to see if Cisco followed.

But he did.

“Make it quick,” she ordered, when they were finally out of earshot. “As well as putting Doug straight, we have to get things ready for Squad G in a few minutes.” Each squad set up the empty house with new parameters for the second squad to go in after theirs.

“It’s about Doug.”

Uh, duh. Talia barely refrained from rolling her eyes. Of course it was. Ready to get her ass chewed by not one, but two of her squad members, she stood with her arms crossed over her chest, waiting.

“He, uh, has a problem with women.”

That’s what Talia had been expecting to hear.

She let his words sink in, and... It wasn’t the first time Talia had faced prejudice against females. Being a woman in law enforcement, she’d encountered it over and over again. Still, she’d found a welcoming niche in her current department in Old Town, so she’d let her guard down over the past couple years.

“No shit.” Talia wasn’t about to cut Doug any slack because he was misogynistic. She didn’t blink as she continued to hear Cisco out.

“No. I mean he has a *real* problem with women.” Cisco huffed, looking damned uncomfortable.

Why was it so tough for some guys to just spit out their crap and be done with it?

His voice grew gruff. “When Doug was fourteen, he came to live with Chief Ildavorg.”

Okay. Somehow, she’d known that.

“The chief’s brother—Doug’s father—died in a boating accident when Doug was ten. After that, Doug’s crazy mother was all Doug had left. The woman not only beat him, regularly, she...physically assaulted him in...other ways. She and a few of her friends.” Cisco shrugged, as if shifting something horrible from his shoulders. “He ran away to his

uncle's house and lived there until he went away to college. But he's never been, after what he suffered...normal where females are concerned."

Talia was appalled. She thought her own childhood had specters, but this... "How...?" She cleared her throat. "Didn't this come up in his psych eval?" She felt for the guy, but man, he needed some serious help.

Again, Cisco shrugged. "Maybe, but the shrink obviously didn't think it would be a problem. She clearly didn't take into consideration the possibility that Doug might be on a woman-run squad."

Talia nailed Cisco with a probing look. "But he's been... involved with policing and the public for years." At least ten, if she wasn't mistaken. "Tell me how this hasn't affected his conduct as a patrolman? And be truthful. I know the two of you have worked together at OPD." She'd heard through the grapevine that Doug, Cisco, and Ildavorg's son Dieter, a lobsterman, were all close friends.

"He's..." Cisco ran a hand back through his hair. "He avoids anything that might have him butting heads with a female, because the chief has reprimanded him, privately, a number of times. But since the chief also knows where Doug's problems stem from, he's cut him some slack and...buried those censures."

Funny how relatives who meant well could be your worst enemy. If Ildavorg had made Doug get help, he might be managing the world better these days.

"And you?" Talia couldn't help but ask. "You seem to join in with most of Doug's antics. That can't be doing you any favors." She'd ascertained that Cisco was smart and capable, and she hadn't previously been able to understand why he'd want himself painted with the same brush as Doug. Now, she knew he was covering for him.

"I've been his friend for years. And I know what he's been through. If that means I have to look like an asshole to take some of the heat off him, that's what I do," he grumbled.

It made sense to Talia now, the mixed messages she'd been getting from Cisco. He'd alternately be accommodating and insubordinate; challenging her authority, but on the flip side, often playing nicely.

Since he'd come forward voluntarily, she'd use his insight; see what his thoughts were about today. If his intel proved sagacious, she'd move forward accordingly. "He screwed up today, big time, Cisco. Mason's not happy and is talking about tossing him off the team," she revealed.

When he would have rebutted, she held up her hand. "I've fixed that, for now. I've told Mase I'd deal with it. But if it happens again..." she trailed off. She didn't have to continue. Cisco knew how that sentence would end.

"Right." He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but hashing this out with her.

Tough shit. His name was indelibly linked to Doug's, so he needed to give her something to go on. "How would you manage this if you were me?" she asked.

Cisco blinked. Clearly, he hadn't expected to be put on the spot.

"You want my opinion?" He swallowed hard and looked discomfited.

"You *are* my second in command," she told him. "So, yes. I'm conferring with you on team business. Now, don't think of Doug as a friend for the moment, think of him as someone over whom you have a supervisory capacity. What would you do about his infractions today?"

"Well, shit," Cisco grumbled. "I don't have a fucking clue. I just wanted to let you know why he does what he does."

"Which is all well and fine, but we need to find a way to deal with it if he's going to remain an integral part of our squad. As Mason reminded me, we can't have someone on board who isn't a team player."

"Maybe..." Cisco seemed hesitant.

“Go ahead. I’m listening.” She kept her foot still, even though she wanted to tap it impatiently.

“Is it... Do you think it’s possible for you to put him under my supervision when we do drills, and when we’re called out? Not to give me lead on our ops. But... You tell me how things will go down, and I’ll fill him in. He’ll take orders from me. I know he will.”

Talia thought for a moment how that might come back to bite her and undermine her authority, but...this was a team endeavor, working SWAT. If this suggestion brought Doug in line without having to can his ass, she could attempt to swallow her pride and give Cisco some autonomy.

She wasn’t stupid, though. This could all be a ploy thought up between the pair of them to weaken her command and make her look incompetent in front of Mason. If she were sidelined or demoted, Cisco would be in the driver seat where Squad E was concerned.

Still... He didn’t look like that was his end-goal. And Talia was normally a good judge of character. Having been seriously duped when she was young, she’d honed her bullshit detector to a fine point as she’d aged.

“Okay. Let’s try it,” she allowed.

Cisco looked flustered. Clearly he hadn’t thought she’d agree.

“But I’ll talk to him first and let him know how things will be. I’ll also let him know this is his last chance. If he can’t work well under your jurisdiction, he’s out.”

“Fair enough,” Cisco acknowledged, exhaling deeply. “But...he’s still my friend, and you...aren’t. Which means,” his jaw firmed up and he looked more like the prick she’d come to know, rather than the concerned man whom she’d briefly glimpsed, “I’ll take my orders from you in the field and keep Doug under control, but don’t expect me to play nice anywhere else.”

“Noted,” Talia said with a succinct nod, dismissing him since the kum-ba-yah moment was over. “You may go.”

He gave a terse, semi-sarcastic salute, then turned on his heels and left.

Talia drew in a deep, cleansing breath, knowing her next conversation—the one with Doug—would be far more contentious. But... There was no time like the present to deal with her insubordinate underling.

She marched resolutely from the woods and approached the man where he sat on an old split-rail fence, sipping water with another couple of male teammates, a fiercely disgruntled look on his face.

“We need to have a word,” Talia told him without preamble.

“Okay,” he answered with a careless shrug. “Talk.”

She looked around at his several companions, who suddenly looked uncomfortable. “You want me to air things out with an audience?”

“Why not. If you’re going to fire me, I might as well have witnesses when I sue your ass for discrimination.”

“Discrimination?” she scoffed. “How about insubordination. You forget, Doug, Mason and the tech people have everything you did on video. And he’s not pleased. You didn’t think he called me into the command bus to shoot the shit, did you?”

He grumbled, but gave a muted, “I suppose not. But you also talked to Cisco,” he added suspiciously. “What was that about?”

Talia had to be as upfront about this as possible, but she didn’t want him to know that Cisco had divulged personal information regarding Doug’s past. Instead, she pretended she was the one to call Cisco aside. “I had a chat with your friend, so that all my ducks would be in order before confronting you. You still okay with me telling it like it is in front of your buddies?”

He jumped the few inches to the ground and shuffled his feet. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

So be it.

“Mason wants to fire your ass, but I told him I still see a lot of good in you. That we need to give you one more chance.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” he returned angrily.

“No favors, Lumous.” She used his last name purposely, letting him know she was under no illusions as to any friendship between them. “Here’s the deal. You fucked up in the drill, going ahead of me when I clearly told you I’d be taking point. Not only that, you decided not to clear the kitchen before heading out the back door. That left me alone and vulnerable to any threats in that section of the house.”

“What?” he snorted. “You’re the squad leader. You can’t take care of yourself?”

Talia bit back a growl. “What about ‘team effort’ do you not understand, Lumous? We work as a unit. Not as individuals. If we don’t, somebody’s going to end up dead.”

He had the good graces to wipe the sneer from his face, but still didn’t look repentant. The onlookers, however, all mumbled excuses, quickly packed up, and left the vicinity. They knew Doug had fucked up, and clearly didn’t want him asking for their opinions.

“Now here’s how things will go from now on,” Talia explained, not giving him the opportunity to make any more excuses. “I know you have some stick up your ass where I’m concerned.” She didn’t let on that she knew he had it out for the entire female gender. “But I still see the possibility that you can be an asset to our team. And for that reason, I’ve made an executive decision. From this point forward, you will answer directly to Cisco. He’ll take his intel and instruction from me, but *he’ll* tell you what your roll will be in any given situation. You and I will not have any words, directly or even indirectly if that’s your choice, after today. How does that work for you?”

Doug grunted. “Fine. I guess,” he allowed.

“Good. But understand this, Doug. I’m watching. And Mason is watching. If you fuck up under Cisco’s command, you’re gone, and maybe Cisco is, too. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” he said, but seemed...relieved.

Given his past, Talia could commiserate that he no longer had to take orders from a lady, but she was also serious about giving him the boot if he went off script in the future.

She was not about to jeopardize the lives of her team-members because he hadn’t dealt with his shitty past.

* * *

BY THE TIME the day wrapped up, it hadn’t been all bad, but Talia felt the need to do something nice for herself as a reward for the shit she’d endured.

Did she dare?

Hell, yes.

CHAPTER TWO

Fleet Eggers removed his headphones and sighed. The latest recording session he'd done with Unisex Poncho had gone poorly. The lead singer had an inflated ego, and against Fleet's better judgement, he'd leaned the mix heavily on the vocals to assuage the asshole, and... It sounded like crap. He lamented how to proceed. UP's drummer was the strongest member of the band, and he should have been calling the shots with the rhythms, but the singer had, heedlessly, gone off-script over and over, changing up the beat, which drove Fleet nuts. He wondered how the band put up with the blowhard.

He rubbed the spot above one eye where pain bloomed, attempting to relieve the torment that had been building as he tried to mix things properly. This was easily his fourth or fifth headache this week, and it sucked.

Fleet reached for the ever-handy bottle of ibuprofen and popped several—not that it ever helped—acknowledging it was time to call it a night. It was Saturday, one of his busier days at the studio, but he was normally finished up well before now. His new right-hand person, Everlee, generally helped mitigate his enormous workload, but the last couple days she'd been involved in some kind of SWAT thing, drills of some kind. Hence, he'd been pulling extra hours.

And speaking of SWAT...

Fleet sighed and couldn't help but pull his phone from his pocket to scroll through his contacts. When he reached the one he wanted, he ran his fingers over the name of the woman who'd intrigued him for weeks, but whom he hadn't called...

yet. Talia had given him her number nearly a month ago at Everlee and Mason's wedding. He'd met the pretty blonde on the campus of UMaine when she and her team had been called in to rescue Ever from a shooter at the radio station. They'd ended up chatting after everybody was safe, and then they'd reconnected at Mason and Ever's unconventional wedding. To say they'd hit it off was an understatement. Talia was about the closest thing to Fleet's idea of a perfect woman he'd ever come across. And that was saying a lot, considering he was thirty-four, and had spent all his adult life in the music world, where beautiful, talented women abounded.

He wasn't quite sure how Talia had dared give him her number, but Fleet seemed to remember Everlee having a hand in it.

It wasn't like Fleet to even consider a fix-up, he certainly never had in the past, nor did he do any online dating, but here he was, in possession of a number for a woman who clearly tickled his fancy...and he was chicken-shit to use it.

Talia was on the SWAT team that Everlee had a role in overseeing. She was a squad leader from what he'd ascertained, so he knew she'd be very busy and stressed all weekend, still... He looked at his watch. The team's drills or maneuvers, or whatever they called their reindeer games, had to be finished for the day.

It was after seven o'clock. Maybe Talia needed food. Fleet certainly did. Dare he call her?

He sighed. Why the hell would he think a woman like Talia would be interested in him, just because she'd been guilted into giving out her contact info by someone who was essentially her boss? She was an extremely pragmatic sort and had a by-the-book look about her, which didn't surprise him because of her job. He, on the other hand, was free spirited; a bohemian. Not to mention he was of African-American descent and she was...blonde.

Very, very blonde.

Groaning, Fleet thrust his phone back into his pocket as he began the process of shutting down his soundboards. But he

continued to lament.

He and Talia were polar opposites, so why was his mind even going there? Why keep up the self-tease?

If he were honest, it was because her pretty visage hadn't left him over the past few weeks. At odd times and all too frequently, her face and voice came to him. The remembered sound of her laughter lit him up inside, every time. But how could he justify calling her, when he knew better? He'd been hurt in *very* similar circumstances a few years back. And even though he understood history didn't always repeat itself, weren't the odds good that it would if he tried to make something happen with Talia?

And there was the rub. Once burnt, twice fearful of being staked out in the hot sun to be incinerated yet again.

No. He would not pull his phone out again.

Sighing, he took one final look around his studio, his sanctuary, and switched off the lights. He'd be okay. He just needed to cleave to his job, enjoy the company of his new employee, Everlee, and appreciate the vast array of musicians he hobnobbed with all the time.

Forget about romance. It was too much trouble.

Turning his key in the lock after closing the door behind him, he set the alarm he'd sprung for after suffering two break-ins the first month he'd been in business. He threw his shoulders back and tried to forget about his headache. Everything was going to be just fine. He'd run his very successful studio for twelve years. He made a decent living. And he didn't need any complications that had luscious female contours.

He patted his door affectionately before he turned and took the stairs up to street level two at a time. His stomach needed food, pronto.

He made it to the pavement, when—

“Hey, Fleet.”

“Talia?” *Shit*. Had his voice just cracked?

“Yeah. It’s me,” she said somewhat hesitantly, pushing a long blonde lock behind one ear. “I, uh, hope I’m not overstepping, but Everlee gave me your address and I saw the lights on, sooo...” She finished up, looking uncomfortable.

“So you thought you’d say hello?” he finished, trying to keep his sudden, bubbling excitement at bay. He wanted to fist-pump. Talia had been thinking about him.

“Actually, I wondered if you wanted to grab a bite to eat,” she affirmed. “I’ve...been meaning to call you, but I’ve been busy.”

“Me, too,” he lied. Not necessarily about the too busy part, but about the meaning to call thing. He’d *wanted* to but had talked himself out of it daily for the entire month of October. Now, however... “I’d love to eat. It’s been a frustrating day. I’ve been sequestered for,” he glanced at his watch again, squinting to ignore his headache, “nine hours, trying to get tracks squared away for a difficult band. Well, not that the whole band is a challenge. Just the lead singer who’s... problematic, but it’s just not happening.”

“I’ve had a sucky day, too,” Talia admitted with a heaving breath. “With a squad member who also doesn’t play nice. Why can’t people just do their jobs and make life easy?”

“Damned good question,” he agreed. “I tell you what. We’ll bitch about our woes over chowder and beer. How does that sound?”

“Chowder, yes. Beer, no,” she answered with a flirty shrug that told him she was happy he’d agreed to eat with her. “I have drills again tomorrow, so no alcohol tonight.”

“Got it,” he said. “I probably shouldn’t either. I’m back at the boards tomorrow, early, and I just popped more than the prescribed dose of ibuprofen.”

“Headache?” she asked as they began walking toward the busy part of downtown.

He nodded. “A huge one. I’ve had a bunch this week. I’m beginning to think I need to have my eyes checked. They’ve become more frequent and are getting really annoying.”

“Yeah. Sounds like you might need glasses.” She gave him an impish grin. “You’ll probably look cute in them.”

Fleet groaned. Just what he wanted to hear. That he was cute. It wasn’t awful, but still, no man over thirty wanted that moniker. Handsome, pumped, buff; those were all words with positive connotations. Cute was...a puppy. And Fleet didn’t want to be Talia’s puppy.

And he wasn’t soft and squishy, either.

Because he worked long hours sitting in his studio, he made a point of hitting the gym and the running trails around the city, but when he had a few days to himself, he took to the mountains and hiked. Actually, he did bouldering. *Yup*. Nothing wimpy for him. He picked extreme trails that included swollen stream crossings and huge piles of rock just begging to be scaled.

“I know this is a completely different subject, but,” he had to ask, “I don’t suppose you like to hike, do you?” he asked.

Talia scoffed. “Are you kidding? I was born and raised just north of here, and I cut my teeth on Maine’s four-thousand footers.”

“That’s awesome,” he grinned. “Hiking is kind of my passion. Other than music that is.”

“Then we’ll definitely have to hit some trails together,” she approved. “I actually have most weekends off, *when* we’re not training.”

“Sounds good. Although...” he wasn’t tooting his own horn here, just warning her. “...I tend to do things a little balls-to-the-wall. We’re not talking a little two-hour Sunday stroll.”

Talia laughed. “You think you can scare me? Think again, Fleet. What are we talking here, a little mountaintop parkour?”

“Kind of,” he grinned back. “Do you know what bouldering is?”

She raised a brow. “Rock climbing without equipment?” she posited. “I think I’ve heard of it.”

He clarified as they turned a corner and walked toward the restaurants that lined the main street. “Nothing cliff-like,” he assured her. “Bouldering is mostly done on rock formations that are no taller than fifteen-feet, but yeah. There’s no equipment except a crash pad and some chalk. And the right footwear, of course,” he added.

“I’d be interested in trying that,” she didn’t hesitate. “I love a good physical challenge.”

“It takes tremendous upper body strength,” Fleet warned.

“Is that a brag, or an invitation for me to feel your muscles,” she teased, and before he could sputter, she actually wrapped one small hand around his bicep. “Mmm,” she purred. “Solid.”

Fleet felt himself blush, which because of his dark skin he hoped wasn’t all that apparent, and attempted a comeback. “I, um, have to do something to keep my ass in shape since it spends most of its time in a chair.”

“Looks like you’ve found the right balance,” she teased, seeming regretful to let go as she slid her fingers down the length of his arm. “Wanna feel mine?”

Fleet nearly choked on spit.

Wanna...? Oh, shit. She meant her arm.

It was poised between them, flexed.

“Uh, sure.” He sent his hand out tentatively and surrounded one gun. Rock solid, yet encased in velvety soft skin. “Impressive,” he managed, clearing his throat of the want that threatened to strangle him. He hadn’t expected another kind of hunger that suddenly suffused him, nor the yearning to take all of her into his arms and simply absorb her essence.

“Well?” She brought him back from his inappropriate fantasies.

“Nice. Strong,” he rasped out, feeling like an idiot. Since when was his vocabulary relegated to one-word answers?

“So, does that mean you think I have a chance of doing well at this bouldering thing, Fleet?”

He could certainly give her honesty here. “I think you’ll be a natural,” he pretty much guaranteed, having heard from Everlee some of the things Talia and the rest of the SWAT team did with their bodies to train.

As he and Talia conversed, they’d walked several blocks and were now strolling amidst a small crowd, checking out the various cafés, some of which had live bands performing on their sidewalk spaces.

“See anything good?” Talia asked him. “For bands, I mean. You clearly know the music scene here, so I know you won’t steer us wrong.”

Fleet pointed. “Let’s head for that place.” He indicated a restaurant where he knew the chowder was top notch, and the band was familiar to him. “Chick and Monkey are playing, and they’re really good... If you like prog-rock,” he ended, giving Talia the choice.

“They sound good from here,” she said, tipping her head to take a listen. “But Fleet, I have to warn you. I don’t know prog-rock from alt-rock from rock-rock. Give me a physical challenge any day, and I’m your girl. Talk about music, and I know next to nothing.”

Fleet wasn’t discouraged. Not everyone had to know everything, and before Ever came along, he’d been woefully ignorant about police officers...with the exception of the few bad experiences he’d had...

He cleared his brain of that shit. “Not a problem. If you want to learn a few things, I can help. Or if you just want to enjoy what you hear and not think about it too much, we can do that, too.”

She scoffed. “I have a feeling that hanging around with you, I’m going to absorb all the music-scene stuff whether I mean to or not. Am I right?”

Fleet felt his breathing hitch. Talia was planning on hanging with him? Cool. Very cool. He’d thought maybe she was giving lip-service to the hiking thing, but now that she mentioned taking music tips from him, he knew she wasn’t

messing with his head. He had to tamp down his enthusiasm though. Just because she seemed on board with spending time together, didn't mean she found him *romantically* attractive. And was he even willing to risk...?

Nope. Another bad subject, and no need to darken the mood.

This was a simple meal, Fleet told himself. Not even a date. He'd worry about shit from his past, later.

He answered Talia's question. "You're probably right. You're bound to pick things up by association. But please, shut me down if I start talking music too much. It's kind of my go-to subject, and I can get pretty boring."

She hummed a little under her breath and took his arm again, briefly. "I get the idea that nothing you're going to do will bore me," Talia told him, then changed the subject. "So, is this where we're eating?" she asked brightly.

Fleet almost couldn't get his tongue to work after the third positive thing in a row the woman said. Here he'd been thinking about Talia for weeks, and she was giving him all kinds of green lights. That meant the decision of whether he was going to man-up and date her was all on him, and had been rendered moot. Since she'd clearly already made up her mind, he would go there, apprehensions be damned.

"This café *is* a great spot," he managed, putting a hand to the small of her back and gently urging her toward the outdoor maître d' station. They didn't have to wait long to be seated, and on the walk to their table, Chick, the lead singer in the band caught his eye and gave a friendly chin lift.

"See," Talia snickered quietly as they sat and picked up their menus. "You know the band more than casually, don't you?"

"I've worked with them a time or two," Fleet admitted. "Alley, or Chick as she's known onstage, is a very talented writer. I see them going places." His stomach growled, and he bent his head to the night's specials; half of which were

elaborate vegetarian choices, and the reason he frequented this place. “Sorry. I’m really hungry.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “I have an enormous appetite.”

He liked that she not only did, but that she’d admit it.

They soon placed their orders and began to make small talk. *Very* small talk, it seemed.

Fleet couldn’t be mistaken that when either one of them started probing deeper into the other’s past, the subject got changed. He was used to dealing with—or more accurately avoiding—his own boogeymen. Now it was fascinating to find that Talia, who seemed very straight-forward to him, seemed to have a few things in her closet, as well.

“We’re skirting around a lot of stuff here, aren’t we?” Fleet dared, after the third time one of them segued off a subject to mention the lovely October weather they’d been enjoying.

“Yeah. We are,” Talia sighed. “But I’m okay with it if you are. As long as it’s both of us being reticent...” She took a bite of her bottom lip and didn’t finish.

“It *is* both of us,” Fleet admitted. “And I’m fine with that. I’m all for getting to know you slowly before we bring up all our baggage.”

She looked relieved, giving him a huge smile. “Nice. Because I’m attracted to you, Fleet. I’ll readily admit that. But I don’t generally date, because I’m not ready to spill all my problems with someone right out of the box. You can’t imagine all the anger I’ve stirred by being...vague.” She brightened further. “As long as you’re not pissed that I’m holding back, I’m really interested in dating you.”

Well, hell. Talia was a lot braver than he was. She’d not only placed her bet on the table, she’d called on him to do the same. What could he do but show his cards?

“Okay. Here it is.” He gathered his courage. “I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since the wedding, Talia. I’m all in for dating. But I—”

“Fleet!” A feminine voice cut off the caveat he was going to send Talia.

He knew who it was. Not great timing, but not awful either. It would give Talia time to digest the fact that he had secrets, too.

Fleet got to his feet and gave Alley a hug. “Alley, this is Talia. Talia, Alley, or Chick as she’s sometimes known.” Funny, he’d been so preoccupied, he hadn’t even realized the band had ended their set.

“Nice to meet you, Talia,” Alley said with a smile, holding out her hand.

Talia took it. “Same,” she said with a grin. “Fleet has been schooling me on music. He says you’re a really good writer.”

Alley beamed. “That’s high praise coming from him.” She turned to Fleet. “And speaking of which, what did you think of the song we just played? It’s new, and I think we need to get some studio time with you to record it.”

Fleet wanted to smack himself. Had he heard a word of the new track? *Nope*. Not a one. He’d been so absorbed with the lady next to him, the world could have blown up and he wouldn’t have noticed. How out of character was that? Never, not once in his memory, had he paid more attention to his table-mate than to the music being played.

Shit. Alley’s waiting for an answer.

“Uh, yeah. It has a lot of merit,” he told Alley. “Give me a call on Monday and let me know when you’d like to come in.”

Alley rolled her eyes as if she knew he was full of shit. Which she probably did, because normally he’d engage with all kinds of suggestions regarding the nuances of her new creations. But bless her, she didn’t miss a beat.

“Yup. We’ll talk,” she smirked, then turned back to the woman beside him. “It was very nice meeting you, Talia. I have a feeling I’ll be seeing a lot more of you in the future.”

She would if Fleet had anything to say about it.

Headache be damned, this night had turned out to be stellar.

CHAPTER THREE

Had she come on strong? *Yes*. Did she regret it? *Hell, no*. It was a fault of hers, or a strength, depending on who you talked to. She always made up her mind, for better or for worse, then went for it. Which she'd done tonight. Talia did an internal shrug. Fleet might as well get used to it if they actually ended up dating.

In truth, she'd been tired of waiting for Fleet to call, and every time she'd asked Everlee if she was barking up the wrong tree with Fleet, Ever had assured her she was not. And now she knew—sort of—why he'd hesitated. He had skeletons in his closet, just like her, which had precluded him from being the one to initiate contact. Talia just hoped that by being up front regarding her own baggage, which remained tightly packed, that he wouldn't feel like he had to spill his guts to her, unless it became necessary.

Fleet was just damned hot, and Talia was interested in seeing if they had any physical chemistry and similar interests before they dug more deeply into each other's back stories.

On the surface, she liked that he had the music thing going—something that was pretty much a mystery to her—because digging into new endeavors satisfied her ever-curious appetite. And hiking? That was an addition to the feast that was Fleet, along with the unexpected side-dish of bouldering...which she was suddenly dying to try.

She mentally cheered. The table was set, now if she could just work things out so that when they left the restaurant he'd

kiss her, she'd be able to tell if things between them were worth pursuing.

"The chowder was excellent," she said, pushing her bowl aside. Talia had also gone with a big salad, and was contemplating an actual dessert before the man-feast she had planned for later. "I don't suppose you'd be up for sharing something chocolate?" she asked.

"My favorite," he admitted, giving her the sexiest smile. "I know it's not something guys usually admit, but I'm a closet chocoholic. I have a desk drawer at work dedicated solely to candy bars."

Mmm. A man not afraid to mix things up.

"What's your favorite?" she asked as she perused both the dessert menu and him, alternately.

"There's a company in Colorado that makes these unbelievable organic cup-thingies with just two ingredients, dark chocolate and honey."

"Sounds good. I'll have to try those," Talia replied, imagining what the confection would taste like, licked from Fleet's lips.

"Stop by any time," he agreed easily, clearly not knowing where her mind had gone. He indicated the paper she held which told of the night's dessert offerings. "Have you picked for us?"

"How about a molten chocolate cake?" she asked. "It comes with vanilla ice cream, whipped cream, or..."

"...both?" he finished with a grin. "I sure hope so."

"Yup," she beamed, putting down the menu. "Both, it is." *Damn.* He was a man after her own heart.

As they waited for their final dish, Fleet asked more about her day.

"So, tell me about the drills you held earlier. Talk about the asshole who wanted to harsh your high."

“Nice drug reference,” Talia answered, becoming a little more cautious with that mention. “Umm, am I to suppose you...smoke? The music industry and all...” She waved a vague hand around wondering if she sounded like an antiquated idiot, or if she were, indeed, spot on.

“Well,” he prevaricated for only a second. “It’s a pretty normal activity for musicians,” he cautioned. “And for myself... I still smoke occasionally,” he admitted. “Not nearly as much as I did a few years ago. Does that bother you? I respect the laws in Maine, and I don’t go over the legal limits.”

Talia shrugged. How did she answer this without coming off as “establishment”?

She sighed. “I’m not a huge fan,” she told him honestly. “And not just because we get tested regularly at the station. It’s more from...the baggage I have that we’re not ready to discuss.”

Fleet held up a hand. “Then we won’t talk about it,” he told her definitively. “And I won’t smoke if we’re going to start seeing each other.” He spoke frankly. “I can take it or leave it these days, and if you’re the incentive...”

“No, no, no,” Talia demurred. “You don’t need to give up anything for me. I just won’t be comfortable if you smoke while we’re together.”

“Not a problem,” he reiterated seriously. “It’s not an integral part of my life any more. You know, like drinking,” he led. “I might have imbibed a lot when I was in college, but now I’m such a lightweight, two beers and I’m ready for bed.”

“Me, too,” Talia laughed. This was good. Swapping where their heads were at. And she believed him about his weed use. “In college, I was known to have a few...lost nights after rounds of shots with my girls.”

Fleet grinned. “I was a shot guy only once,” he chuckled. “I embarrassed myself monumentally after imbibing an unknown number of tequila shots in my freshman year, after which I swore off them forever.”

“Oooh, tell me,” Talia poked. The topic was a lot sweeter than rehashing her day with her complicated squad-mate, Doug.

Besides, she had drinking stories of her own to share.

Twenty minutes later after becoming bust-a-gut-mirthful over some seriously debauched anecdotes—and a decadent dessert she attempted not to snort out her nose—Talia had a better picture of the man Fleet had been in college; a light-weight, studious nerd with a side hustle of extreme sports. It was an unexpected, but very sweet combination, and was probably why he came off a little shy. The nerd in him, clearly still kept things low key.

Talia found she really liked all that about him, and as they settled the bill—she insisted on paying half, which Fleet didn’t like at all—she figured she’d had it right, earlier. If a kiss was going to happen tonight, he’d be too shy. She’d have to be the one to initiate things.

“You want to call it a night, or prowl around town for a bit?” he asked, obviously remembering that she had drills tomorrow.

Talia looked at her watch. “It’s only nine. If I’m tucked in by eleven, I’ll be good.”

“Which gives us...?”

Talia laughed. “It’s only a nine-minute drive home for me,” she told him. “So we have at least an hour.”

“Nine minutes, huh? You live...?”

“Fishing, Fleet?” she countered with a snicker as they both came to their feet and wove their way out of the restaurant between tables.

“Maybe,” he answered, giving a cheerful wave to the band just before he held the door open for her.

When was the last time anyone had done her that courtesy? Talia definitely liked it.

“But if you don’t feel comfortable telling me, that’s okay,” Fleet promised her. “*I live above my studio,*” he added.

“I’m just teasing,” Talia assured him. “I have a place in Old Town, just north of here. It’s not much. A small cottage, but it’s home. Now to get back to your first question, I’d love to walk around for a while and digest, so I don’t have to hit the hay on a full stomach.”

“Sounds good to me,” he replied, but the line between his brows deepened as he attempted a half-grin.

Well, shit. She’d forgotten he didn’t feel well. “Your headache still doing a number on you?” she asked solicitously.

“Yeah. It’s persistent tonight. But I’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep,” he brightened.

“You sure you’re up for a walk?” Talia asked.

He nodded. “The unaccustomed fresh air will do me good.”

“It’s Maine,” she countered impishly. “There’s always fresh air.”

“Not if you’re trapped in your studio twelve hours a day,” he retorted. “Only when I’m off do I get my fill. The air and the mountains were the reason I stayed here after college, you know.”

“Where are you from, originally?” she asked, before realizing she might have opened a can of worms. “If you don’t want to say, that’s okay.” She didn’t tend to want to talk about *her* childhood home.

“Alabama,” he told her, but she could sense his hesitation. “Huntsville to be exact. My parents are still there, and I uh, see them every so often. How about you? Are you from Maine, originally?” He’d changed the subject pretty quickly. What was up with that?

Of course, who was she to talk? She’d avoided all mention of her home town, too.

Purposely.

“I’m actually from Skowhegan,” she answered without enthusiasm.

“And do you still have family there?”

“I do,” she told him, her discomfort with the subject had her mumbling. She didn’t like this subject, but Fleet couldn’t know that, so she continued. Without enthusiasm. “My parents and one sister.”

He must have finally clued in to her reluctant vibe because he dropped the subject. “How often are you in Orono?” he asked.

“Not that often,” she admitted, able to take a full breath now that he’d segued into a different topic. “I work a lot of shifts for the Old Town department, and when I’m off, I’m generally chilling at home with my cat and my plants.”

“You have a cat?” he asked, grinning again.

“I do. Her name’s Majorca, or May, for short.”

“I sense a story behind that name,” Fleet teased, taking them in a direction Talia hadn’t walked before. But she wasn’t worried. Fleet had a good reputation in town—she’d done a little covert research on him—*and* he was friends with Everlee. Not to mention that she could more than take care of herself in a fight if it came down to it.

Her feet moved companionably next to his as she talked openly again. “I did a semester abroad in Spain,” she said, “and became addicted to the marmalade they make from the bitter oranges grown on the island. Fast forward a few years, and I got this kitten, and found she went nuts over it. I can’t leave it out of the refrigerator, or she finds a way to get into the jars to eat it all.”

Fleet laughed. “I would have thought you’d call her marmalade, then.”

“Too conventional for an orange cat,” she countered with a smile. “And there’s nothing conventional about May.”

“I’d like to meet her someday,” he replied. “But no pressure.”

Because Fleet dared mention a future, Talia grew brave and reached for his hand, threading her fingers through his.

“No pressure felt.”

“Nice,” he sighed, glancing down at their combined digits. “I was wondering how I could take your hand and do it smoothly without looking like an asshole.”

“Are you saying I’m an asshole because I took the initiative?” Talia mock-growled.

He looked appalled and stuttered. “No! I...”

“I’m just teasing, Fleet.” Talia gave a flirty laugh. “And FYI, I promise I won’t think you’re a dick if you decided to explore things a little more.”

There. That was about as succinctly as she could put it; letting him know she wouldn’t mind if he got a little more... intimate.

“I’m, uh, not in the habit of throwing myself at women,” he admitted a little gruffly. “And I don’t want to be picking up the wrong signals here, so... Are you saying you wouldn’t mind if I kissed you?” Without waiting for an answer, he tugged her into the entry-alcove of a store that had closed up hours earlier and stared into her eyes.

“See. I knew you were astute,” Talia answered breathlessly, her anticipation building. Her body gave a small shiver, and she was unable to keep her tongue from swiping across her bottom lip.

Fleet watched it as if mesmerized, then slowly, gently backed her up against the cool bricks of the store, taking her face in his hands to cradle her blush-hot cheeks. He didn’t invade her space; didn’t press her into the wall with his large body. He simply dipped his head slowly toward her and brushed his warm lips across hers before withdrawing to regard her even more deeply.

Talia sighed. The kiss was lovely, but she wanted more. Still, she’d already stuck her bossy foot into things, pretty much orchestrating the whole physical contact thing, so she needed to cool her jets and see how Fleet would proceed. She blinked up at him, willing him with all her non-existent psychic powers to go for it.

When he finally bent to her again, she did an internal fist-pump, then brought both hands up to tangle in his hair; relishing the feel of his soft, short-cropped curls

Her actions unleashed something in him, and he deepened his pressure, kissing her in earnest this time. She moaned at the contact, arching her body toward his, wanting more; seeking the pressure of his muscled chest and hips. He didn't give her that, though, holding himself back to touch only her face, but... Still, she was lost. Absorbed. Tingling from head to toe. He plied his mouth and tongue like a virtuoso, playing her for all she was worth, making her brain sing.

Her fingers dropped to his neck of their own volition, scraping his flesh along her journey downward before she judiciously clutched the front of his shirt to prevent a foray toward his lower extremities. *Yes*. She wanted to touch his abs, his hips, and even his cock, but she refrained. *Barely*. And wasn't that mind-blowing? Normally she was way more cautious, really getting to know someone before she, herself, allowed things to ramp up.

But this encounter? She'd wanted it to go from zero to sixty from the moment her foot hit the pedal. Fleet sparked something in her she couldn't begin to explain.

She was just about to take things to the next level when—

“Damn, Talia. That was...” Fleet pulled back first.

“Extraordinary?” she answered breathlessly, ready the second he gave her the sign to pull him forward for more.

“Scorching,” he agreed, bending again, but only to touch his forehead to hers. He gently untangled her hands from his shirt. “Still, as much as I want to continue this, we need to take it slowly. I've been...burnt in the past, leaping before looking, and I'm not going to risk that with you.”

Damn. Talia was ready for more right now. “I—”

He laid a finger on her lips. “No, Talia. Don't. Please.”

“But I...” Did she just stamp her foot?

Fleet backed up a step, shaking his head regretfully. “Listen. I like you, but if you’re looking for something fast and semi-meaningless, I’m not your man.”

“Semi...” Now her mouth dropped open. “No.” She shook her head. “You have seriously read me wrong. I’m *not* looking for a quick fuck, Fleet,” she snapped. Her anger grew and she pushed him away, stalking back toward the sidewalk, suddenly irate.

This was why she didn’t date. It didn’t matter whether you figured someone was on the same page as you, or not. Guys always got the wrong picture, taking her natural aggression as a guaranteed booty-call rather than a simple green light. Had she imagined going to bed with Fleet after a few dates? Hell, yes. Had she wanted more than a kiss tonight? Yes, to that, too. But not to the extent of them getting naked. She’d simply craved a little...more.

As he struggled to catch up, his frown line became pronounced. “I wasn’t—”

Talia cut Fleet off, not interested in what he had to say. “I think it’s time for me to go home,” she told him, turning on her heel and striding down the sidewalk. She wasn’t sure who she was angrier at, herself or Fleet. This was the first man in whom she’d had an interest in ages, and because of her aggressive nature, he’d read her signals wrong and backed off. Because of...his past, he’d said?

Cripes. She might just have just blown this all to hell, and she needed space to calm down and reassess.

“I’m sorry, Talia,” Fleet said, catching up again and offering an apology she didn’t need as she marched back toward where she’d parked her car. “I didn’t mean to make you think—”

“Well, you did,” she clipped, although maybe she should have let him finish.

What didn’t he want her to think? That he was turned off by pushy women, or worse. That he thought she was a slut?

“I’m the one who’s sorry,” she mumbled, now horrendously embarrassed. She dug her keys from her pocket and thankfully heard the chirp that signaled her car, parked just ahead, was now unlocked. “I guess this wasn’t such a good idea, after all.”

Without looking at Fleet again, Talia opened the door to her car, got in, and started it up. He cemented her belief that she’d blown it all to hell when he didn’t attempt to say anything more before she closed her door, effectively shutting him out.

What an idiot she was, Talia lamented as she dropped the car in gear. She purposely dropped her head to bang it on the steering wheel as she drove off.

CHAPTER FOUR

What the fuck had just happened? One minute, Fleet was reveling in the best kiss he'd seriously ever had, and the next he'd been doused with the equivalent of a cold bucket of ice water.

Had he...? *Ah, shit.*

Talia must have taken his words wrong. He'd *wanted* to reassure her that he didn't do casual; that she could just let things unfold naturally and count on him to allow things to progress to the next level without any pressure. She'd clearly taken his words to mean he thought she played fast and loose.

He watched her tail-lights fade away, and with her disappearing act, a sinking feeling invaded his stomach. She was...pissed.

How the fuck was he going to fix this? Unfortunately, at the moment, he could barely think because of how blinding his headache had become. He needed to get back to his apartment and sleep, but he couldn't help lamenting what he'd said. He might have blown it with Talia. For good.

One thing was unequivocally certain. Talia wasn't going to approach his weenie-ass a second time, like she had tonight. The next move, if he dared, would have to be up to him.

Fleet made his way back to his apartment and didn't even bother with the niceties of brushing his teeth before falling into bed. Somehow, he'd managed to remove his clothes, but all else was beyond him. For sure, first thing in the morning, he'd be making a trip to the local eyewear store where he

hoped the optometrist would, with the help of lenses, magically make his headaches go away.

* * *

FLEET STRETCHED, not quite willing to open his eyes and face the day for two very different reasons. One, he still had his headache—albeit a lot milder than last night—but would his cranium feel like it was going to explode once the sunlight hit his retinas? And two, how was he going to deal with the mess he'd made out of things with Talia?

He knew both problems would have to be faced sooner, rather than later, but getting his eyes checked would be easy compared to the uphill battle he faced with his wanna-be relationship.

He needed to man up and grovel, but he was otherwise clueless.

How lame was it to say “it’s me, not you” in regard to how he’d reacted to Talia physically last night? She’d wanted to take things further, and dammit, so had he. But he’d gotten spooked. He had proof from his past that blindly following his feelings without taking into consideration all the caveats was dangerous. And he wasn’t about to let loose his carnal desires too rapidly, potentially derailing things with a woman whom he felt certain could mean something incredible to him.

Unless he already had. Derailed things, that is.

Shit.

Okay. Where getting out of bed was concerned, it was time to face the music. And it wouldn’t necessarily be a stellar score.

He cracked one eyelid.

Huh. The pain was there. Definitely. But at a handleable level. He threw back the covers and carefully swung his legs out of bed, slowly rising to his feet.

So far, so good. There was nothing debilitating going on with his head this morning. Just a dull throb. That was progress. He had several projects that desperately needed his attention today, and he'd already decided the only distraction he'd allow would be a quick trip to the mall for an eye-check.

Luckily, or unluckily, he knew Talia had another full day of drills, so he wouldn't have to face her, yet.

Two hours later, Fleet's head was not only pounding again, but he'd gone to three different eyeglass stores, and because it was Sunday, not one of them had an optometrist on duty. It figured. Just as he'd finally given in to the glasses possibility, there was nobody to take a look and tell him what he needed for lenses. The only appointment he could get was for a week from tomorrow, and he grabbed it, but... Cripes. Was he going to be able to work like this over the next few days?

He finally dragged himself back to his studio, groaning when he saw it was closing in on eleven. He sat in front of his console and popped two more pills; acetaminophen this time, changing it up from the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs that were his norm, hoping he could make it through the day.

Within an hour, Fleet knew he was beyond useless. He'd been fussing over the same exposition mix since he sat down, with no good results. He had a choice, continue to fiddle around with nothing to show for it, or...go for a hike. That never failed to clear his head. And even though he was way behind on work, he'd have Everlee's help for the next few mornings before she went to class. He hoped. They hadn't exactly talked about her schedule for the upcoming week. Sometimes, after overseeing a drill weekend with her SWAT team, she liked to have a little down time. He hoped that wouldn't be the case tomorrow.

Fleet eyed the phone. He could call her and find out, but... He sighed. Chances were good he'd ask her some stupid question about Talia that would clue Ever in to last night's troubles. Did he want to go there? *Mmm... Maybe.*

Before he could talk himself out of it, he picked up the phone. She'd most likely answer, because her job was to be on

the command bus, helping to spot potential problems within the squads.

“Fleet!” Everlee’s cheery voice perked him up. The woman who had always been upbeat before marrying her long-time love, Mason, was now a never-dimming ray of sunshine. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I, uh, just wondered if you were going to be in tomorrow,” he queried. “I’m having a bit of a headache today, and I need to get out for some fresh air for a while. I’ll be back to work later, after I’ve done some good oxygenating, but I already know I won’t be getting as much done as I like.”

There was a huffing sound. “You still haven’t had your eyes checked, have you?” Ever scolded.

“Hey. I went to three different places this morning, and not one of them had a professional in the building. The best I could do was get an appointment for next week.”

“Well, that sucks,” Everlee commiserated. “But the answer to your question is, yes. I *will* be in tomorrow, and you’ll be happy to know I can give you the whole day. I only had one afternoon class scheduled, and my professor called it off for some family thing he has to attend.”

Fleet felt his shoulders lower. “That’s great. Really great. Now I won’t feel so bad taking the afternoon off.”

“You work too hard, anyway,” Ever snipped before her tone turned thoughtful. “Listen. We’re finishing up here in a couple of hours. Do you want me to come in and join you later today?”

Fleet would love that, but Ever would have already worked a bunch of hours. It wouldn’t be fair to her. “It’s a nice offer, Ever, but you’ll be exhausted. Just head home and get a good night’s sleep so you can meet me early tomorrow morning.”

“Well... If you’re sure...” She didn’t sound convinced.

“I promise I’ll only work until midnight,” he joked, but it probably wouldn’t be too far off from the time he’d put in. Who knew when he started his small studio that it would outgrow him to become so big, so fast?

“You know it’s about time you advertised for some full-time help,” Ever admonished lightly, echoing his sentiments without realizing it.

Fleet felt a grin twitch up his lips. “What if I’m waiting for a certain someone to graduate so I can offer her the job?”

Ever snorted, but with a happy overtone. “You’re going to wait three more years for me? That’s awesome, Fleet, but in the meantime, you’re going to kill yourself with the hours you keep.”

He gave a shrug she couldn’t see. “If I can hike every couple days, even for short breaks, it’ll keep me sane.”

“Speaking of hiking, where are you headed today?”

Ever and Mason had joined him on some of his favorite trails, so she’d be familiar with the spot at which he’d do some bouldering today. Even though the two had only watched and cheered him on as he’d completed the difficult traverses that day, Ever and Mason had appreciated how he challenged himself. He felt the same. There was nothing like asking for the best from his body, especially on a day when he needed to be yanked out of his damned headache-doldrums.

He named the peak he’d be climbing.

“Geeze. When you go for it, you go for it,” Everlee whistled.

“Like you don’t,” he countered. He’d heard hair-raising stories from her times with SWAT, mostly those of her team back in Chicago where she’d worked for years. This team in Orono was a newer undertaking, and the squads hadn’t had too many of what Ever called, call-outs, yet. Also, she was currently on their oversight committee, so not an actual geared-up, participant.

“I’ve had my moments,” she countered with a laugh. “Sooo... Speaking of moments...”

Clearly Ever and Talia had talked.

“Yes. I saw Talia last night,” Fleet spit out, anxious to get her take on how badly he’d blown things.

“I heard, but got no details,” Ever replied. “Am I wrong in assuming it didn’t go well? Talia’s been a bear all day.”

Fleet sighed. “I, um, might have blown it.”

“Explain. If you want to,” Ever added quickly.

He did.

“I might have been playing it too safely. We...kissed, then I kind of pulled back. I’m of the mind to take things slowly,” he spit out in his own defense.

“And...?” Ever prompted. “I don’t see much of a problem there. Talia’s not a hard-ass, after all.”

“Well, she, um, *did* actually want to do a little more, and I might have told her if she was only after some booty, maybe I wasn’t her man.”

“What? You basically called her a whore?” Ever howled.

“See? That’s why I need a female coach. I didn’t mean to. I was only trying to tell her that we didn’t need to jump into anything. That we’d have plenty of time to explore each other. And she just...blew up.”

“Well, duh,” Everlee huffed. “Being a take-charge woman myself—which Talia obviously is—I can’t tell you the number of miscommunications I’ve encountered over the years if I’ve made the first move.”

“Not with Mase,” Fleet managed to choke out.

“No.” He could hear the smile come back to her voice. “Mason loves me just the way I am.”

Fleet took a deep breath and went for it. “Well, I’m not averse to a woman who knows her own mind, either, but... I told Talia. I’ve been burnt in the past for taking things too fast, and I’m not comfortable doing that with her. I was simply trying to make sure things didn’t blow up, and now I’m afraid I’ve done that by holding her off.”

Ever’s tone gentled. “The problem is, you didn’t just hold her off, you made her feel like she was a jerk for coming on too strong.”

“I realized that, after she left,” Fleet sighed. “But in my defense, I wasn’t exactly thinking straight. My head was coming off.”

“Damn, Fleet. I’m glad you’re getting that checked out.” He heard her draw in air. “Listen, do you want me to talk to Talia?”

“No. No.” It was the last thing Fleet needed, to have Talia believe he was sending someone in to fight his battles. “I’ll call her and see if I can make it better. I...may have to come clean about a pretty sordid situation in my past, but if that’s what it takes to convince her to take a chance on me, I’ll do it.”

“Good man,” Ever praised. “If you remember, the convoluted situation that Mason and I faced would have been straightened out so much sooner if both of us had just opened up and talked.”

Fleet knew a little of their pasts, and he had to agree. They’d had a lot of ups and downs before they’d both come clean. Their honesty—when it finally emerged—hadn’t harmed the pair; it had moved their relationship forward and put them into a very good place. Somehow, Fleet doubted his own story would be met with as much tolerance by Talia. But one could always hope.

“Listen, I’m headed out now,” Fleet declared, knowing he and Ever could hash things over all day once they got started, and that wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted mountains, solitude, and action. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay. If not before,” she quipped.

Yeah. He wouldn’t be surprised if Ever showed up to help him tonight. She had a huge heart.

Twenty minutes later, with his bouldering pad strapped to his back, and his chalk bag, climbing shoes, brushes, and skin-care kit in his pack, he did some quick stretches and began his climb. The air was fresh, the temperature was warm, and the trail was deserted. That was one of the reasons he liked this particular climb. It wasn’t well known and wasn’t something

the majority of novices would attempt. Also, Sunday hikers were usually tourists with kids, so he didn't expect to see any of them this late in the day.

Everything would be just about perfect, if his damned head would clear.

He speculated about his recalcitrant head as he undertook a few quick sprints in parts of the trail where roots wouldn't trip him up. Maybe the problem wasn't his eyes. Maybe it was allergies. Although this late in October he couldn't think of a single thing that would be in the air except ragweed, and he'd never had a problem with it before. It could also be tension. That would follow with the amount of work he had piled up. Maybe he *should* think of hiring somebody full time before Ever became available.

Breathing deeply, he ignored the pounding in his brain and headed for the higher elevation where he was familiar with a stiff skill-level of bouldering. The cascade of rocks he'd be attempting had some of the best verticals and roofs he'd come across, and when he finally topped out, the view from the apex of the formation would be better than most, giving him a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the range.

It took an hour for Fleet to reach his quarry for the day, and when he looked over the familiar rock wall, he felt a deep sense of satisfaction. He'd climb. He'd eat a small meal when he reached the final highball, then he'd feel good enough to go back to town and face his workload.

CHAPTER FIVE

Where the hell was Fleet? Ever sighed in frustration as she dug in her pocket for her key to his studio. She'd expected her friend/boss to be back from his climb by now, but... She looked at her watch. Maybe she'd jumped the gun? It was only five o'clock, and she'd talked to him at what? Noon? She did the math. Maybe, after they'd spoken, it had taken a half hour before he'd started his climb, then an hour until he hit his preferred boulder-wall. If he did his normal, high-intensity workout, he'd have topped out after another hour. That would have been around two-thirty. Coming down he'd be loose, so...not quite as long on the descent?

Which meant he should be back any minute. Fleet certainly wasn't one to dawdle

She'd wait.

Ever let herself into the studio, turning on the lights to peruse the dimmed sound board and she chewed a nail. Should she turn everything on? She knew what she was doing, sort of, after working with Fleet for three months, but... *No*. She didn't dare put her fingers on his equipment without his input. *Damn*. She thought she'd surprise him by coming in to help, but with him being absent, she was currently no better than a frigging paper-weight.

She looked at her watch again. She'd give the man thirty minutes.

No.

She'd call him right now, dammit. There was great coverage on the mountain he was climbing, *and* on the route home from there, so she could quickly find out if she'd wasted her time coming in or if he'd be prancing through the door at any second.

Ever dialed.

Fleet's phone rang. And rang. And rang. Then it went to voicemail.

What the fuck? Why didn't he pick up?

Maybe he'd taken things more slowly than she thought, and his hands were busy. She nodded, sagely. He couldn't answer his phone very easily if he was pulling some elaborate circus trick, that was for sure. And she certainly didn't want to be the one who distracted him at a crucial moment.

He had to have heard her ring-tone, so he'd respond as soon as he was able. She could be patient.

Twenty minutes passed, and Ever began doubting the waiting thing. She'd given him more than enough time to get to a ledge, or even to perhaps finish his bouldering for the day. She winced, but... *Shit*. Fine. She'd be that woman and try calling him again.

Ever got the same thing she had before; a bunch of rings, then voicemail.

Something wasn't right. Her gut gnawed a warning that she'd learned over her years in law enforcement never to ignore.

She lifted her phone again. This time to call Mason.

He answered cheerfully. "Hey, sweetie. What's up? I didn't expect your task-master to give you time out for a phone call."

"Fleet's not here, Mase," she answered without preamble, her concern clear. "And I can't get in touch with him. You know the place he headed isn't the easiest challenge, and this time... You don't suppose..." she trailed off twice, not wanting to put words to her worries.

She'd let Mase come to his own conclusions. She'd told him before she left, exactly where Fleet had been headed.

"Give me his timing today," Mason probed, using his officious voice, which calmed Ever down just a little.

She carefully went over what should have been the hour-by-hour rundown of Fleet's trip, this time speaking it out loud. Giving voice to his supposed itinerary made his absence seem even worse. Her friend was a good half-hour past the time he should have arrived back in town, and he wasn't answering his phone, goddammit.

"I don't like it," Mase concurred, and growled. "We've warned him before about bouldering alone."

"We have. But you know him. He's stubborn." That was an understatement, but one Ever wouldn't hold against the missing Fleet at this moment.

"Okay. Stay put. I'm on my way to you. And...just to be on the safe side, I'll have a squad meet us at the base of the mountain."

"Thanks, Mase. I feel vindicated that you think he might be in trouble, too. I wondered if I was blowing things up in my head, but...something surely must have happened to him. Maybe..." She thought about a fall he could have taken; the recent headaches he'd complained about, which indicated a possible vision problem, making a snap decision. "I think you should call in an ambulance crew, as well," she blew out through numb lips.

"On it, Ever. We think alike, sweetheart."

The next eight minutes felt like forever as she waited for Mason to come pick her up so they could travel to the mountain together. When he did arrive, he got out, hugged her quickly, then they both hurried back into the car and got on the road.

"Who did you call for help?" she asked, filling the dead air with talk. The quiet inside the vehicle ate at her.

"E Squad," he replied and flashed her a smile, albeit a worried one.

“Talia,” Everlee confirmed, and wasn’t surprised. She and Mason had talked about the connection they’d sensed between Fleet and their squad leader. Mase had clearly known the woman wouldn’t want to be kept out of a potential rescue if Fleet was a victim. “How did she take him being missing?”

Mason shrugged. “I couldn’t tell over the phone. You know how professional Talia is. But I certainly got the feeling she’ll be on scene before us.”

“Will she wait before she heads into the woods?”

“She’ll have to. I told her under no circumstances was she to begin the hike until we and her squad arrived for back-up.”

Ever sighed. “Yeah. She’ll wait. But she won’t be happy.”

It took ten more minutes to drive to the base of the mountain in question, where true to what they’d imagined, Talia was already waiting. Cisco—her second-in-command—was also early on the scene.

“That’s Fleet’s car,” Ever stated loudly as soon as she got out, pointing at the only other conveyance in the small lot.

“I know,” Talia called back. “And we’ve already ascertained he’s not in the general vicinity, at least not if he’s coherent. We’ve yelled for him until we’re horse.”

Talia had donned her professional face, but Ever could see the underlying tension in the woman’s posture.

Squad E’s leader turned back to a vehicle that was parked with the rear hatch standing open. Ever got close enough to look inside, and saw what looked like climbing equipment; ropes, harnesses, and helmets. Ever didn’t know where or how Talia had procured the professional looking apparatus so quickly, but she got her answer as soon as she raised a brow at the woman who was digging around in the pile.

“Cisco brought all this stuff, and we need to decide what to take with us.”

“I dabble in rock-climbing on the weekends,” Cisco explained matter-of-factly.

Ever hadn't known that. She'd figured the often-times insubordinate squad member spent all his free time lifting beers and jeering at sporting events on TV with a bunch of macho friends.

So much for making snap judgements.

Several more cars pulled in behind them as Talia and Cisco sorted through things they might need. Within minutes, Talia's entire squad was there, along with an ambulance carrying crew members with whom Ever was not familiar. They must be some late weekend shift guys she'd never come in contact with before.

Two big men emerged from the vehicle, but before introducing themselves, they rounded to the back of their ambo to pull out their medical bags and a portable basket litter that would be needed in case of an emergency extraction. In a mountain rescue situation, a regular gurney didn't always cut it.

One look at the patches on the men's sleeves as they approached, let Ever know the crew weren't paramedics, but EMT's, which may or may not bode well depending on Fleet's condition when they found him. The pair would be able to successfully immobilize Fleet if there were a neck or spinal injury, but they weren't certified to put in an IV line or administer drugs.

"Hi. I'm Brian and this is Holden." The larger of the two men lifted his chin toward his partner since his hands were full. "What do we have?"

Ever looked to Mason.

"Listen up, everyone," her husband barked, gaining the entire group's attention. That included the five from E squad, and the two EMTs. "The man we're here for is Fleet Eggers, he's a friend of ours, and a bouldering expert. He arrived here today sometime between noon and one, with an anticipated ETA back in Orono of over an hour ago. We wouldn't have thought much about him being on the mountain for longer than expected, except he's not answering his phone. And as you all know, there's good cell reception all over this mountain.

“We believe we’ve pinpointed where he was most likely headed because he invited me and Ever here a few weeks ago and took us to his favorite spot about an hour up the trail. We hope that’s where he is. If not, we’ll have to call in the entire team, along with Harvé and Muddy.”

Ever knew he talked of the expert tracker who was a friend of his, along with his very talented dog.

“What the hell is bouldering?” Brian asked as soon as Mase was finished. He gave a shake of his head, clearly confused.

Huh. He must not be a local, Ever thought, taking note of his slight, southern accent.

“It’s like rock climbing, but without the ropes and harnesses,” Cisco came back evenly. “Normally bouldering climbs are undertaken on outcroppings not more than fifteen or twenty feet high, but they’re differently challenging because in that sport, it’s all about hand and foot holds. There are no ropes, no anchors, nothing but a crash mat below to save you in a fall.”

Which was exactly what had Ever worried. If Fleet wasn’t answering, he could have taken a major drop.

While they talked, Talia and Cisco had decided on exactly what to bring and stood tall with several ropes looped over their shoulders, along with anchor supplies, quickdraws, and belay devices. Ever had never climbed before, but she was very familiar with the equipment, having grown up with parents who ran a white-water rafting venture. Often times climbers used their services to get to cliffs that weren’t accessible by car.

“This is about Fleet?” Doug finally jeered. “What an idiot to head out without a buddy.”

It was nothing Ever hadn’t expected to come out of his mouth. The man was not an easy team player. Point in case; he had troubles with a woman being his squad leader. The only thing that had kept him on the team was Talia vouching for him, saying he was an extremely competent officer. So they’d

compromised to keep him active; having him answer only to Talia's second in command, Cisco, with whom the man had been friends for years.

"I go without backup sometimes," Cisco astonishingly admonished his buddy, shutting down Doug's line of questioning immediately. "You can't always dictate when the urge will hit to do some verticals."

Doug grunted, and they all begun walking briskly toward the trail. At least it had buttoned the guy's lips.

Funny, but Doug had never seemed to like Fleet during the few times they'd met. Ever didn't know what the deal was. It could be prejudice against Fleet's skin color. It could be—like everyone else—that he'd noticed Talia's interest in the man and was...jealous? Or it could simply be that anyone connected to the arts community lay outside Doug's jock-like comfort zone, so his disapproving attitude was all bluster.

Right now, Ever didn't care what motivated his dislike. Doug could take his biases and shove them up his ass. He'd better just do his job.

Silence reigned for the first mile in, until Talia came up to walk beside Ever on a particularly wide portion of the trail.

"When did you discover Fleet was missing?" Talia's face was a study in worried lines. Ever didn't know if her synopsis would be of any comfort.

"Well, he was bummed because he hadn't gotten a lot done this morning, so he called to find out if I'd be in tomorrow. When I told him I would, he was relieved. He said he needed a break and was headed out to do some bouldering to see if he could clear his head. He assured me he'd be back at the soundboard by late this afternoon, so I decided to go in and help him out as a surprise."

"And when you arrived, he wasn't there."

"Right. Which worried me a little, but not overly much. I figured he was probably late because he'd gotten into his 'zone'. But when I called a couple times and he didn't answer, I started becoming uneasy. You know how seriously Fleet

takes his work, and I couldn't see him bugging out and muting his phone just to spend an extra hour on the boulders.”

“Yeah. Me either,” Talia responded with a grimace. “I... hate this,” she admitted, almost under her breath so that only Ever could hear. “We were actually together last night, and... had a little...disagreement,” she admitted. “Now I'm upset we left things the way we did. I had some pretty severe regrets all night, but now I feel even worse, knowing I might have added to his need to get away, and that whatever happened is partially my fault.”

“Don't beat yourself up, Talia,” Ever told her, not wanting to divulge that she knew about the words that had passed between the two. “I know he had a really bad headache this morning, which is why he wasn't having any luck in the studio. I'm sure his distraction had nothing to do with you.”

“I think it did,” Talia rebutted. “It was my fault, our falling out. I overreacted to something he said; basically, putting words in his mouth that he didn't say. It's because I'm super-sensitive to the whole ‘women shouldn't ask for what they want’ thing, that I jumped on him. I couldn't stop it. I've been espousing female autonomy my whole adult life,” she defended herself.

Ever kept quiet, knowing Talia needed to rant.

“Do you know how sick and tired I am of being looked at askance because of my size and my blondeness? Having people's mouths drop open when I show I not only have a brain, but dare to give an opinion?”

Ever would have snickered if the situation weren't so dire. Of course, she knew. She'd been part of the same type of old-boys network when she'd been on the PD in Chicago.

And Talia, bless her, gave off more than opinions. She was downright take-charge, but it was past time she understood that it wasn't a bad thing. Fleet knew exactly who Talia was, and he liked her not despite it, but *because* of it. Her confidence in a world that was foreign to Fleet, had him all kinds of interested.

“He talks about you, you know,” Ever soft-pedaled, leading in to what she hoped wouldn’t sound like a lecture.

“He does?” That shut Talia up. She hiked and blinked.

“Yeah. He’s kind of amazed you’ve become his...friend, considering you’re in a line of work that is almost completely beyond his comprehension.”

Talia snorted. “Right. He’s mentioned a time or two how cops aren’t high on his list of people to trust, but because of you and me, he’s changing his mind.”

“And doesn’t that tell you he doesn’t give a damn if you’re bossy or not?” Ever quipped, trying to lighten things up. “He’s not stupid, and he understands being a little arrogant, comes with the territory of law enforcement.”

“I...hadn’t thought of that,” Talia pondered, shifting the ropes that hung across her body. “I thought maybe he was slumming it with me, seeing how much he could put up with before he shut things down. Which...is kind of what I believed he did last night.”

Wrong. Ever knew what had been said. As well as attempting to gently tell Talia he wasn’t ready for things to move so quickly, Fleet had cited problems in his past as a reason. Maybe Talia had forgotten that as she’d sunk her teeth into his supposed rejection of her advances instead.

It was time to probe deeper. “Did Fleet give any hint of why he might be putting you off, other than your supposed aggression?”

There was a long silence from Talia. Ever figured the woman was playing back the conversation from the previous night.

“Well, shit,” Talia finally hissed.

“What?” Ever innocently asked.

There was a frustrated huff. “He *did* mention being burnt in the past, and I just...swept right past that.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m such an idiot. I didn’t listen, I just reacted.” She drew in a sharp breath.

“You’ll just have to apologize,” Ever suggested lightly.

Talia turned tear-soaked orbs toward hers. “Yeah. Let’s hope I get the chance.”

CHAPTER SIX

Talia couldn't believe she'd been such an idiot. Because of the insecurities she'd hidden deep within her, she'd jumped to conclusions when Fleet told her he wanted to take things slowly. Now that Ever had prodded her, set her straight, she remembered the conversation correctly, and...

Dammit. This wasn't the first time her words and actions had leapt ahead of her brain, and of course she knew why. When she was a kid, she'd been so freaking careful all the time, then all hell had broken loose. After that, she'd changed, figuring out that keeping silent wasn't the best thing. So she'd made it an art; speaking her mind, being in the driver's seat. She'd needed to do that not just for herself, but for her sister.

But this time it had backfired. Big time.

Her feet sped up the path. She wanted to go faster, but she had to stay with her group and not everyone was fleet footed. One EMT in particular, Brian, seemed very unused to the rough terrain. Didn't they cross-train these guys anymore?

Talia gave an internal growl and kept trying to hurry him up while she continued to turn the situation over in her head. What could have happened to Fleet?

He'd clearly encountered a problem of epic proportions while hiking into familiar territory where he should have been most comfortable, and...

Dammit. Talia's behavior last night struck her, in a way, as similar.

The previous evening, what should have been a routine, highly predictable response from her mouth, had turned the situation with Fleet sour. She'd spewed, he'd been...confused. Maybe her grab-the-balls approach to life wasn't always the way to go. She and her gut—and Fleet with his loner bouldering—might need to examine the circumstances of certain challenges and change things up from here on out.

Talia wasn't sure exactly how she'd do that, but what the hell? She clearly couldn't go on the way she was if she didn't want to end up alone and lonely. She *wanted* a partner. A lover. A confidant. And she'd previously driven away all those who'd attempted to woo her by being a hard-ass.

She promised herself that if they found Fleet and he was okay, she'd change her ways and show him the soft underbelly she'd kept hidden for so long. But it wasn't just she who needed to change. Fleet needed prodding as well. He clearly undertook self-destructive practices to compensate for something. She'd find out what, and they'd both work on their heretofore hidden shit, together.

“Just another five minutes until we reach our destination,” Mason told the group from where he'd taken point. “Keep your eyes open.”

As if they hadn't been vigilant all the way up the trail, Talia wanted to scoff. But she held her tongue. *Yup*. This was her, turning over a new leaf.

As soon as they reached the clearing that became visible up ahead, Mason began to run. “Here,” he yelled, and Talia scrambled her way past a few of her squad members, more than anxious to see the condition in which Mason had found Fleet.

She almost wished she hadn't.

Fleet lay still and unconscious, his body twisted in an unnatural way at the base of a rock wall. He'd hit and landed on his crash mat, but it clearly hadn't helped. Was he concussed?

Mason was already on him, kneeling by Fleet who was laying awkwardly crumpled to his side, with the EMT's only steps behind.

"Don't touch him," Brian snapped, walking briskly to Mason's position. "He may have spinal injuries. We need to stabilize him before we carry him out."

Mason ignored the surly EMT, having done his share of rescues in his long career. "No bleeding from the head," he stated briskly, and Talia let her shoulders relax a little. There could still be brain trauma, but if Fleet hadn't hit hard enough to bleed, chances were it wasn't a life threatening injury.

Despite Brian's bluster, Mason continued to run gentle hands up and down Fleet's limbs, and Talia found herself quickly squatting next to him, feeling uncustomarily useless as she watched. Fleet looked so pale. So still. But there was something else not quite right...

"I wonder what made him fall?" Ever said from somewhere above them.

"Stupidity," Doug grouched, standing back with a sour look on his face that matched the irritable EMT's. "He's an arrogant son of a bitch being here by himself. He probably tried something he shouldn't have and suffered the consequences."

"That's enough, Doug," Mason barked, clearly not liking the attitude. "Make yourself useful and start preparing the straps on the litter. We'll all be taking turns carrying him down the mountain in a couple minutes."

By all, Mason meant the EMT's, Ever, and Talia's entire squad. Besides Doug and Cisco, Jess and Azis were part of the five that comprised her unit. They were good people, and would take extreme caution with their patient.

Damn. She hated thinking of vibrant Fleet that way. And speaking of vibrant...

Talia continued to study Fleet's face, and it suddenly occurred to her what she'd been missing. "Mase," she barked. "Isn't the left side of Fleet's face droopier than the right?" Her heart seized. "Could he have had a stroke?"

Holden, the professional one of the EMT'S, quickly snapped on a pair of gloves and lifted Fleet's eyelids, one at a time, then used his penlight to check pupil reaction.

"Good call, Talia. His left pupil is fully dilated, and non-reactive, whereas the right shows signs of response. It's certainly one indication of a stroke, but it's not the only thing that can point to," he said, shaking his head to gently, with the help of Mason—not his partner—put a cervical collar in place around Fleet's neck.

"What else can it mean?" Mason questioned.

"Well, shit. It could be a brain bleed; an aneurysm," the guy warned. "I'm not equipped to diagnose, but... Either way, we need to get him off this mountain fast."

That's not what Talia wanted to hear, and more regret poured through her over how she'd treated Fleet the night before. She had so much to apologize for.

And the headaches? If she hadn't been so self-absorbed, she might have utilized her bossy tendencies for good, rather than evil, and taken Fleet right to an urgent care center.

"I should have caught this," she lamented huskily. "We were out last night, and he wasn't well. He said he'd been having lots of headaches."

Had she just received a huff from the EMT, Brian? If she did, it was probably because he agreed she'd been an idiot.

Everlee, however, came to her rescue. "Don't beat yourself up, Talia. If anyone should have figured it out, it was me. Fleet has been complaining about the unrelenting pain behind one eye for a couple weeks now, and I'm an imbecile for having ignored it." She pulled her phone from her pocket and her fingers flew over the screen.

"Listen to this. Stroke warnings," she read. "Severe headache. Weakness in arms or legs. Dizziness. Nausea. Vision problems. Difficulty with balance. He's clearly had a bunch of those, but I never made the connection."

"And every one of those symptoms could have led to his fall," Mason stated.

“Yeah. But now listen to this,” Ever continued. “Brain aneurysm symptoms: incapacitating headaches, vision problems, drooping eyelid, numbness in limbs, vomiting.”

“Bingo on the vomiting,” Azis confirmed, having moved closer to the face of the rock wall Fleet would have climbed. “It looks like he puked down the boulder from somewhere up top before he fell.”

Eyes turned to see a trail of vomit emanating from a spot higher up before cascading down over the rocks.

“Dammit. Strike two,” Holden snapped. “We need to get him to a hospital, fast,” Holden glanced around. “I need a few hands. We’re going to turn him slowly to his back, keeping his head, neck, and spine aligned. Then we’ll ease him onto the litter.”

Talia took a deep breath. They’d all been trained to move spinal column injury victims. She knew the drill. Why then, wasn’t she moving to help, and why were her hands trembling? “I...”

“Let me,” Ever said, kneeling down and easing into Talia’s spot while urging her to stand. “You be his emotional support. Hold his hand once we have him in position.”

“He...he won’t know,” Talia countered, feeling totally out of control, even though she was always cool under fire. “He’s...unconscious.”

“And you know as well as I do,” Ever responded gently, “that he still might be able to sense you. It happens all the time.”

Talia nodded, stood, and got out of the way while she pondered Ever’s words. In her shaken form, she didn’t want to do anything that might harm Fleet.

It took less than thirty seconds to have Fleet positioned, on his back, in the conveyance the rescue team would carry down the mountain. He was looking paler and paler—at least to Talia’s eyes—by the minute, and she instinctively knew that time was of the essence. She reached out and grasped his still hand. “You’re going to be okay, Fleet. We’ve got you.”

“Let’s move, people,” Mason barked, taking one end of the litter while Cisco immediately took the other. They began to hoof it toward the trail head. Was it Talia’s imagination, or had both Doug and Brian the EMT shuffled back when it came time to transport? *Damn them*. They better step up and do their job when it came their time to carry.

Holden took quick vitals on Fleet as he jogged beside the stretcher. “Blood pressure is low; heart rate is rapid. With a stroke, I’d expect high blood pressure,” He shook his head. “That leans us toward an aneurysm. We need to pick up the pace.”

Everyone began quick-stepping-it down the mountain, faster than normal, but still not quickly enough for Talia. But she understood. In the long run, losing their footing was not something that would be good for Fleet.

If Talia thought the hike up the mountain had seemed long, the trip down the steep inclines seemed interminable. She kept a hold of Fleet’s hand whenever the path was wide enough, but often times there was only enough room for the stretcher, and all she could do was watch Fleet’s face and worry. There hadn’t been a twitch from the prone man; no indication he knew where he was, or that anyone had come to his rescue. There were no overt signs of life except the rising and falling of his chest, on which Talia kept a very close watch.

When the first pair of bearers changed out for a second, she wasn’t quite ready to trust herself to be a carrier, but at the third shift change, she felt more herself, and spelled Jess at Fleet’s head, while Azis stepped in for Holden. She noted that Doug and Brian still hadn’t offered to take a turn.

“How much farther?” Talia finally asked as her muscles began to burn, unable to keep her worry to herself.

“Maybe a mile,” Mason told her. “We’ve made good time, but on this terrain, I’d say we have at least another twenty minutes.”

That wasn’t what Talia wanted to hear. She needed Fleet in the ambulance. She needed him in the hospital. Hell, she

needed him anywhere but on the side of a fucking mountain with God-knows-what going on inside his cranium.

When the ground leveled out, she lowered her head to Fleet's and spoke to him, hoping somehow he could hear her.

"Fleet. I need you to hang in there. I need you to get better. I..." *Fuck it.* She didn't give a shit who heard her. At this juncture it was all about him. If there was any way he was listening...

"I blew it last night, and I'm sorry," she began. "I didn't mean to try to question you and your agenda, but I'm used to having things happen the way I want, and for that, I'm sorry. If you want to proceed in a manner that's better for you, I'm good with that. I just want to...keep seeing you and find out where things can go between us. Once you're on your feet, we can have a do-over of our date last night, and I'll let you have your way. I promise."

There. At least she'd gotten that off her chest, and even if Doug and Brian were looking at her askance? *Fuck them.* Doug, she knew, didn't date because he had that negative thing going regarding women, and Brian? She didn't know what his problem was, but it wasn't hers, and she didn't give a shit. Talia would probably have only limited contact with the man during future emergencies, so his sour puss was a non-issue.

What she didn't expect was Doug's growl.

"Did the bastard try to force himself on you?" Doug asked through tight lips, looking all kinds of angry.

Huh? Concern? For her? That was damned strange, coming out of this man's mouth, but considering what he'd suffered at the hands of his fucked-up mother, Talia he must relate to *any* potential victim.

"No, Doug," she kept her voice even. "It was actually just the opposite. I was ready for a little more, but Fleet let me know he wanted to take things slowly. I thought..." Should she go here? Why not? It might make Doug uncomfortable, but she wasn't going to prevaricate. "I thought he was backing off because I have a tendency to be...aggressive, so I took that

personally.” She gave a self-deprecating snort. “Not only didn’t I listen to his reasons when he tried to explain, I insinuated that if I couldn’t have what I wanted, I didn’t want to see him again.”

Doug’s eyes narrowed. “You wanted to fuck him, and he wasn’t into it?” Doug bit out, clearly also not caring who was listening.

“I didn’t want to go that far,” Talia responded, feeling color come up her face at the bluntness of his assertion. “But I wanted a little more at that point than he was willing to give.”

“So did you back off?” Doug continued. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes were looking beyond her as if he was seeing something in his own very fucked up past.

“I did,” she assured him. “Because I’m a bitch, not an asshole.”

Talia leaned down to place a light kiss on Fleet’s forehead, letting her regrets show even more. “I just want him to wake up so I can prove to him I’m sorry.”

Doug didn’t respond, and that was okay. Talia didn’t know whether the conversation had helped, or fucked him up even more. She guessed she’d find out, eventually. She didn’t know *what* she’d expected. That he’d open up, as she had, amongst strangers? It didn’t happen, but she became hopeful that some headway might have been made. When they reached their final half mile and stopped briefly, Doug took one end of the litter.

Not so, Brian, who stood back and let Mason rotate in again.

Now there was a real asshole.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fleet edged into awareness and had no idea where he was. The beeping almost said he was in his studio having a mixing issue, but... It wasn't exactly that kind of beeping, and...his eyes didn't want to open. He tried to think. A difficult task because he was having one of his killer headaches again.

Only this one...felt different.

He attempted to reach his hand up to rub the area of pain but couldn't quite make his muscles work. After a few attempts, he depleted whatever reserves of energy he had, and found himself drifting off. That was okay. He clearly needed sleep and wasn't going to be much good in the studio today with his head coming off. It was just a shame he had to fall asleep at work. Being in his bed would have afforded a much more refreshing night. But damned if he could get up to move to his apartment.

"Fleet?"

As he succumbed to the sandman, he thought he heard a voice say his name. Not just any voice, but Talia's. He wanted to snort, but couldn't muster the energy. He knew he was delusional. Talia would *not* be in the studio with him after she'd shut him down so righteously the evening before. *No*. He needed to be the one to make the first move to clear up the misunderstanding between them.

Make a move? That was putting it mildly. He had some serious groveling to do to patch things up. He slipped into

dreamworld, visions of Talia's beautiful blue eyes allowing him to drift happily away.

Fleet woke again, sometime later, and realizing he was screwed if he didn't wake the hell up and get some work accomplished, concentrated hard on opening his eyes. With no success.

What the hell was wrong with him, anyway? Sure, the headache that had been giving him fitful nights' sleep was full on blasting away at the inside of his cranium, but since when did he just conk out with all his equipment still humming...

At least, he thought it was his equipment... Until he was sure it wasn't.

Fleet, panicking a bit now, struggled to get his lids to budge, with no success. But as he continued working on it, he got the impression that a person was hovering above him.

"Fleet. Can you hear me?"

There it was again. Talia's voice. He had to be dreaming. He remembered thinking he heard it a few...minutes? Hours, earlier? And now it was haunting him again. *Cripes*. If the headaches didn't do him in, his imagination surely would. Way to go, fantasizing that the beautiful woman he wanted to get to know would actually be hanging around his sorry self.

"Fleet, honey. Open your eyes," the Talia-voice said again.

Ah, hell. How could he say no to those dulcet tones? And what did he have to lose, anyway? Sure, the warmth he was feeling from the phantom-voice would dissipate as soon as he let reality back in, but there was still the need to return to his actual life. He had a shitload of work to do.

With a major effort, Fleet cracked one lid, then the other.

Huh. Not what he expected.

Everything was blurry. And the ambient light...hurt. He shuttered up his orbs again, but apparently his struggles had been witnessed.

"Oh my God! You're awake!" The female who was talking—and it sure as shit sounded like Talia—reached across his

body for something. “I’m getting the nurse,” the fuzzy figure yelped excitedly.

Nurse? Was he...in the hospital?

More awareness began to seep in, and he let himself reach beyond the preconceived notions he’d had that the noises were in his studio, and...

Yeah. Duh. Those were one-hundred percent medical sounds. And the antiseptic smell? Hospital. Abso-fucking-lutely. His fully functioning olfactory senses told him the odor was nothing like the slightly chemical tang of his acoustic panels.

Fleet attempted to unglue his lips.

“Mmmphri?” he managed. *No.* That didn’t come out like anything. He wanted to laugh. Since when had he been unable to articulate? He needed to try again.

“Where...” He paused. Man, it had been a lot of work getting that one word out.

“In the hospital,” came the rapid answer.

Well at least whoever hovered was able to make sense of what he wanted to know.

The hospital, huh? So he’d been correct. *Shit.* When and how had that happened? He remembered abandoning his board for some fresh air, heading out to his favorite spot to do some bouldering. Then...

He must have fallen. *Dammit.* He recalled feeling woozy, and...he thought he remembered puking before...nothing.

“Fall?” he asked, still apparently and frustratingly stuck in his monosyllabic state.

“Yes, Fleet. You fell. But it was because of...” the explanation inexplicably trailed off, but... He could still swear that was Talia’s voice. “I should let the doctor explain.” The person sighed with relief. “Here’s the nurse, now.”

“He just woke up,” his watcher explained. “He’s been in and out over the past hour, but this time he opened his eyes for

real, and he spoke. That's good news, right?"

Fleet digested the words and berated himself even more. Putting two and two together, he thought he understood what had happened. In the fall he'd taken that had just been confirmed, he must have suffered a head injury; a concussion most likely. Oddly, his first, in a sport that lent its share of TBI's to participants.

That had to be why he was so muddled, and why it was clearly a good sign to the unknown speaker that he'd been able to pull two words out of his ass. He needed to reassure her, and the nurse, that despite his inability to articulate, he was totally with it, inside his cranial vault.

He attempted to raise his right hand because it might be easier than trying to talk again, but in his foray upward, he bumped into something soft. Even in his gummy-headed state, he knew a breast when he touched one. His male instinct was to root for a nipple, but before he could attempt it, his fingers were gently lowered as someone shifted their touch to take his pulse.

"I think our patient was just trying to cop a feel," said a female voice, laughing. "I don't want you to get your hopes up..." Was she talking to the other female in the room? "but between his autonomic response and the fact that he said two words, we're being given very good signs."

Fleet felt the blood pressure cuff inflate on his upper arm.

"His vitals are normal as well, but let's leave it to the surgeon to make a more detailed determination, shall we?"

The surgeon? Now Fleet was flummoxed. Had he undergone surgery?

Maybe it was broken bones needing to be pinned? He was determined to find out.

He flexed his feet, one by one. They both seemed to work just fine. And the breast-hand he'd employed had certainly responded appropriately. He began hefting his *left* arm, and that worked, too, except everything felt damned heavy.

“Nothing broken?” he asked. And, *score!* He’d managed four syllables.

“Nope,” the woman he assumed was the nurse spoke again. “The surgeon will explain everything. Right now, however, can you open your eyes for me?”

Fleet wanted to grumble, but... If he must.

He struggled to unglue his lashes, and managed to open to a gloomy fog again, one bereft of color. An indistinct figure poised above him, and another stood off to his left. He wished he could focus, but it seemed beyond him.

“Cloudy,” he grunted, but since he was on a roll at least with his language skills, he undertook a sentence. “Did I hit my head?”

“My, my,” the nurse said cheerily. “That had to have taken some effort. Slow down and relax. The surgeon will be in momentarily to answer all of your questions.”

Fleet watched the shadow of that speaker walk away and listened as her footsteps retreated down a hallway. At least his hearing was still sharp.

Like that nurse—because that’s who had obviously departed—couldn’t have given him some information to go on, Fleet scoffed internally. But he understood protocol. He wasn’t however, always the greatest at patience. “Who...else is here?” he asked, turning to his other obscured visitor; the one to the left.

“It’s me, Fleet. Talia.”

His heart instantly lit up. He hadn’t dreamed her! Then it plummeted again. *Shit.* If Talia was here, his prognosis must not be good. The only thing that would have her at his bedside would be a life-or-death thing.

He gave what he hoped was a smile. “Thought I...was a...goner, huh?” he quipped.

“Don’t even tease about it,” Talia admonished gently, and he felt her hand rest on his shoulder. Her warmth felt damned good. “You were actually touch and go for a while.”

Was she supposed to be giving him that info? Probably not, but he sure hoped he could lead her into revealing more. He didn't want to wait to receive cold, hard facts from the surgeon.

"Tell me...what happened?" He still couldn't see worth shit, but it was getting easier to talk.

"You...fell. Because of..."

She seemed hesitant.

"More, Talia," Fleet urged.

"Those headaches you've been having?" He could almost see her chewing on her lip. "It turns out you've been suffering from what's called a sentinel bleed."

"Clueless," he returned. What the hell was she talking about?

"It's a slow bleed that led up to a major event; a brain aneurysm."

Well, hell. He knew what *that* was.

"I...exploded while bouldering?" he questioned, already running the scenario back again. Climbing, becoming dizzy, blinding pain, losing his lunch, then...nothing more.

"Don't say exploded," Talia scolded. "It's a terrible visual. Your artery...ruptured."

Fuck. He understood. It wasn't an anomaly.

He'd had two uncles on his father's side who'd suffered the same exact thing. It was a genetic weakness in the family, one he'd thought he'd escaped because his father hadn't been affected. His old man had undergone CT scanning just after his uncles' episodes and had been given a clean bill of head-health.

In retrospect, maybe he should have undergone scanning, too. And he was a supreme idiot for ignoring his headaches. But damned if he hadn't gotten lucky. One of his uncles had died from his...rupture. The other was fine, but had suffered permanent impairment to his fine motor skills.

Fleet worked the fingers on his hands, mimicking having them on a keyboard, and found they responded to his prompting. That was good, right?

Next question.

“How did I get here?”

Because Talia was with him, Fleet could only assume she and SWAT had somehow rescued him off the mountain. But how had they known he was in trouble?

He didn't have to explain his pondering.

“Ever went to your studio to help you out last night, but you weren't there. Luckily, you'd told her where you were headed, and when you didn't arrive back in what she considered an appropriate amount of time, she got Mason on the horn, and he rounded up my squad and an ambulance crew to come find you.”

Man, he'd been lucky. He'd read up on brain aneurysms back when his uncles had suffered their episodes, and he knew that if he hadn't been found within a short window of time, his chances of survival would have been slim to none. That he'd lived was a testament to Everlee's stellar intuition, and he'd never been happier to have taken her on as a helpmate in his studio. He'd have to give her a fucking huge raise.

“Well, it seems our patient is awake.” A new female voice sounded stridently from the door before footsteps moved closer. “How are you feeling, Mr. Eggers?”

Before he could answer, the surgeon was already poking and prodding different bits of his anatomy, shining a light into his beleaguered eyes, then bending down to have a look at his pupils.

“Everything is fuzzy,” Fleet managed to say succinctly. “My head hurts.”

“Well, since we cracked you open to clamp off that bleeder, I'm not surprised. As soon as I'm through with my exam, I'll send the nurse in with some meds to help with your pain. You'll probably have that headache off and on for a few weeks, but it's perfectly normal. Your eyesight, we can hope,

will improve with rest. Sometimes it takes a few days to regain your visual acuity, but since you're responding to light and can see, albeit hazily, I have good reason to believe you'll make a full recovery."

Fleet let out a sigh of relief. That was all good news.

"We'll be keeping you here for a few days to make sure your recuperation progresses appropriately, but I'll give credit where credit is due. The reason this turned out well is because of your overall health. You're young, you don't smoke, and your blood pressure is thankfully, normally low according to your GP, with whom I've been in touch. He also mentioned you keep to a strict vegetarian diet, so that's another plus, not having to warn you away from red meat in the future. Now, it's your turn." She stopped prodding his body. "Tell me how you feel?"

"Well..." Fleet became thoughtful for a moment and took note. "Besides my blurry vision, my head still hurts."

"Which it will for a few weeks," the surgeon told him for a second time. "Maybe longer. Some people get residuals for a month or more after being repaired."

"And the top of my head is...sore," he continued. Fleet winced as his good hand went up and encountered bandages.

"Metal plates," was the immediate reply. "Those will stay in place for seven to ten days, along with your clamps, after which we'll remove them before you're discharged if we don't feel you require any additional intercranial surgery. In the meantime, we'll treat that topical tenderness with ice packs. You'll also be very tired for the next couple weeks, but that's normal, too."

The surgeon's voice became more serious. "I won't beat around the bush, Mr. Eggers. These first twenty-four hours out of surgery are the most critical, so we've been monitoring you closely, and will continue to do so overnight. You're almost there, so if all your vitals remain good, and your post-surgical conditions—like your blurry eyesight—continue to improve, I think we can have you in a non-ICU room and on your feet as early as tomorrow afternoon."

“What...? How long have I been out?” He was clueless as to what day it was.

Talia’s voice soothed him. “We got to you last night, Sunday, around six. You were operated on just two hours later, and now it’s just after five PM on Monday.”

Wow. Way to lose a bunch of time. And shit. He’d missed a full day of work. His backlog wasn’t going to allow him to be incapacitated for long. He needed to get better, and fast.

“What can I do to expedite my recovery?” he turned to ask the outline of the surgeon. His words were coming easier now, and maybe, just maybe, he was getting a little more nuance of color in the shadows he perceived.

“Sleep, sleep, and more sleep,” the surgeon in front of him said. “As well as staying hydrated; which you can’t help because we’ve got you hooked up to an IV. The next thing you can do to keep things moving in the right direction is getting yourself up and mobile. That will happen tomorrow, as I’ve said, if your vitals behave. Movement, albeit slow to begin with, will help mitigate possible clotting and other complications like pneumonia. So right now, Mr. Eggers, close your eyes and relax.”

“Relax?” Fleet snorted, and *ta-dah*, this time he was actually able to make the disgruntled sound. “I have a pile of work waiting for me at my studio that can’t wait. I can comply with the sleep thing right now, but don’t expect me to be chilling out for long.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news.” The surgeon used her most officious voice. “But it will take two to four weeks before you’ll be cleared to go back to work. And another warning,” she admonished. “Your friends have told me how you spend your leisure time, and it will be at least three months before you can begin bouldering again.”

Fleet had already figured the exercise thing would take a while. He could handle that inactivity. But two to four weeks before he could get back to work? No freaking way. He needed to hurry that timeline along. He’d find a way. He tuned into the surgeon again.

“Now I’ll leave you to chat with your girlfriend for a few minutes before the nurse comes in to administer your meds. After that, I expect you to head immediately back to la-la land,” she said with a cheeky edge to her voice.

So she knew he wasn’t exactly on board with the agenda she’d given him. He’d see about that.

A couple things hit Fleet at the same time after his little internal rebellion. One, he didn’t mind that the surgeon had called Talia his girlfriend. And two, his eyelids were already drooping. Sleep wasn’t that far away.

“Thanks, doc,” Fleet mumbled. “And food?” he remembered to ask before he shut down for the night.

“If you can stomach it, you can have breakfast in the morning.”

“I eat eggs,” Fleet offered. “And cheese.”

“I’ll make note of that on your chart. Have a good night, Mr. Eggers.”

“Thanks,” he believed he managed, but suddenly he was dead-tired. The surgeon left the room.

“I should probably be going, too,” Talia’s voice momentarily perked him up. Her shadow was within touching distance again.

Fleet reached for her hand and...yes. She took it gently.

“Can you stay until I fall asleep?” he asked.

“You want me here?” she countered. “After I was such a skunk to you?”

Fleet chuckled, or at least he thought he did. “My fault,” he yawned, and it hurt, so he shut that down. “I was being selfish; only thinking of myself.”

“No. It was me who was selfish,” she returned. “But I... I regret it, and want to be with you, Fleet. Will you let me come back tomorrow?”

“Mm, hmm,” he managed, hoping his lips were smiling as he bid them to. He roused himself for one last tease. “But

Talia, I won't be ready for sex yet."

Talia's laugh made him feel light again. "I can wait."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Damn, Fleet was a horrible patient.

Not because he was demanding. *No*. It was just the opposite. The man was frustratingly quiet and compliant, not asking for anything; never voicing any discomfort, never rocking the boat. As far as Talia was concerned, Fleet was taking the whole “I’ve been selfish” thing he’d admonished himself for, to a ridiculous extreme.

Fuck that. He needed to start whining a little to prove he was human.

For the third night in a row, Talia tried to disabuse him of the idea that he was being in any way demanding or thoughtless, urging him to ask her for something. *Anything*.

“You know, the doctor told me I could pick you up some interesting foods if you’re getting sick of hospital chow,” Talia offered.

She’d seen the various stuff they brought in which was supposed to pass for vegetarian meals, and it always looked like a pile of rotting compost to her.

Fleet looked at her thoughtfully. “No. I’m good,” he told her, maddeningly, before turning his attention back to the ball game on TV.

There was a good thing. His vision had fully returned about thirty or so hours after surgery, and his headaches, he said, had subsided to a three on a scale of ten. Whether that could be believed with his current level of non-advocacy for himself, Talia wasn’t sure. But what could she do? Beat him

over the head to get him to admit his pain? *Uh...* scratch that. Not a cool picture. She eyed him now, with equal parts tenderness and frustration. The man was a definite conundrum.

Fleet was comfortably ensconced in a private room at the end of a hallway on the third floor of the hospital where the noise level was fairly low. He'd remain there— notwithstanding a return to the ICU if something went wrong with his procedure tomorrow—until he got the green light on being released. Which he seemed...content about, if she were any judge.

Talia had found, in the ensuing days of visiting Fleet at night after work, that besides being a complete music enthusiast, he was also a huge Red Sox fan. The man was four days out of surgery, and Talia had spent the last three evenings watching the games with him, trying to cajole him into showing some emotion. *Any* emotion. Even when Fleet's favorite player hit a home run, the man only gave a minor fist pump.

Talia was heartily sick of his whole disengaged demeanor. Where was the man she knew who was so passionate about his work? Where was the guy who'd kissed the crap out of her? Where was the workaholic who'd insisted—that first day after surgery—that he needed to get back to his studio ASAP, because he had a huge pile of work that couldn't wait? When had his whole attitude taken a turn toward apathy?

Talia glared at Fleet, but he continued to ignore her. She could handle that, but what she couldn't wrap her head around was him eschewing any signs of emotion. Which had everyone pussy-footing around him. Yeah? Screw that. She'd had it.

"Fleet. You're being a jerk," she told him.

That got his eyes snapping toward hers.

"Why? What do you mean? I've been good. I've been doing everything I'm supposed to," he...pouted.

Not fair.

Didn't that make her want to lick the spit right out of him? His lips, lush and compelling at the best of times, now put on

an exaggerated moue that had her nipples...

Libido. Full stop, Talia ordered.

Fuck. She wasn't going to get anywhere if all she could think about was attacking the man. But dammit. She remembered their one-and-done kiss as scorching, and she was only human. Eventually, she was going to need more, but right now...

She needed to call him on his bullshit. "You're being *way* too compliant, and I know for a fact that's not the real you. Ever and I have talked—"

Fleet gave out a little moan.

"Yeah. That's right. We've hashed it out, And she agrees with me. We both know you're full of crap, pulling this act. Now tell me what this new attitude of yours is all about? For real. Is it fear? Depression?" She hated prodding, but she and Ever had waited, and Fleet hadn't snapped out of his stupor. If being a major pain in his ass was the only way to get him talking, then so be it.

She could totally understand both fear and depression, but keeping it to himself wasn't going to help. Fleet had to let somebody in; let someone know what was bothering him so they could find him the right help.

Fleet gave a big sigh and Talia wanted to cheer. It seemed like he was going to open up.

"Is it that obvious?" he asked.

"Duh," she countered, giving what she hoped was a cute eyeroll. "So asks the man who always has a smile on his face. I wouldn't say you've been actually dour, but...a coma patient shows more humor than you."

"Ouch," he said.

"Yeah, so?" Talia wasn't letting this go.

"Maybe I'm feeling a little of both," he finally admitted. "If I let myself start thinking too much, I begin to worry about my clients and my business. That's bad enough, but ..."

The crux of it was coming, Talia was sure.

“...I can’t help wonder if and how this...condition will affect my future.” His shoulders dropped as if he’d been holding onto that worry for far too long.

Talia reached out a hand and covered his where they lay in his lap. “I’m glad you finally decided to share,” she told him.

He snorted. “Did I have a choice?” Fleet was actually able to raise one eyebrow, which amused the hell out of her.

“No. I would have kept at you,” she admitted. “But back to what’s important. First, let’s address the work thing.” Talia became pragmatic. “You know Ever has been in touch with all your bands, and they’ve been more than understanding. Hell, a few of the more savvy musicians have even offered to go into your studio and pick up some slack if you think it’s within their means.”

“And I’m grateful for that,” Fleet interrupted, which buoyed Talia up because the man hadn’t so much as made a peep to anyone who had previously made similar suggestions. “But I’m a perfectionist, and I’m afraid if I start barking orders from a hospital bed, I’ll alienate some of the people who have become good friends.”

Talia scoffed. “You’re not alienating anybody. Your clients want to help. And hell. Look at me? You’ve been an uncommunicative zombie for three days, and I haven’t gone anywhere.”

Fleet looked at her sideways; the first real, disgruntled look he’d flashed her since he’d blamed himself for their “misunderstanding” several nights before.

“Yeah? And why is that, Talia?” he questioned.

So he was challenging her now? *Fine*. But she could tell he was on edge about how she’d answer by the way his tongue poked out to swipe nervously across his lower lip.

She took the initiative and moved her ass from the chair she’d occupied, to the mattress where she scooted it close to his warm body.

Honesty it was.

“Because I like you, you big dope. And somebody needs to bust your chops for acting like a boneh—, uh, a chump.”

Fleet actually snickered. “You were going to say bonehead, weren’t you?”

“I was,” she returned sheepishly. “Then I figured it might be too soon.”

“Hmm. I myself think steelhead might have been more appropriate, anyway,” he sent back, deadpan. Fleet was scheduled to have that metal removed the following morning.

“Jerk,” Talia laughed. “*Now* you decide to make jokes?”

“Well you just accused me of being the undead, so...duh.” His face fell and he hesitated for a moment before giving voice to his trepidation “But Talia. What if they find...bad shit when they open me up again tomorrow?”

Ahh. Now they’d gotten to the crux of things.

“Listen,” she bent to reassure him, dropping a spontaneous kiss on the un-plated side of his head where the stubble was just beginning to grow back because, *yeah*. They’d shaved his head for the whole aneurysm clusterfuck. “You—”

“Time for meds,” came a sullen voice from the doorway. Talia’s least favorite nurse, an enormous bruiser of a woman, appeared. She was a real sourpuss, and looked even more lemon-sucky tonight as she addressed Talia. “And you shouldn’t be on his bed,” she stated nastily before looking at her watch. “There’s only ten minutes left of visiting hours. I’d pack it up right now if I were you.”

“Well you aren’t me,” Talia snarked back. She wasn’t going to take this battle-ax’s shit. “I’ll be enjoying every one of my last ten minutes.”

Nurse stick-up-her-ass sniffed arrogantly, then plunked a cup of pills on Fleet’s side table while barely glancing at him to continue with Talia. “I’ll be in later to hook Mr. Eggers up for a new IV and administer some pre-surgery meds for tomorrow, so *do not* hang around. This patient needs his

sleep.” She turned sharply on her squeaky-soft heel and strode out.

Talia stuck out her tongue at the woman’s retreating back.

“Very grown up of you,” Fleet teased with a chuckle.

“Well, she’s a bitch,” Talia grumbled, happy that Fleet’s good mood had shown up again. “And she interrupted a very important conversation.”

Talia picked up the pill cup and wagged it at him. Fleet obediently picked up his water and downed the fistful he’d been given.

“You were saying, before we were sidetracked?” Talia prompted.

He sighed. “I’m...less than excited about tomorrow’s surgery,” he grumbled.

“Is there a reason?” Talia questioned, stroking his leg gently through the sheet.

“My...” He took a deep breath and began again. “My uncles, two of them had brain aneurysms.”

Talia managed to hold back her gasp.

“Yeah. It’s something genetic. One uncle...died. And the other...? He was left with motor skill problems. But his disability didn’t occur with the initial aneurysm. It was something that happened when they were removing his hardware. What if...?”

Talia leaned down and rested her cheek against him and spoke softly. “Listen. I don’t pretend to know all about this shit, but I’m thinking that must be kind of rare. Besides. If something like that happens, we’ll find a way to deal with it.”

“We?” he asked, nuzzling her ear, sending goosebumps up her spine.

“Yeah. We,” she assured him. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I’m still interested in hanging around to see if there’s something between us.” She leaned into his touch, relishing the breath that wafted warmly into her sensitive whorls.

“You are?” he whispered, sounding so uncertain that Talia could have wept.

“Yeah. I’m not messing with you, Fleet. I feel something for you, and I want to explore it. *If you’re game. You’re the one who acted hesitant and backed off after that fucking amazing earthquake of a kiss we shared.*” Was she being selfish, wanting him to talk about his feelings for her before she left? *Yes.* Was she going to let him off the hook? *Not a chance.*

He huffed as their heads moved apart. “It was a damned fine kiss, wasn’t it,” he admitted, looking her right in the eyes. His were warm, and dark, and she wanted to fall right into them and never leave.

“The best,” Talia assured him with a catch in her voice, waiting to see if he’d continue letting her in.

“Fine,” he sighed. “You must remember that I tried to tell you there are some very fucked up things in my past, right?”

“Yeah. I remember. But Fleet. Nothing is too fucked up for me to hear. I have skeletons of my own to share. But...maybe we should wait to get all that crap out into the open when we have more than ten minutes.”

Fleet glanced at the wall clock. “Seven minutes,” he corrected.

“Yeah. See what I mean? Time’s ticking. And we shouldn’t rush, opening up our baggage. We’ll unpack all our shit soon, of that I’m sure,” she told him. She sat up straighter. “Now. Any other caveats I need to know about?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “I’m a freaking wild card in the health department, and...now you know it’s genetic.”

Talia threw back her head and gave an enormous laugh. She couldn’t help it. “Are you actually intimating you want to have kids with me someday? Because Fleet, that might be a little premature. We’ve only had one date.” Not that the thought bothered her. Being honest, she’d already pondered what kind of babies they’d make together.

Damned beautiful ones.

“I know.” Fleet worried the inside of his cheek. “But let’s just say we do.” He turned troubled eyes to hers.

“Okay. I’ll go there.” She sucked in a breath. “If we have kids, we’ll make sure they get prophylactic CT scans every few years. Does that work for you?”

Sunshine broke out over his face before he tamped it down. “Is that a thing?”

“It is, now,” she assured him.

He clearly took her at her word because he looked far more upbeat than he had before. “Okay. Just for the record, let me get this straight.” He settled back. “First, you don’t care if I have something horrendous in my past. Second, you’ll wipe my sorry ass if I end up getting lobotomized tomorrow. And third, you’ll have my kids, even if they turn out to be broken.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “Yes, to all of the above, but do you have to make it sound like such a shit-show? How about this. One: what’s in the past stays in the past. Two: there won’t be a lobotomy tomorrow, maybe just a few challenges following your *procedure*.” She reminded him the surgeon *hadn’t* called it surgery. “And three: no kids of ours will be broken, just maybe differently put together.”

His smile grew wider, and it was real.

“Have I mentioned how much I like the optimist in you?” Fleet chuckled, staring at her mouth.

Oh yeah? Well, she’d give him what he was, hopefully, angling for.

“Have I mentioned how much I liked our kiss the other night?” She licked her lips and leaned forward.

“You may have,” he groaned.

Closing the gap between them, Fleet palmed the back of her head and pulled her forward.

Yes! His mouth met hers and just like before, insta-lust. How was it possible that this man, with his lips, could turn her world on its edge quicker than anybody who’d ever spent

hours working her over in bed? Was it magic? Pheromones? She didn't know, but at this point she didn't care.

Talia sunk into Fleet's kiss and breathed him in.

Moans mingled, coming from both their mouths, and she snuggled next to his hard chest, as close as she could get, but it wasn't enough. She needed skin. Talia pulled back to draw the hospital gown off Fleet's shoulder so she could get to that warm, enticing flesh, when the lights in the room dimmed.

"Dammit," they both said at the same time.

"Piss poor timing," Fleet grumped.

They laughed.

The room and hallway lights were on a timer that let visitors know when their time was up. And wasn't that just her luck. Things had sped up to what might have been a satisfying crescendo, then come to a screeching halt.

But still, she should be happy for the roadblock. Talia couldn't *seriously* or conscionably have jumped Fleet's bones in his hospital bed. Someone might have walked in. And who knew if he was even cleared for sex? *Uh*, probably not. Even if she was on top, Talia figured sexual acrobatics probably came under the heading of strenuous exercise, which was a big no-no for a while, soooo...good then. It was a rude awakening, but a necessary one. The last thing Talia wanted to do was hurt Fleet.

"That's my cue to go," she said regretfully, laying a swift kiss on his nose and prying herself away from him, rising to her feet. "But I promise I'll be back," she told him with a grin. "And Fleet?"

"Yeah?" he answered, looking at her from his bed with happy bemusement. And didn't that make her feel all "woot-woot". She'd been able to distract him from his woes. With her bod, lol.

She pointed to his lap, cheekily. "You, uh, better ditch that tent before your night nurse comes in."

* * *

IN THE HALLWAY outside Fleet's room, hidden in the shadows and waiting patiently, came a sneer. How ugly. The disgusting pair had almost made out right in the guy's hospital bed. Wasn't it bad enough they were flaunting themselves to any and all who saw them together, without compounding the abhorrence by touching each other...that way?

Disgust battled with satisfaction, because it was the last time anything like that would happen.

As soon as the corridors calmed down for the night, the plan was to make sure Mr. Eggers didn't get the opportunity to overstep those forbidden lines again.

CHAPTER NINE

Sneaking into the security office that was currently unmanned due to staff shortages had been easy. Disabling the cameras in the appropriate hallway had been equally as simple. And deactivating the emergency door alarm at the far end of the building? A piece of cake. With unfettered access to Eggers' room and the egress via the stairwell, the table had been set for the last bit of business that needed to occur.

Getting into the sleeping man's room to slip a knock-out cocktail into his IV had been child's play, and no one had looked twice as a wheelchair was procured for transport. Of course, Eggers had been secretly rolled toward the stairwell when all eyes were busy elsewhere.

From the top landing, it had been a little more difficult, hefting the man's limp body in a fireman's carry to transport him down two floors, but it had eventually been accomplished. Then with a little extra help from some pre-hidden refrigerator straps, Eggers had been wrapped in a tarp and folded into a secured burden which was then hoisted to be taken deeply into the woods.

It had all been so smartly accomplished. And because of that, there'd be one less abomination walking the earth.

Covering the hapless, knocked-out Eggers with a thin layer of dirt and leaves felt incredible. It was the final step in a well-orchestrated plan. Glancing down at the pile of detritus that now obscured the man's body, satisfaction was a warm embrace.

“That’s the last time a fucker like you will touch someone like her. You shouldn’t have done it, you know. I was very displeased. You should have known she was off limits for a person like you.”

Sending one final kick of dirt over what would become the man’s shallow grave, the long walk back began.

* * *

“I’M SORRY. WHAT?” Talia had only been asleep maybe four hours when she’d had to fumble for her ringing phone, taking a call from...the hospital?

Oh shit!

Her mind immediately went to complications regarding Fleet, and her breath seized in her lungs. But the statement on the other end of the phone by the hospital administrator wasn’t anything she expected.

“I said, Mr. Eggers is missing,” the woman repeated. “When his nurse went in to take his vitals ten minutes ago, he wasn’t in his bed. And he wasn’t in the bathroom, either. We’ve been searching the entire hospital, but we can’t find him. The clothes he came in with are still in his closet, and the IV that had been put in early has been ripped out. We... seriously don’t have any idea what could have happened to him or where he could be.”

Talia was already up and throwing on clothes. “I’ll be there in ten minutes,” she barked. “Did you call the police?”

“I did. Right before I called you, as Mr. Eggers’ emergency contact.”

“Good. Don’t touch anything else in his room. I’m calling my team.”

“Your team?” the voice asked.

“SWAT.” Talia hung up before the administrator could question her again.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Had Fleet suffered some kind of mind-altering side-effect from one of his medications? It was the only reasonable answer. There was no way he'd just...walk out, still in a hospital johnny, even if he was scared shitless about his procedure tomorrow...uh, today.

Dammit. It was fucking two o'clock in the morning, and she was about to wake Mason up to mobilize the rest of the team.

With shaking fingers, she hit Mase's number.

"Mmhhlllo?" His groggy voice answered.

"Mason. It's Talia. Fleet is missing."

As expected, Mason went from zero to sixty in a fast second. "Missing? How?"

Talia picked up her go-bag with all her gear, her feet pounding toward the door as she answered. "The hospital just called. When his nurse went to check on him about ten minutes ago, his room was empty."

"Did he walk out? Is that what they think happened?"

"I don't know. But he didn't put on his street clothes which means he's still in a hospital gown. So if he *did* leave, he wasn't in his right mind."

"Got it. I'm mobilizing the team, and I'll call our tracker Harvé with his dog Muddy." He threw out the name of his H Squad leader. "Welker has a forensics background, so we'll have him go over Fleet's room for any evidence, stat."

"I told the hospital not to touch anything," Talia supplied while turning the key in her ignition. Unfortunately, her private vehicle didn't have blue lights, but seriously? Just let someone try to stop her for speeding. They'd get an earful.

"I'll meet you there," Mason continued. She could hear him moving about and attempted to swallow down the worst of her trepidation. There had to be a reasonable explanation for Fleet's disappearance, and Mason and the squads she'd worked with were the best. They'd find him. They had to.

The blue lights she'd thought of before were flashing everywhere by the time she arrived at the hospital. As for her team, she'd been beaten there by a number of SWAT officers; the ones who lived in Orono. Talia had to travel a slightly longer distance from Old Town. Mike, Squad A's leader, was on scene, and approached her as she stepped from her car.

"I got with OPD when I arrived, and told them that we'd be taking the lead on this one, but Mason had already notified them it would be our jurisdiction, so they cordoned off Fleet's room and are keeping gawkers at bay."

"Good." Talia felt better that everyone was on this, and that no untrained hands were mucking about in Fleet's room. She fastened on her collar mic, noting that the squad members who had already arrived were hooked in.

Welker appeared at her elbow with what she assumed was his forensics kit slung over his shoulder. "What have we got?" he asked.

"That's what we're hoping you'll find out," Talia stated. She, Mike, and Welker hurried into the hospital. She had no doubt Mason was only minutes behind, as well as her entire squad and however many others the boss had called in to help.

She only prayed that Harvé and his dog would make a fast arrival. He lived in some pretty heavy-duty, dirt track wilderness off Goss road to the east, so chances were he'd be last on scene.

When they reached Fleet's room, the place was lit up like daytime, and several officers stood with their backs to the wall, making sure no unauthorized personnel went in.

Just as she and Welker were pulling their credentials from their pockets—something Mike didn't need to do because he was part of OPD, and well known—Mason jogged up behind them.

"They're all clear," he barked to the officer she vaguely knew as Schmittty.

"Got it, Cap." Schmittty unhooked the crime-scene tape that had been slapped across the open doorway, indicating they

should go in.

“Who’s been in here? Do we know?” Mason asked, rigging his mic.

Schmitty followed them inside, hanging back as they took a look around. “We questioned the staff. The only ones to come in and have a look were the night nurse and the administrator. We’ve ascertained they touched nothing except the closet and bathroom doors. Everything else is exactly as it was.”

Mason spoke into his collar-mic. “Squads A thru D, set up a room-by-room search of the entire hospital. Squads E thru I, fan out over the hospital’s perimeter and start looking for anything out of the ordinary. Squad J, you’re headed to Fleet Eggers’ studio and apartment to see if he shows up there.” He gave the address. “Opal? Nolan? Are you on premise yet?” he clipped.

“Just getting out of my car, now,” Opal replied. “Where do you want me?”

The pair were tech support for the SWAT team, and clearly they’d be examining all available security footage. Thank God Mason had called in the experts.

“In the security office,” Nolan answered before Mason could reply. “I’m just going to... Hold on. The administrator is trying to tell me something.”

Talia and everyone else waited impatiently.

Nolan came back with a huff. “She says we’re not allowed to view the camera feeds. That it’s privacy and HIPPA protected. She’s sorry, but without a warrant we’re not going to be given access.”

“That’s bullshit,” Talia growled. “They’re the ones who lost their patient. They should be giving us everything we want.” She was incensed. “If anything happens to Fleet, and they make our job difficult, I’ll make sure heads roll,” she promised.

“I, uh, relayed that to the administrator, and she understands, but she’s sorry. She says she can lose her job if

she lets us in.”

“Never mind,” Mason snapped. “I know who to call.”

Talia wondered if Mase knew a judge who wouldn’t chew him up and spit him out for waking him at this time of the morning.

“He might be pissed I’ve gotten his ass out of bed at 1 AM his time, but he’ll get it.”

One? His time? He wasn’t calling a judge, that was for sure.

Mason grabbed his phone from his belt and hit a couple buttons. “Yeah. Quint. Hi. I’m sorry to call you, but I have a problem.”

Right. Quint. Talia had met him at Mason’s wedding, but the man was in Texas. What could he possibly do to help?

It was clear by Mason’s pause that Quint was asking for details.

“It’s pretty fucked up. We have a missing patient at the local hospital, and nobody saw a thing.” He named the facility, and the room from which Fleet had gone absent. “The person we’re trying to locate is Fleet Eggers, and he’s a friend. Fleet was operated on four days ago for a brain aneurysm. We got the call less than a half hour ago that he was no longer in his room. The staff did a quick search of the entire facility, and found nothing—”

A moment passed while Quint clearly spoke.

“Yeah,” Mason piped up again. “I’ve got my squads doing an in-depth search, both inside *and* outside on hospital grounds. The problem is, the hospital won’t give us access to their security footage because of their HIPPA shit, so—”

Mason stopped abruptly, a small, satisfied smile coming to his lips. “I knew you could help. Call me when you find something. And thanks, Quint. I owe you.”

“What?” Talia asked, watching Welker carefully begin to go through Fleet’s room.

“Quint has a friend who works for an undisclosed federal agency. He says the man can hack into the hospital’s systems, no problem. He also let me know it shouldn’t take very long to get an idea of what happened.”

“That’s good,” Talia breathed just a little bit easier. Any action was good.

“Are you finding anything, Welker?” Mason asked.

“Yeah. I’m not sure if it’s pertinent, but there’s some dirt on the floor with a sneaker pattern imbedded. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t have been a nurse because the detritus is like, from the woods.” He bent and picked up a clump with his glove-clad hand, giving the lump a little palpation before putting it into a zip-lock baggie.

“See here?” He pointed, giving her, Mason, and Mike a good look at the find. “Leaf matter is involved, which means whoever left it behind had been in the woods. It feels fairly fresh because it still retains a good deal of moisture.”

“So what does that mean?” Talia questioned. “Someone hid in the woods, then came in to steal Fleet away? That doesn’t make sense. As far as I know, Fleet doesn’t have enemies. He has a few bands who have been on his case to speed things up with their studio sessions, but the last thing they’d want to do is kidnap him, because that would put an even bigger crimp in their timetables.”

Mason stuck up his hand. “Let’s wait to see what else we have.”

“I’m bagging up the IV apparatus,” Welker told them. “We’ll send it to the lab and see if anything’s in there that shouldn’t be. Get me a list of the meds that were authorized.”

“On it,” Mike stated, and took off out the door.

Welker went back to his examination, and—

“I may have something else,” Welker said excitedly, then traversed the room rapidly to flick off the light switch.

The room went dark for a moment before Welker turned on his UV light and headed back to the bed, kneeling down.

“There’s blood, Mase,” he stated with a grunt. “Small droplets.”

Walking closer, Talia saw the tiny black dots that showed up under the spectrum, on the rail of the bed and on the floor, It could only have come from Fleet’s IV being pulled out.

Welker stood, but remaining stooped, his footsteps took him from the bed, across the room to the door as he carefully examined the egress. “The blood definitely leads out into the corridor.”

Mason, Talia, and Mike were quickly on his heels. “Where does it go from there?” Mason asked.

Welker grouched. “I can’t see well enough because the lights in the hallway are too bright. I need them off.”

They spread out, looking for a switch nearby, but none were in evidence.

Welker huffed. “If we can get someone to—”

“On it.” Mason keyed his mic. “Nolan. Are you still with the administrator?”

“That’s an affirmative, Chief,” Nolan replied.

“Tell her we need the hallway lights doused outside Fleet’s room, and the ones in the stairwell adjacent. Have her standby if we need her to kill a few more.”

“Copy that.”

It took a good two minutes—that had Talia fidgeting—but eventually the bank of overheads went out, and Welker reemployed his UV light.

“Got it,” he stated, and began slowly walking toward the exit door at the end of the hallway.

“Wait,” Mason barked, then spoke to Nolan again. “Ask the woman if there’s an alarm on the third-floor exit door at Fleet’s end of the hallway she needs to turn off. And if there is, why didn’t anyone come to investigate if it sounded earlier.”

Mike was already at the door with his flashlight out, examining the frame.

“I can tell you why,” he growled. “Somebody disabled it.” He pointed to a big-ass magnet they could now all see, attached to the upper doorframe, along with some very distinct gouges in the metal where it had been forcibly inserted. “They shoved it in here so the connection wasn’t broken when they opened the door,” he said, shaking his head in disgust.

“So, what does this mean?” Talia couldn’t believe it. “That someone stole Fleet away? Because there’s no way he could have done that stuff himself. You understand he was gorged up on drugs and half naked, for God’s sake.”

“We won’t be jumping to any conclusions, Talia. Let’s go at this methodically, as we *always* do,” Mason reminded her. He put a hand on her arm to calm her down, but it just ramped her up more, so she shook him off.

“I’m not jumping to conclusions,” she insisted. “When I left Fleet tonight, he was all set for getting his plates removed tomorrow and getting home. He might have been a little... down, earlier, but we talked things out, and he was more than ready to move things along. If he’d had any second thoughts, he would have called me.”

“His state of mind might not have been that reasonable, Talia. The hospital gave him drugs, as you said, remember? He could have been having some kind of pharmaceutically induced episode. And he’s certainly technically savvy enough to have disabled an alarm.”

Before she could rebut, Welker spoke up again.

“Have maintenance turn off the stairwell lights, Nolan.” Their forensics expert used his own mic to make the request of their techie, obviously understanding that Mason was attempting to talk Talia off her metaphorical ledge.

Talia growled, and Mason responded.

“Hey. Don’t lose it on me now. Use your brain. Occam’s Razor says the simplest explanation is the most likely. And the simplest thing is that he went a little loopy and took off.”

Right. And he had the knowledge and the wherewithal to disable a magnetic alarm while in an altered state. *Bullshit.*

Talia bit her tongue as the area went dark and Welker began pointing out blood droplets again. She ceased grumbling, not one to normally argue with her chief, but in this instance she knew she was correct and made one more stab at it.

“Somebody took him,” she stated through stiff lips.

Mason sighed but placated. “If that’s the case, we’ll find out. What’s most important right now is not following conjecture, but examining the evidence. Once we have intel, we’ll know how to proceed. In the meantime, the squads are all doing their jobs. Are we agreed?”

Talia felt like she was chewing metal shavings, but of course what Mason said made sense. She turned to him and nodded, but she sure didn’t like it.

“Agreed.”

CHAPTER TEN

Why is it so freaking cold?

Fleet struggled to find the blankets that must have fallen off, but couldn't quite get his hands to work. Or his eyes to open. Stupid meds. They were not only making him an ice-pop, they were impeding his motor functions. His brain, however, seemed to be functioning because...

What the hell? He wasn't smelling antiseptics. His nose was full of...outdoor odors? Dirt? And what was lying across his face? It wasn't the softness of a sheet, it was something... scratchy. He could tell by the way it moved when he exhaled.

Fleet started to panic, but forced himself to calm down.

Breathe in. Breathe out. *Do not* aspirate whatever the hell was covering his nose and mouth.

Eventually, having successfully controlled his respiration, he swallowed.

Okay. What next? His first order of operation should be to get all his body-parts cooperating, but... *Fuck*. He was so goddamned tired.

Maybe just another short nap...

* * *

IT HAD BEEN an hour since the hospital discovered Fleet missing, and now bits and pieces of information were starting to flood in. Talia had glued herself to Mason's side, despite the

fact she wanted to be searching in every closet inside, and under every bush outside. She knew the boss would be apprised of each bit of intel first, so she needed to be one-hundred percent in his orbit to get all the details—both good and bad.

Currently, they were in the command bus that Mason's brother Spencer had driven to the hospital, having parked it dead-center in front of the main doors while all the teams scoured the vicinity for any kind of evidence.

Welker had lost the trail of Fleet's blood no more than fifteen paces outside the back door, and no matter how much he went back and forth over the pavement, he couldn't pick it up again. They were hoping that when Harvé arrived, Muddy would have better luck. But speaking of luck, it certainly wasn't on their side.

Only ten minutes ago, Harvé had called, expressing his frustration that he and his dog were at some lake house to the north. He'd only just received Mason's call, and was packing up to be on his way. He wouldn't be on site for at least fifty minutes, though, and that was if he ignored all speed limits... which he assured Mason he was going to do.

Welker had since hustled all his samples off to a lab run by a friend, who, despite the early morning hour would expedite running the necessary tests.

Now Mason was on the phone with Quint.

"What the fuck?" Mason's growl did nothing to calm Talia down. Just the opposite. She knew whatever he was hearing was bad news.

"Okay. Thanks for getting back to me so fast. We'll have to approach things from a different angle now."

Mason paused to listen.

"Yeah. I figured you'd have your guy on that. Let me know if anything pans out."

Mason hung up and looked at Talia, giving it to her right away. "Somebody disabled the cameras in the hallway outside

of Fleet's room, as well as the ones in the stairwell and the pair that cover the back lot."

"Shit!" Talia exclaimed. "I knew it. Somebody took him." Her anger knew no bounds.

"Quint's having his guy check all the other cameras in and out, to see if there's anyone who looks like they don't belong. But that's a long shot."

Talia knew that. Whoever kidnapped Fleet might have been hiding out for hours before grabbing him, or...perhaps it was a staff member who actually belonged in the hospital. They'd have to approach things another way.

She set her brain in motion.

First off, why would someone kidnap Fleet?

Granted, she didn't know all that much about his background, but she *did* know he'd been in Orono for years, and seemed to fit right in with the community. He'd moved to the area when he was eighteen, he'd said, coming right from his hometown in Alabama. He'd attended four years at UMO, then opened his studio. How much more straightforward could a life be? Still...

"We're going to have to run a background check on him," Talia told Mason with her jaw clenched. "We need to see if there are any red flags in his past that might point to someone who's had a problem with him."

"I agree." Mason nodded. "Sandrine is our research specialist. She can pass off Squad C to her lieutenant while she works her magic."

Damn. Talia wasn't happy about this. She hated to invade Fleet's privacy, but what choice did they have? If information about his history would help find him, it was necessary to uncover it.

"Conide?" Mason keyed his mic and called for his squad leader.

"Conide, up," Sandrine answered immediately.

"We need you at the command bus, ASAP," he barked.

“Roger that,” Sandrine replied, and didn’t ask any questions. She knew whatever Mason required of her, she’d get the explanation when she showed up.

* * *

FLEET WOKE FOR A SECOND TIME, becoming aware of his surroundings more quickly this time.

He was...not in his hospital bed. Everything seemed wrong for that; the noises, the smells. But he had no clue exactly where he was. What was even more disturbing was that he didn’t have control of his body. As much as he concentrated hard on his fingers; picturing himself dexterously working the buttons and slide switches on his soundboard, he couldn’t get anything to move.

He didn’t know how much time passed while he concentrated on that simple exercise, but eventually he became frustrated and gave up. It was clearly useless. Whatever he’d done, maybe damaging his brain with some ill-conceived flight, he was completely unable to move.

Sleep descended again, and this time he didn’t fight it.

* * *

SANDRINE’S FINGERS flew over her keyboard as accolades galore—regarding Fleet and his work—popped up on her screen. Talia hovered because Mason had ordered her to stay put while he’d gone out to interface with the various squads, and for once she wasn’t sorry to be the one confined to the bus.

What she read over Sandrine’s shoulder was amazing.

She’d had no idea Fleet was so revered in the recording world. The man, in the course of his fifteen-year career, had worked with several extremely famous bands, had won awards for movie and television scores, and was a highly sought-after consultant. That he’d stayed in tiny Orono was a puzzle, when

it was clear he could be gleaming so much more fame and fortune if he worked, say, on the West Coast, or in New York City.

That in itself was a conundrum, but the other thing that had Talia puzzled? For a gregarious and handsome man, there were no pictures of him at award ceremonies, galas, industry fêtes of any sort. It was almost as if...

“I can hear your brain cooking, Talia,” Sandrine snorted. “And yeah, mine is, too. Why would a guy who has the talent to do everything Fleet does, never go where the action is? I understand people come to him because they know he’s so good, but he could be cleaning up if he wasn’t hidden away in his tiny studio in small-town America. It’s almost as if—”

“He’s hiding,” Talia finished, then quickly amended. “Not exactly hiding, maybe. Just laying low; not making any kind of splash to bring himself to anyone’s attention.”

Sandrine shrugged. “Which isn’t the worst thing, I guess. Maybe he loves his work but hates the limelight?”

“Possibly,” Talia scowled. “But there’s got to be something more. He’s so...involved with his artists. I could see that after being with him for just one evening. He’s far from a hermit type. He loves talking and mentoring here... Can you dig a little deeper? Maybe something spooked him before he came to Maine?”

“Okay. I’ve pulled his SSI info. He’s thirty-four, born and raised in Huntsville, Alabama, to Lodine and Jim Eggers. Okay. Now let me see if I can tap into his home town police department’s data base.”

Sandrine hummed while Talia tapped her foot.

I didn’t take long.

“Bingo. He’s in their system. But Talia. There’s no arrests, no warrants, not even an outstanding ticket on his record, but... Well how about that? He’s listed as having a juvenile record, but it’s locked up tight. That means whatever they’ve got on him, he...” She tapped into Google with an age search for the state. “...he did it before he was eighteen.”

“Well, shit,” Talia growled. “Can’t you...hack it or something?”

“Not in my skill set,” Sandrine replied with a sigh. “Even if it was legal,” she tsked. “The best I can do is have Mason send a request to his friend the judge, who might be able to get the records unsealed. But he’ll have to have a good reason, and Fleet being missing isn’t exactly an open-sesame for that kind of thing.”

“We could...” Talia chewed a nail. “Dammit. I’m going to have to run this by Mason, but maybe we should call Fleet’s parents. I know they’re still alive and they still live there.”

Sandrine nodded. “It might be good to notify them anyway, as long as you know they’re not estranged. I’m sure if I went missing, my parents would want to know.”

“Yeah. Mine, too,” Talia added, with not a single bit of hesitation. She and her family had gone through a lot, so withholding things from them wasn’t something she’d even consider. “And from what I know, Fleet is in touch with his family.”

Talia keyed her mic. “Mason?” She used his first name, because there were three Sothard’s on the team.

“Sothard up,” he responded immediately.

“Giving you an update. Sandrine hasn’t found anything current to raise concern, but she’s discovered he has a juvenile record that’s been locked up tightly. I was wondering whether we should call Fleet’s parents. First, they need to be told their son is missing. Hell, maybe Fleet never notified them about his operation, so they deserve to know about that, too.”

“I agree,” Mason said. “Continue.”

“Maybe, after I tell them what’s been going on,” she speculated, “they can supply us with information regarding his past that’s not showing up on our computer search; point us in a direction we’re clearly missing.”

She wasn’t blowing smoke. Fleet had told her during one of their heart-to-heart’s that something fucked up lay in his history.

“It’s worth a try, Talia. You want me to head to the bus and take care of it? I’m not averse to making the call.”

Talia chewed her lip. Did she want Mason to take over, or did she want to talk to Fleet’s parents? Would they know who she was? Had Fleet called them from the hospital sometime during his recovery period over the last week and mentioned her name? It was possible. She’d visited him after work at the end of each day, so he would have had plenty of time to conduct complete, in-depth discussions with them about his possible new love interest. Hell, every time she talked to *her* mother, the first thing the woman always asked was if there was a man in Talia’s life.

Goddammit. The chances of Fleet bringing her up were slim. They weren’t even dating yet. They’d eaten together once before he’d had his aneurysm, and just because she’d kept him company at his bedside for the last week, didn’t mean she’d become someone important enough to mention to his parents. So... Depending on what kind of reaction she got once she gave his parents her name, she’d go with either new girlfriend, or act officially as a member of Downeast SWAT.

“I’ll call,” she told Mason. “But most likely in a professional capacity. I’m guessing Fleet probably hasn’t mentioned me to them yet.”

“Okay. Do it. Although it’s the middle of the night...”

Talia gave an internal scoff. Her parents would definitely want to know if something had happened to her, regardless of the hour. And Mason’s? “Would your parents be more pissed if they were woken up with the news you were missing, or furious because they weren’t told until the following day?”

He sighed but didn’t hesitate to answer. “They’d be apoplectic if they’d been kept in the dark.”

“That’s what I thought,” Talia agreed.

It was time to find the parents’ contact info and get them on the phone.

* * *

OPEN. Close. Open. Close.

Fleet had come back to consciousness again, and he was having more luck this time working minor body parts, like his eyelids.

Open. Close. Open. Close.

And shit. He was pretty certain the things that covered his face were leaves. How the fuck was that possible?

Had he somehow left the hospital and walked into the woods? And if his body had actually managed the feat, how was it he'd been able to bypass all the hospital personnel and the facility's alarm systems? They had to have alarms, right?

But...if they didn't, how much time would pass before the night nurse found he was missing? And how exactly would they find him once they discovered him gone...wherever the hell he'd gotten to?

Why couldn't he remember anything?

The last thing he recalled was that Talia had been visiting. They'd kissed again, and he'd been sporting a highly satisfactory hard-on. Despite his circumstances, Fleet smiled inside. Talia was one hell of a woman to have gotten that reaction out of him while he was pretty much down for the count.

He sighed. Now wasn't the time to drift away from what was happening, reliving that hotter-than-hell memory.

Fleet continued scraping the bottom of his brain.

Right. He'd been nodding off when a new night attendant had come in to fiddle with his IV, then...nothing. Lights out. He couldn't remember another freaking thing. Especially not leaving his room, which he must have done. How weird was that? Fleet had never, in his whole life, been a sleep-walker.

Had someone...relocated him? An unknown enemy? That bruiser of a night nurse?

Fuck. He shivered, and this time with more than the cold. His circumstances, if he *had* been taken from the hospital, reminded him too vividly of a time in the past he wanted never to contemplate again. But considering he'd been embarking in some of the same behavior that had gotten him into hot water before, he had to weigh the possibility that he might be in the same kind of trouble, now.

Dammit.

He needed to get his body moving.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mason was back in the command bus after issuing new orders to the searching squads. He and Talia had begun to review the stills Mase's friend Quint had sent of every person who'd walked through the front door of the hospital from the time visiting hours began until the time Fleet had been discovered missing. There were over eighty, and that didn't include staff, EMT's, paramedics, uniformed officers, janitorial staff, or late-night delivery people.

The other thing Quint sent them was video his tech guy had obtained of all the cars leaving the hospital grounds after the alleged time of abduction. The task of going through all of the pictures and footage was going to be daunting, but Mason, realizing that, set Opal and Nolan on it, scouring alongside them.

Talia, however, was champing at the bit. She'd been sitting on her butt too long. Surveillance wasn't her thing. She was ready to go out and join up with her squad to start scouring the woods instead of being stuck in front of a monitor.

She'd just asked Mason's permission to put boots to pavement and, gaining his approval, was about to leave the bus when Mason's phone rang again.

"What do you have?" he barked, not wasting time on any niceties with the caller.

Talia watched the Chief's eyes narrow and his jaw harden.

Shit. This couldn't be good. She steeled herself for the worst and waited not so patiently.

“Thank your friend for us,” Mason concluded. “It cements what we already assumed. Head back and join your squad.”

He turned to Talia after he hung up, an angry snarl on his face. “That was Welker. Forensics show rocuronium in Fleet’s IV bag.”

“Rocuronium?” Talia questioned. That was a new one on her.

“Yeah. It’s a neuromuscular blocker used when tracheal movement needs to be suspended for emergency intubation, or in the course of surgery to keep skeletal muscles relaxed. The normal dosage is .6 to 1.2 milligrams, which lasts in the patient’s system for between twenty and thirty-five minutes. The traces in Fleet’s IV bag shows a saturation equal to that of just over 2 milligrams. It’s not a recommended dosage, and in that potency it would keep a patient unable to move for almost two hours.”

“Shit,” Talia wailed. “Someone wanted him completely incapacitated, but...” She blinked, and slowly brightened. “... not killed. Think about it, Mase. They had access to his room and his IV bag, why not just overdose him right there and be done with it? They wanted him alive.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Mason agreed. “And it also points to the fact that whoever did this was, for some unknown reason, trying to terrorize Fleet. Imagine waking up and not being able to move a muscle.”

Talia shivered. “And not being able to be mobile enough to help yourself. It’s awful to think about, and that person could have taken Fleet, done anything they wanted to him, and dropped him anywhere when they were finished.”

“They could, but...”

Now she could see Mason’s brain cooking, and she waited anxiously to see what he was coming up with.

“...why risk it?” he asked. “Would you take the chance of your car being spotted on camera, then have it searched? Or would you use the perfectly handy wooded acreage that lay right behind the hospital to get rid of your problem?”

Talia's hopes raised.

So far, the searchers had kept to the peripheries of the parking lot, with most everyone assuming—due to the cessation of blood droplets—that Fleet had been bundled into a car and taken away. Mason was now saying otherwise, and it made sense.

“I'm taking my squad into the woods,” she said, heading for the door. She knew Mason wouldn't call her back.

“Harvé is only twenty minutes out,” Mason reminded her as her foot hit the top step.

“That's twenty minutes of additional terror for Fleet,” Talia growled. “If I can spare him that, I will.”

She flew out the door and sped across the pavement joining her squad while hearing Mason give a sit-rep in her ear to every team member, explaining what they'd just determined. Almost before he'd finished, her squad was joined by all the others at the edge of the woods.

“Listen up,” Mason's voice clipped again over everyone's mics. “I've sent satellite imagery on your phones with areas gridded out. I'm assigning a two-acre deep section to each squad. Take things slowly, and look for signs of disturbance in the undergrowth. Since Mr. Eggers was unable to move, our perp had to have carried him. So footprints, scrape marks in the dirt, broken branches; they're to be examined and recorded with coordinates and pictures. You copy?”

“Copy, Chief,” all the squad leaders affirmed.

“Okay. Go. And just in case our perp did drive Mr. Eggers off-site, I have the State Police blocking off all main roads to do a quick search of every vehicle attempting to leave the area.”

Talia figured that wouldn't be such a daunting task. It was just after three in the morning, and traffic would be almost non-existent.

The team's job, on the other hand, would be like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Fleet had been taken at approximately one forty-five, which meant if Mason was

correct about the rocuronium, Fleet was still out there somewhere, paralyzed, and wouldn't be able to call out to anyone or answer their hails.

"Let's move," Talia ordered her squad, having just received their search-grid.

Thank God Doug was choosing to keep his mouth shut and play nice. There was no way she could have calmly listened to any of his back-talk.

The ten squads spread out so that each person who entered the dense woods could spot the team member who walked in to their left and right, all approximately twelve feet apart. It would do no good to put *too* much room between them, because a comatose Fleet might be bypassed without being spotted. Thankfully, they had some very good trackers on the team, Amos being the best of the best. It certainly wasn't *her* forte, but she lowered her head, scrutinizing every bit of dirt. She'd be damned if she missed even the slightest clue tonight.

Talia used her flashlight to examine each square inch of ground as the line progressed. She called over to Cisco, her squad lieutenant on her right. "Cisco? How far do you think you could carry a two-hundred-pound deadweight through the woods?" She picked him over others since he was the closest to her besides Doug.

She heard Cisco grunt. "I don't know. Two hundred yards? Maybe three?"

It's what she thought. And Cisco was no slouch. She'd seen him during drills, fireman carrying their large test-dummy which weighed-in comparably to Fleet, down a flight of stairs and well away from a building they'd been told would eventually blow up.

"I could do four," Doug boasted from her left, and didn't the asshole sound like he was enjoying himself? Why did he have to be such a prick? Talia wasn't in the mood.

"I'll make sure we put that to the test during our next drill weekend," she growled. "Now, minds to the ground, people." And by people, she meant Doug.

* * *

FLEET HAD BEEN TRYING and trying to get bits and pieces of himself to move. So far, he'd managed a pinky-finger wiggle, but that was about it. How long had he been working on it? Would it matter? Was anybody looking for him or was he on his own? He side-swiped his digit again. *Left, right. Left right.* He dug a small path through what felt like dirt to his returning senses.

Had his toe just twitched? It was possible, but he couldn't look at it to find out.

He hated that his face remained covered. Fleet wanted to see where he lay now that he could blink his eyes. More than that, he wanted to open his mouth and call out for help, but fear that the leaves—because that's what he'd finally decided were on top of him—would fall into his open cavity and choke him before he figured out how to get it closed again, prevented him from trying. Because how badly would that suck? Aspirating a leaf before he had control over his body again?

He tried to calm himself again, and while he attempted working his smaller muscle groups, he couldn't help but churn over the reason he found himself in this situation.

There was really only one thing that came to mind, and as he catalogued his recent behavior, he became more and more certain that his current predicament had to be related to the attention he'd been paying to Talia. And that wasn't just his paranoia speaking.

Fact: Many people didn't like a black man showing interest in a white woman.

Fact: Bigots often thought it was their right to take matters into their own hands when they didn't agree with something they thought was wrong.

Fuck.

Fleet should have been more careful. He knew better. Similar circumstances had nearly derailed his life when he'd

been young. Why had he imagined things would be different now just because he was older. Had becoming an established and well-respected business owner in Maine made him forget?

Probably. But...

There were prejudiced assholes everywhere.

Fleet gave an internal sigh, but couldn't afford to dwell on that now. It might all be moot if he couldn't get himself out of the woods. Had the person who'd brought him here meant for him to die, or simply wanted to scare him? If it was the latter, the strategy had been successful. Fleet had suffered severe panic waking up to find that his muscles didn't work. And now, as he was slowly regaining feeling, he was terrified that before he could actually move his entire self, he'd end up freezing to death in the October chill, or get eaten by a bear.

He wanted to laugh over that picture. What a tasty morsel he'd make for a predator. He was nearly unwrapped for easy eating, wearing only the foolish hospital gown he'd had on in bed. Which wasn't helping his situation.

Cold had now permeated every inch of his body. He could give up, or... Fleet gritted his teeth, an action he could now perform, and concentrated on his little finger again.

Wiggle. Wiggle, wiggle.

He wasn't about to give up.

* * *

"I'VE GOT DRAG MARKS," a voice from Talia's left called out triumphantly. The same voice instantly sounded over her mic. "Amos up. All squads to me. I have signs of a large burden being dragged." He named his coordinates.

Mason's voice rang out next. "Everyone converge to Amos's rear. Do not precede him. Let him take the lead while the rest of you give backup. Spread out behind him to make sure nothing is missed, keeping a distance of no more than three feet between you."

“Spires up,” Talia keyed in. Oh, hell no. She wasn’t going to be left to sweep up. “Permission to join Amos at point, Chief.”

She could almost hear him thinking before he relented. “Do it. But keep a level head, Talia. We don’t know what we’re going to find.”

“Copy that, Chief,” she agreed.

“Cisco, you’re with me,” Talia barked to her second in command. “When you said two hundred yards, you were spot on. Now how far could you...drag somebody?” She swallowed a lump that almost threatened to strangle her question. She didn’t want to think of Fleet’s nearly naked body being hauled roughly across the forest floor.

“Depends if he was trussed up or not,” Cisco grunted. “If he was just in a hospital gown and I had to rely on pulling him by his hands or feet, it would be damned slow going. If he were wrapped in something...say...a tarp with a rope, I could go for a long time.”

That’s what Talia had been afraid of, but at least they’d have a trail to follow.

“What do you think, Amos?” She’d reached the leader of G squad, who was examining the ground carefully and squatted beside him.

“I think Eggers was wrapped in something. You see this? There’s only one drag mark that leads away. If he was only in his johnny and being moved by his feet, we’d have his head furrowing a gouge in the leaves, and his hands would be making lighter ones where they trailed loosely. If he’d been taken by the arms and pulled, we’d have two distinct marks from his feet.”

“That’s either good news or bad,” Talia couldn’t keep the words in her mouth as they both rose to their feet and began the painstakingly slow trek forward.

“How so?” Amos asked.

“It’s good if he’s alive, because his body will be protected. It could, however, mean he’s...dead.” There was that lump

again, dammit, but she couldn't manage to get rid of it. What if Fleet had been killed?

She didn't know if she could handle that. In the short time they'd spent together, Fleet had become so important to her. He was the first man in a long time who actually piqued her interest in all ways. He was intellectually her equal, he was artistically her superior, and in the physical attraction arena, damn, the man was off the charts. Talia had never in her thirty-two years had a visceral reaction to any male like she'd had to Fleet. The couple kisses they'd shared had proven it. And dammit, she was nowhere near being finished. She needed more time with the compelling man to explore, and to convince him to let down whatever fucked up barriers he'd erected, letting her in.

Talia pulled her head out of her ass and doubled-down on paying attention to where Amos was leading. She trusted his tracking skills, and easily gave him lead.

Time passed slowly, painstakingly. Inch by inch they covered ground.

At times, Amos pointed out where the burden had been shifted, rearranged to create a different drag pattern. There were flattened areas of leaves where their perpetrator had sat to take a rest. There was a candy wrapper which Talia, donning gloves to pick it up, put it in a bag for DNA sampling.

But after an additional ten minutes of searching, they had yet to—

“Amos! What's that?” Talia yelled, pointing to a dark lump on the ground up ahead. Flashlights raised from all sides as feet sped forward and squads moved in, suddenly disregarding the methodical way they'd previously trod.

Amos reached the bundle first, dropping to his heels.

“It's not him,” he hissed, disappointment etched in his face as he turned to Talia. He tugged gloves out of his pocket and put them on to begin examining the bunched-up tarp, unfolding it from its crumpled position. “But it's one-hundred

percent what he was dragged in,” Amos supplied more excitedly. “Look at this.”

Everyone crowded around, concentrating on where Amos pointed. “Blood, like what we had in the parking lot before Welker lost the trial. Whoever did this, wrapped Fleet up to make getting him into the woods, easier. And here.” He pointed again. “This dirt encrusted spot is where the tarp was dragged, which means...”

Talia stood up and began shining her light amongst the trees. “Which means our perp unwrapped Fleet and carried him somewhere nearby. He’s got to be close,” she managed, her breathing tightening her voice. She cleared her throat to make herself heard. “He’s here somewhere nearby, people. Eyes everywhere.”

Cisco’s dry tone rang out. “He might have been hoisted into a tree, or he could be buried somewhere.”

Not a picture Talia wanted in her head. She cleared her throat. “Cisco has a good point. He may not be lying out in the open, so careful going. Let’s find Fleet and get him home.”

Talia notified Mason and the other squads who were behind them of their new findings, having no doubt the information would give everyone a new life on the search.

As she and her team members fanned out, Talia said a small prayer.

Please God, let him be okay. Please.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Huh?

Was the sound that hit Fleet's ears the sweet cadence of Talia's voice? Was he dreaming? He moved his hand slightly—something he'd been working on—and manage to poke himself.

Nope. Not sleeping.

Talia had come to find him.

He opened his mouth and attempted to call out, but leaves sifted in and no sound emerged. *Damn.* He couldn't even cough, which sucked. What if Talia walked right by without seeing him? What could he do to gain her attention? His pinky fingers were now moving like mad with his rising agitation, and his hand actually...

There. A wrist-flex. Fleet gave everything toward concentrating on that one hand. *Move, move, move,* he told it, and in response, he heard the glorious rustle of leaves.

Yes!

He could do this. Talia's voice was getting closer. Very slowly, but he was certain she was moving toward him. Still he had no idea how deeply he was buried under the detritus that continued to sift up into his nose. *Dammit.* It was possible she could walk right the hell by, and he'd be left to his own, pitiful devices.

Hell, no. That wasn't an option.

He could hear the crunching of many feet on the forest floor now, and knew he needed to up his game. And thinking of it as a game helped. Since when had a physical challenge he'd ever attempted gotten the better of him? Not once in his adult life, because he always worked damned hard to reach the exact outcome he wanted. So... This fight wasn't going to defeat him, either.

He bent his hand up slowly, only succeeding in raising it to what he thought might be a ninety-degree angle at his wrist. But still, it was better than nothing. He began flapping it up and down in the leaves, and was heartened to hear himself making noise. But was it enough to be heard over the footsteps and voices approaching?

He wiggled his hand as if his life depended on it... Because it did.

* * *

THE MIC IN Talia's ear came to life.

"Spires," Mason barked.

"Spires up," Talia answered, then raised a hand to signal everyone should come to a momentary stop.

"Harvé and Muddy are now on site," Mason's voice clipped. "They're headed in to your location."

"That's good." She breathed a little easier. "He can take a long sniff of the tarp that Welker is bagging up. We're close, Chief, because our perp wouldn't have carried Fleet far, we're sure. But we're taking it very slowly, so we don't miss anything. Muddy's nose will be invaluable at this point."

Mason said something else, but a slight rustling up ahead that sounded nothing like the breeze that had been wafting through the trees, hit her ears.

"Chief. I hear something. We may have him. Spires out." She cut her connection and headed for the odd crinkling she heard.

“Probably a goddamned animal,” Doug grumbled from behind her.

“Shut it,” Cisco told him before Talia could respond, and how about that? Cisco stepping up.

If the situation weren't so dire, she might have felt pretty warm and fuzzy that Cisco finally had her back. She'd known he had it in him. Was he still combative and caustic? *Yes*. But she was beginning to see that his poisoned-dart comments were often helpful; pointing more toward thinking outside the box, than naysaying. That wasn't a bad thing.

The leaf crunching sounds became louder, and it now gave an accurate direction in which to head. Without conscious thought, Talia began to run until...

Holy Mother of God. Her flashlight beam silhouetted the paleness of a hand sticking up through the leafy ground-cover.

“Got him!” she yelped over her mic, stumbling the last few yards toward what looked to be a shallow depression in the ground. Abe's squad and hers were right behind, with Cisco, and Doug by her side.

The hand sticking up, moved, and her knees threatened collapse from relief. Fleet was alive. Who knew his condition, but they'd deal with that as soon as they got him up and out of his hole.

“Wait,” Cisco yelled sharply, grabbing her arm as she would have lurched forward the final few steps.

She narrowed her eyes up at him, unable to stop the growl that rose up from her throat. “Wh—”

“Let's make sure nothing's booby-trapped,” Cisco broke in to state sharply. “We don't know what kind of bastard took him, and what they're capable of, but we need to make sure Fleet's safe to move.”

Completely reasonable.

“Thanks, Cisco.” Talia took a step back.

Normally the careful one, she realized her emotions were running high and had threatened to override her common

sense. She was never happier to have Cisco as her second in command right now. The man was smart, though at times acerbic, and had kept her from what might have been a fatal error.

There was no doubt Cisco deserved to have a leadership position within the team. She'd heard through Everlee that Squad B's leader had run into a conflict of scheduling, and was stepping down. She'd have to put Cisco's name forward as his five-star replacement.

Talia regrouped.

"McGee," she sent out. "We need you front and center."

Squad D's leader, Hops, was the team's foremost ordnance specialist.

"Copy that. I'm thirty seconds out."

He arrived in twenty, nodding his understanding as he took note of the scene. Cisco had kept everyone ten feet short of the indentation in the ground, and Hops, his eyes moving constantly up, down, and sideways, moved forward slowly and methodically. He swept the area with his flashlight, looking, Talia knew, for trip-wires or detonator pads. He kept them apprised as he worked.

"No ground cover has been disturbed on the far end of the depression, nor on the opposite side. All the action took place here," Hops shone his light on a pile of dirt and brush that had clearly been excavated from the shallow hole. "...and here." He showed drag marks and churned up scores on the groundcover that indicated where Fleet had been pushed into the hollow.

"Good news? We can move in. I'm not seeing any signs of explosive devices."

* * *

EXPLOSIVE DEVICES?

That was the last thing Fleet had expected to hear. He'd heard a voice mention booby traps, but he'd thought maybe... Indiana Jones type stuff? Like nets scooping people up. Ropes dragging people into trees. Snake filled pits to fall into. He wanted to give a wry laugh. Nope. Not his luck. Just some plain old bomb shit. What kind of fucked up fate would get him pulled from his shallow grave, only to be blown up?

But the man had given the all-clear, right?

Fleet pushed back his slightly hysterical panic.

More rustling sounded toward his left, his right, his head, and foot. The footsteps were painstakingly unhurried, and Fleet wanted to scream his frustration, but nope. Fried vocal chords; not the intentional vocal fry that so many young women these days effected.

Fleet needed to chill. He knew they were just trying to keep him safe.

When he finally felt a warm hand surround his where he'd managed to keep it upraised, Fleet felt like crying. Or maybe he was crying. He couldn't yet feel much of his face in order to tell.

"We've got you, Fleet." Talia's voice was music to his ears; a score he would write as soon as he was back in his studio.

* * *

"GODDAMMIT," Talia swore under her breath as several squad members began uncovering Fleet. What kind of bastard would do a thing like this, and why? She hoped Fleet had some answers for them, but doubted it. She dug to uncover his face as the team worked on his body, and as soon as his visage was clear of all debris, she saw him open his lovely dark eyes.

"Hi Fleet," she whispered, her heart in her throat. "You have no idea how good it is to see you. Hang tight. We're going to have you out of there in a minute."

He blinked his understanding, and Talia barely choked back a sob. His brain hadn't been affected.

She was going to find and destroy the bastard who'd done this to Fleet. It was the utmost in cruelty. To bury someone alive when they were aware, but unable to move? Mental torture to a degree that Talia had never seen.

Fleet's johnny-clad body was slowly revealed under thick clods of dirt and leaves that luckily, had been hastily thrown over him and were easily removed. By the time they had him exposed, it was clear he was nearly hypothermic. His skin was freezing cold to the touch, and held a blue tinge.

Normal assessment would also include looking for confusion, shivering, and lack of coordination, but Fleet was still under the influence of rocuronium, so those determining factors were off the table.

Talia, along with Mike, quickly ran their hands over Fleet's cold body to ascertain if he had any injuries that meant they had to be careful in moving him, but other than some blood on his IV arm, and scraped marks in various places on his body, it looked like he was good to be lifted.

Mason, along with some of his squad jogged up, their hands full of what they'd need to get Fleet out of the woods. Harvé and Muddy followed, immediately being shown the tarp, after which Muddy took off at a run.

"Keep me posted," Mason called to Harvé, and got a wave over the man's shoulder as he chased his dog.

Mason handed a cervical collar to Mike—who was now in the depression with Fleet—and Mike secured the device in place.

Next, Mason handed down a blanket, and more people jumped into the slight hollow, carefully turning Fleet to his side before executing a log-roll to slide the blanket underneath his still unresponsive body before lowering him onto his back. Gently, the rescue party lifted Fleet in a what they called a controlled blanket-carry, until he was out of the ground.

Talia had kept hold of Fleet's hand during the entire procedure, and had actually detected some movement from his fingers. That was amazing. There were so many people, who in Fleet's position, would have simply given up. But not him. He'd managed to raise his hand while under the influence of a paralytic. It said a lot for his perseverance...or was it his stubbornness? Talia wanted to laugh. She didn't care. It had kept him alive, and that's all that mattered.

Mason had also carried in a thermal blanket which was now tucked around Fleet's body, and the entire group began the slow trek out of the woods, the mood much lighter than the trip in had been.

Talia began talking to Fleet, because she was sure his acute mind had questions, so she didn't hesitate to fill him in on everything they knew.

"The night nurse notified me that you'd gone missing, so I called in the team," she told him. "It became obvious right away that you hadn't just up and left your room on your own because the surveillance cameras and door alarms had been tampered with."

She felt a slight squeeze of her hand, so she kept going.

"Our forensics guy, Welker, following a trail of blood that was dripping from your arm where your IV had been taken out, made it out into the parking lot. But then the trail ended. We were devastated to think you'd been driven away, but still, we searched everywhere; in and out of the hospital."

She took a deep breath, remembering. "Pretty quickly, however, with the help of Mason's contacts, we ascertained you most likely hadn't been taken from the hospital grounds by car because no camera footage on the surrounding areas or car searches conducted by the State Police uncovered any suspicious activity. Which left us to believe that the woods were our target."

Talia took a deep breath. "In the meantime, Welker had your IV bag analyzed, and found it contained a very high concentration of a drug called rocuronium, which is a paralytic used during certain operations." She wanted to reassure him.

“That’s why you can’t move. And in the dosage you received, it should be starting to wear off soon.”

Another contraction of his fingers in hers. She hoped it was relief.

“Whoever did this, it turns out, wrapped you up in a tarp, which we have in our possession. They carried you in it, then when they tired, dragged you further into the woods, eventually putting you into that hole that looks like it had been dug sometime previous to your being left there.”

She wound down with a sigh. “That’s about all we know at this point, but we’ll get to the bottom of it, Fleet. I promise.”

This time there was no hand clasp back, and for a moment Talia thought Fleet might have passed out, but gazing at him, she saw his eyes open, with an undeniable sorrow filling them.

“It’s okay,” she soothed. “We’ll catch whoever did this. And in the meantime, I won’t be leaving your side.”

Had his head just moved a little, negatively, side to side, or was it the unavoidable jostling of the blanket? Talia didn’t know. But there’d be plenty of time for Fleet to try to deny her being his sticker-burr, later. Right now, he needed medical care. Stat.

Mason had radioed ahead, and an emergency team, along with Fleet’s surgeon, had been called in. When they got to the main doors, the medical staff wasted no time whisking Fleet away, and Talia suddenly felt...adrift. As long as she’d been able to touch the man she’d come to adore, she’d been able to reason that he was going to be okay. But the minute he’d been taken out of her hands, worries started to descend.

What if the trauma to Fleet’s body had derailed his recovery? What if his paralyzed state didn’t end up abating? What if one of the medical team now working on him had been the one responsible for his kidnapping?

“Mason. I—”

“No, Talia.” Mason held up his hand. “You need to go home and get some sleep. I have G squad positioned right outside Fleet’s OR to make sure no unauthorized personnel get

in. I've also got F and A squads guarding all the exterior doors. Believe me, to get into the hospital right now, someone will be scrutinized from asshole to elbow. And I plan on being here for the rest of the night, too."

For which Talia was eternally thankful.

"I know you've got everything covered," she sighed. "But if you think I'm going to be able to sleep..." She trailed off.

Mason, only a month or so earlier, had suffered similar anguish when Everlee had been held at gunpoint. Therefore, he knew the state of Talia's nerves, first-hand.

"Listen." Mase put a hand on Talia's shoulder. "Just go home for a while, pat your cat, and chill out. You can come back in a few hours and sit at his bedside. Which doesn't mean I won't still have people stationed right outside his door. Until our OPD detectives get to the bottom of Fleet's abduction, we have to assume he's not safe."

"My thoughts, exactly," she agreed. "And as far up his ass as I'm going to stay until this gets solved? He's not going to be happy." Talia gave a chuckle, then thought of something else. "Have you heard back yet about Fleet's juvenile records?" She figured Mason would have pulled in every favor he was owed to get those files opened and sent north.

"Not yet. But I promise I'll let you know when I do."

Talia thought for a moment, then shook her head. "Don't bother. I want to hear it directly from Fleet. He told me before all this happened that he had shit to tell me about his past. I'll be holding him to it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The first thing Fleet became aware of was being warm. It was a damned good feeling. He'd been so cold...

Shit.

Cold. Leaves. A hole in the ground. His brain snapped into awareness and his eyes popped open as he began struggling to sit up.

“Whoa, whoa! Hold on.”

Talia's voice cut through his panic, and he blinked a few times and looked around.

White walls. Overhead lights. Talia's beautiful face above him, and her hands on his shoulders gently pushing him back.

“Damn...” Fleet rasped. “I thought...”

“I know. I know. But it's okay. You're not in the woods any more. You're in the hospital. You're safe.”

“How long...? How is...?” Why the hell couldn't he get his mouth to function? His brain was working just perfectly now that he'd fully woken, but he could only get one or two words to form on his tongue. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, slowed down, and tried again.

“How...long was I in the woods?” he asked, taking an inordinate amount of time to form syllables.

“About three hours from what we can ascertain,” Talia told him, her hand on his shoulder as she smoothed his sheet back up over him with her other hand. “We brought you back in

early this morning, and the surgeon took you into the OR right away. She opened your head back up to make sure there was no damage.”

“And?” Fleet prompted, looking up at a face he’d never tire of, but damn, she looked as tired as he felt.

Talia gave him a huge, reassuring grin that not only made his heart beat a little faster, it calmed whatever fears he’d been conjuring. “Everything was perfect in that delectable cranium of yours. So perfect, in fact, that she took out the plates and clamps so you’re all finished. You don’t have to undergo any additional surgeries.”

Fleet felt his chest relax for a moment until he remembered his earlier fears regarding the procedure. Slowly, he raised both hands and flexed them. He then jiggled his legs and feet. Everything seemed to be in working order. He was practically moved to tears.

“I can...” There he went again, trailing off his words. But this time it was due to emotion, not lack of larynx power. Granted, his voice was rough, but he blamed that on the breathing tube he’d probably had.

“Yes. You can move everything. You probably don’t remember, but your surgeon came into the recovery room, had you wiggle all your appendages, then poked you repeatedly with some kind of popsicle stick thingy, which you assured her you felt every time.”

“That’s...great news,” Fleet answered, closing his eyes against his onslaught of relief. He didn’t want Talia to see he was close to losing it.

“The best,” she agreed heartily. “And even better, they may even release you tomorrow if all your vitals remain stable.”

Now Fleet could truly settle down. Everything was—

Shit. Everything *was not* okay. Someone had tried to kill him, or scare him, or something really fucked up. He could only hope...

“Have you caught the person who brought me into the woods?” he asked roughly, able to string together words, but raspily. He figured it might be days until his vocal cords recovered fully.

“No.” Talia’s cheerful countenance stumbled. “We haven’t got a lot to go on, but we’re being extremely methodical with the information we have. Mason has split up the footage of the people coming and going from the hospital last night, and the team is sorting through it painstakingly. Welker, our forensics guy I mentioned previously, has his friend at the lab fast-tracking DNA samples they took from your room and from the tarp you were wrapped in.”

That’s right. He remembered Talia mentioning a tarp.

“They can rule your markers out, because they already have your blood from earlier, and they’re hoping to have something definitive within the next forty-eight hours. In the meantime,” she continued, her face remaining serious, “I’ll be sticking to your side, and Mason’s got squad members in rotation outside your room and on all the hospital entrances.”

Was he okay with that? He was, as long as it meant Talia would remain safe. He was pretty sure the attack on him was somehow related to him being with her, and he wouldn’t ever want to risk her life. “You can stop babysitting me now, you know,” he told her. “I’m awake, and if Mase has guards on me, I’ll be fine.”

Talia stuck out her bottom lip in a stubborn set he’d seen before. Fleet thought himself unyielding, but he’d been with Talia enough by now to know that he was a complete pushover compared to her.

He sighed. “You’re not leaving, are you.”

Her arms folded over her chest, and she looked satisfied he’d figured it out. “Not even close. I’m glued to you, Fleet, whether you like it or not. The only question is, where? You haven’t invited me up to your apartment yet, so I’m not sure of your amenities. Do you have a spare bedroom? A pullout couch?”

“No to both,” he answered, knowing full well it wouldn’t discourage her. The intrepid woman would assuredly bunk out on his floor if she had to.

Of course, there was always his king-sized bed...

Nope. Shut that right down. As Fleet understood it, his most important task right now would be getting Talia out of his life, so she wasn’t in danger of becoming some deranged asshole’s target. For himself? He’d be on the lookout for threats. He’d done it before, and he could do it again. He was no slouch in the physical arena, and as soon as the doc cleared him for strenuous exercise...

Oh. Shit. That would be three months from now. How could he have forgotten that? And how was he going to keep himself safe until then? Maybe hire a bodyguard?

He’d almost forgotten that Talia was still chewing over the fact he didn’t have room for a guest.

“We’ll have to land at my place,” she told him definitively. “I have a spare bedroom. And on the bright side, then I won’t have to relocate May, which with her being so high-strung, could send her on a serious rant.”

Fleet remembered her saying that May was her cat, and wondered if the feline’s harangue would be worse than his because seriously? He couldn’t let Talia endanger herself by inviting him into her home. How could their association be mistaken if he bunked out in her house and she had to ferry him to work every day until he was cleared to drive?

“I can see that brain cooking, Fleet,” Talia upbraided. “And just so we’re clear, you’re not getting rid of me. During my shifts at the PD, or if I need a break from what I assume will be your pissy attitude, Everlee has already said she’d be on duty, so you can shut down any thoughts of being left to your own devices. For whatever prideful or fucked up reasons might be in your head,” she added with attitude.

“Stubborn,” Fleet grumbled, and all he got in return for his comment was a huge, shit-eating grin.

“Thank you.” Talia stopped fussing with his pillow and pulled up a chair to sit right next to his bed, grabbing onto and holding his hand. “Now. I know you couldn’t move very much when we hauled you out of the woods last night, but something tells me your mind was churning. Am I correct?”

He nodded, wondering where this was going.

“So, tell me if you came up with anyone in your life, past or present, who might have been responsible for your abduction.”

Fleet huffed. He understood that Talia was doing her best, assuming the perpetrator was someone he knew, but being a young white woman, she might not understand that simply by virtue of the color of his skin, someone had probably taken exception to any one of a million things he did. With the foremost one being seen with her. Because as far as local, overt enemies went? He couldn’t think of a single one.

“Talia, I’m going to be very honest with you,” Fleet began.

“Please do.” She sat forward.

“There’s not a soul amongst my present-day acquaintances, my clients, or my business associates who would have a problem with me. I left the people who didn’t, uh, like me, behind in Alabama a long time ago.”

“I figured that, Fleet,” she said, threading and unthreading her fingers through his. “You hinted at having something fucked up in your past. Now tell me seriously, could that trouble have followed you here?”

“After sixteen years?” he scoffed. “I sincerely doubt it.” Although the persons responsible for that long ago, nearly life-changing incident, had never faced charges. He, on the other hand, had made haste to get away from the area as fast as he could once his name had been cleared. Those people responsible for derailing his final year in town, however, wouldn’t have bothered to travel north at this late date just to ruin his life. They knew they’d done that by chasing him off.

It did kind of suck, being figuratively banned from the place he grew up, but he’d never felt comfortable going back.

If Fleet wanted to see his parents, they either traveled to him, or they met in some neutral spot that wasn't Huntsville. He'd pretty much written off ever visiting his birth city again, if just for his own peace of mind.

"Then...what? Any ideas?" Talia was clearly fishing, and Fleet finally figured out why. She knew something. Mason had probably sicced all his super-spies on digging deep into his past, and had found Fleet's sealed juvenile record.

Hmph. So much for his clean slate. For some odd reason, Talia didn't look spooked, but would Mase look at him differently now? Would Everlee?

Wait. Talia had said Ever was going to be his second baby-sitter, so the Sothard couple hadn't shunned him. Maybe Mason hadn't gotten a look at what was in Fleet's closed files, or...perhaps the smart man had read between the lines.

There was only one way to find out.

"Did Mason pull my juvenile record from Huntsville?" he asked Talia pointedly.

She didn't prevaricate. "Yup. He found them, but without a court order, he couldn't get in to see what they contain." Talia met his eyes, and he saw no judgement there.

"I, on the other hand," she continued smugly, "called your parents after we got you back here to the hospital last night."

"You did?" Was that his voice that squeaked?

"Yeah. I like them a lot. They're super chill." Talia's smile was brilliant again.

"Uh, I guess so," Fleet managed. "How did they take everything?"

"Well, first of all they're really ticked off that you didn't call and tell them you'd been operated on. You're going to have to do some serious damage control there."

Fleet rolled his eyes, and was amazed it didn't hurt too much, so he did it again.

Talia snorted at his reaction. “And as for your abduction, I didn’t call until after we had you back at the hospital safely, so any worries they might have had around you going missing were no longer viable.”

“And...did they tell you anything...interesting?”

“You mean about why you left Huntsville?” she asked slyly, narrowing her eyes.

“No. About my teething and toilet-training habits as a toddler,” he countered with a huff before continuing. “Of course I mean about my extremely precipitous leave-taking of my childhood home.”

“Well...” Talia looked as if she were the proverbial cat about to lick cream. “They were reluctant at first, with me having introduced myself as an officer with the OTPD and a member of the SWAT team that rescued you. It seems you aren’t the only one cautious around cops. But I sweetened them up by saying we’re dating.”

Fleet groaned. “Shit. Am I to ascertain from your grin that they jumped all over that?”

“They did. It seems like their only son has been remiss making it to the ripe old age of thirty-four and not providing them with any grandchildren.”

Now Fleet tipped his head back on his pillow and gave a huge sigh. “This is going to sound fucked, but...do they know you’re white?”

Talia’s smile quickly morphed into a scowl. “What does that matter?” she asked. “Of course I didn’t mention it. How stupid would that have sounded?” She threw her voice into a high-pitched parody. “Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Eggers? Let me introduce myself. I’m a member of the OTPD and the Downeast SWAT team here in Maine. You don’t know me, but we just rescued your *brain-surgery* recovering son from a kidnapper, and oh, by the way, I’m dating Fleet and I’m white.”

Sarcasm dripped from every word, and...she had a point. It would have been a little odd to interject that fact into the

conversation.

“Okay. Fine. But we’re going to have to tell them soon.” That is, if he allowed his relationship with Talia to move forward, which at this point he was extremely reluctant to do.

“Why?” She asked inquisitively. “Are they prejudice?”

“No. No. Not at all. My high-school sweetheart...” he practically choked on words that hadn’t left his mouth in a decade and a half, “...was white.” Why was he sure that she was now in possession of that fact?

“Well then, we don’t have a problem,” Talia stated succinctly. “Which is a good thing, because they’ll be rolling in soon.” She looked at her watch and missed the look of panic that Fleet knew crossed his face. “They’re flying as we speak, and they’ll be staying for a week, unless you decide you want them for longer.”

Fleet swallowed down his initial trepidation. Overall, it would be good to see his folks. It was the conversations they’d have about Talia that would prove uncomfortable.

“Their flight was six and a half hours,” Talia continued as if everything were hunky-dory. “Which means they’ll be arriving at the airport in twenty minutes. Mason sent his brother Kyle to pick them up.”

Fleet let out a long moan. “Great. Kyle.” Mason’s slightly older brother was the jokester in the Sothard family, and no topic, regardless of sensitivity, was off limits for to him if he thought it would get a laugh. Fleet hoped his parents took the man with a grain of salt. Not that they were lacking in humor. His dad was actually pretty funny. It was just that all the subject matter that might get tossed around could become pretty...volatile.

“Remind me to thank Mason,” Fleet responded, tongue in cheek. At least one good thing might come of that cluster-fuck. His parents might get all the details they needed from Kyle, and Fleet wouldn’t have to bother fudging around with facts.

Argh. See? He was already reverting to his childhood self. Fudging instead of fucking? It was going to be a long week.

He drew in a breath and regrouped.

“You still haven’t told me what kind of things my parents told you about my past,” he reminded her, but after all the bombshells that had been dropped since he’d awakened, Fleet realized he was currently beyond exhausted. He yawned widely.

“But obviously now’s not the time to rehash it,” Talia derided. “I can see you’re about two seconds from la-la land.” She got up from her chair, bent over, and...tucked him in? Fleet all of a sudden felt pretty warm and fuzzy inside. When was the last time anyone had done that for him?

“I’m...” He yawned again. “You’re right,” he mumbled, closing his eyes. “We’ll talk more when I wake up.”

“Sure we will,” he heard Talia say before the world around him disappeared.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Talia wasn't blind. She'd seen all the emotions running across Fleet's face, and it pained her that he was so conflicted, but... *Suck it up, buddy.* If they were going to be an item—which Talia was determined they would be despite Fleet's obvious fucked-up-ed-ness over what his parents had revealed to her—he'd have to do better about trusting her.

She wasn't afraid of becoming a target. She'd been taking care of herself and others for a long time. Just let someone try to derail her life and that of the man she was quickly coming to adore. If she had to, Talia would be more than happy to put her boot firmly up some prejudiced asshole's butt. That's if their head wasn't already clogging up the works.

Talia went back to the phone conversation she'd had with Fleet's parents, Lodine and Jim Eggers. The one where she'd requested details of his past to see if it had any bearing on his current jeopardy. She was now quite sure that whatever was happening in Maine had no connection to Fleet's juvenile troubles, but still...

What a mind-fuck.

* * *

"HELLO?"

"Mr. Eggers? This is Talia Spires. I'm an officer with the Old Town Police Department in Maine, and a member of the Downeast SWAT team based in Orono. I—"

“Has something happened to Fleet? Is he okay?” The cold voice cut her off.

“Fleet is fine,” she assured Mr. Eggers. “But he’s had some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” the man clipped, clearly responding with deep suspicion.

Talia figured out his concern quickly enough. A strange cop was calling about his son, mentioning a nebulous kind of problem.

Hell. Mr. Eggers must think she was calling because his son had been arrested. Talia needed to do better.

“Mr. Eggers. Fleet is not in any kind of legal trouble. I promise.”

The voice didn’t exactly warm up as the man responded. “Then exactly what are you calling for, Ms. Spires?”

Talia cleared her throat and began again.

“Has Fleet talked to you in the past week?” She knew she still sounded sketchy as hell, but she didn’t want to drop more on Mr. Eggers than necessary. Hopefully Fleet had called them about his operation, and she’d only have to fill him in about his son’s kidnapping.

Right. Only.

“No. We haven’t heard from him in a couple weeks. You’re sure he’s okay?” Now Mr. Eggers tone was now tinged with worry.

Shit. He hadn’t contacted his parents during his time in the hospital. “Dammit. I’m going to kill him,” Talia mumbled.

“What?”

She heard the renewed panic in Mr. Egger’s voice and mentally kicked herself. Why couldn’t she manage this simple task? Nerves? Maybe. Clearly it was time to play a different card.

“Mr. Eggers. I’m doing this all wrong; making a mess of things because, well,” You can do this, Talia. “I’m not only an

officer of the law, I'm...dating your son."

There was dead silence. Then, "Lodine?" the man yelled. "Get on the extension. You're going to want to hear this." He snorted. Actually snorted! "Can you wait for my wife to pick up?" Mr. Eggers asked, his voice a lot warmer all of a sudden.

"Uh, sure. You should both hear everything I have to say, anyway," she agreed. Better to meet both of the parents at once, right?

"I'm here, Jim," a feminine voice piped in. "Who are we talking to? Fleet?"

"No, honey," Mr. Eggers corrected. "It's not Fleet. It's his girlfriend."

"Oh... Oh!" Mrs. Eggers responded breathlessly. "To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name is Talia, Mrs. Eggers. Talia Spires."

Before Mrs. Eggers could respond, her husband added a clear caveat.

"She's not only his girlfriend, honey, she's a police officer, as well as a member of some SWAT team where Fleet lives."

"Oh, my." Now the woman's voice choked up. "He's...he's not in any trouble, is he?"

Talia sighed deeply. "No, ma'am. Fleet is now absolutely, one-hundred percent fine."

Mr. Eggers probed. "Now, you say?"

"Right." Talia drew in a full breath. "A little less than a week ago, Fleet was out in the mountains by himself, bouldering."

"He fell, didn't he?" Mrs. Eggers guessed, concern in her tone. "I don't know how many times I've told him not to be going out alone. It was only a matter of time."

Talia could just picture the woman shaking her head, and hated to do it, but she needed to deliver much more difficult news.

“It actually wasn’t just a fall, Mrs. Eggers. He ended up on his mat, but not for the reasons you think.”

“Continue,” Mr. Eggers prompted.

Talia fortified herself with a few swift flexes before giving them their answer. “Your son suffered a ruptured brain aneurysm while he was climbing.”

“Oh, my God!” Mrs. Eggers wailed. “I’ve been so afraid that might happen. But you said he’s okay?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I told Fleet he should have a brain scan because of Jim’s family history, but he kept assuring me he was fine.”

“I know. Fleet told me about his uncles,” Talia returned. “And yes, he probably should have had a CT scan, but he didn’t, and...he got very lucky. A colleague of his knew where he was going when he headed off for the afternoon. She was waiting for him to get back to his studio so they could do some work. Everlee—his employee and my friend—is married to my SWAT chief,” she told them as an aside before delving deeper into the story.

“When Fleet didn’t arrive back at the studio when he was supposed to, she called him a few times, and he didn’t answer his phone. Feeling that something was wrong, Ever contacted her husband and he mobilized our squad to go out and search for Fleet. We got to him pretty quickly, stabilized him, and transported him to the nearest hospital where he underwent emergency surgery.”

“How long ago was this?” Mr. Eggers asked with a bite to his voice.

“Five, uh, six days ago.”

“And he’s okay now, but he didn’t call us,” the man stated rhetorically. “I’m going to kill him.”

Talia barked a laugh. “See? That’s what I said, and now you know why.”

“Right. Because our independent, not wanting to worry his parents, son, had major surgery and didn’t think to call us once he was on the mend,” Mr. Eggers supplied.

“Exactly.” Talia let her shoulders relax just a little. The rest of the story wouldn’t be fun to impart, but at least she’d laid the groundwork.

“So why are you calling us, instead of him reaching out?”

Talia sighed. “Because he’s in recovery. Again.”

“A relapse?” Mrs. Eggers voice shook as she questioned.

“No. He was scheduled to have his plates and clamps removed later today, but there was an...incident last night and the surgeon had to move up his procedure.”

“What kind of incident?” The suspicion was back in Mr. Egger’s tone.

“Let me start with last night,” Talia suggested, and when she wasn’t met with any dissent, she continued. “I was with Fleet before visiting hours ended, both physically and metaphorically holding his hand while he whined about his scheduled surgery—”

“Did he tell you why he was nervous?” Mr. Eggers asked, but kept going before she could answer. “My brother made it through his first surgery just fine, but lost a good deal of his fine motor skills after the second. I’m sure Fleet was worried about that.”

“He was,” Talia agreed. “But I told him to suck it up. That we’d deal with it. That I wasn’t going anywhere even if he ended up with complications.”

“I like the sound of you,” Mrs. Eggers put in with a little giggle. “I’ve always said Fleet needs somebody strong in his life to smarten him up. He can be so...stubborn and opinionated sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Talia actually laughed. “How about whenever he opens his mouth?” she quipped. “But he’s met his match, in me.”

“We can’t wait to meet you.” Mrs. Eggers responded effusively. She seemed a lot less suspicious than her husband, but Talia would reserve judgement on that until they’d finished their conversation.

“So, you were saying?” Mr. Eggers urged. “Our noncommunicative son had major surgery and didn’t call us. He was worried about the follow up procedure, but that somehow got moved up?”

Here was the hardest part. “Because he went missing from his room last night,” Talia revealed. “We got the call from his night nurse just before two in the morning that he wasn’t in his bed, and that they’d searched the entire hospital.”

“What?” Mrs. Eggers sounded justifiably alarmed.

Talia kept on, wanting to have the whole story out quickly, so she could then get what could be vital information for their current investigation. “SWAT was called in again, once it was determined there needed to be a search and rescue team on scene.”

“And...where was he? Where did you find him?” Mr. Eggers asked, his voice shaky with emotion.

“He was in the woods behind the hospital,” Talia told them without sugar coating it. “Someone had pumped a temporary, paralytic drug into his IV, before taking him out back, wrapping him in a tarp, walking deep into the woods to bury him under a pile of leaves and debris. We located him after an intensive search, and he was whisked right back into surgery as soon as we got him to the hospital.”

“Oh, my God,” Mrs. Eggers moaned. “Did you catch whoever...?”

“No. Which is the reason for my call.” Talia didn’t prevaricate. “I never would go behind Fleet’s back to talk about his situation, but... The info I gave you about his surgeries? That should have been on him. But what’s important to us now, is that we have an open case to investigate, and we’re looking...have looked into Fleet’s past to see if anything there raised a red flag.”

“And you found his juvenile record,” Mr. Eggers stated bluntly.

“We did. But without a court order, we can’t get into it, so I told my chief I’d make this call and see if you could tell me

anything that might help in our investigation.”

“Ms. Spires...,” Mr. Eggers began.

“Talia. Please,” she countered.

“Talia,” Mr. Eggers continued. “I’ll tell you exactly what’s in his sealed records, but I assure you, it won’t be pertinent to your case. What happened to him certainly shaped our boy into the closed off man he’s become; changed him from the happy-go-lucky youngster we’d raised, into a bitter, mistrusting individual, but it absolutely did not follow him north. It’s not the people responsible for his past insecurities who have done this. I’m certain.”

“Because...?”

“Listen. I’ll tell you what happened, but only because as his girlfriend it will help you to understand him. Fleet has... ghosts that keep him from moving forward with close relationships; and to this day, shape him in ways it shouldn’t. Did he tell you he’s never been home since he left Huntsville, sixteen years ago?”

“He told me,” Talia answered. “And he promised to let me know why, but then all this happened, and there was no opportunity. Full disclosure. Fleet and I have known each other for several months, but we just started dating, officially, last week.”

“Well, I for one don’t care. You sound like you have our boy’s best interest at heart, so I’m on board with telling you everything,” Mrs. Eggers stated.

She didn’t say another word while clearly waiting for her husband’s opinion.

There was a huge sigh. “If you think it will help...” he trailed off.

“Oh,” his wife responded kind of sassily. “I don’t think it has any bearing on what’s happening to him up in Maine, but I think it will help Talia. Because if I know our son, he’ll continue to make excuses for why he won’t tell her about his past, and he’ll end up driving her away.”

Talia actually laughed. “You think? I have good news for you. I told Fleet to suck it up, because getting rid of me is not an option. I’m head-over-heels for your son, and sooner or later he’ll figure that out. But if you want to give me a version of his past that I can work with to help him? I’ll be more than appreciative.”

“He had a girlfriend back in high school,” Mrs. Eggers began without preamble. “She was a sweet thing, and the pair were like two peas in a pod for more than a year before things went bad. They did everything together, and were so darned cute...”

Talia bit her tongue, wanting Fleet’s mother to tell it all quickly, but she knew she had to give the woman time to get it out in her own way.

Mrs. Eggers clearly reminisced. “Bitsy—that’s her name—had two cousins she saw occasionally at family outings, but apparently for a very long time they hadn’t heard she was dating Fleet. When they finally found out at some event to which he accompanied her, they took exception to our son, deciding they didn’t like him on sight.”

Talia figured she knew what that meant.

“The pair were...still are...officers in Huntsville, and they began making veiled threats, saying they’d make Fleet’s life miserable if he didn’t stop seeing Bitsy. He didn’t think much of it, having never been in any kind of trouble. You have to understand. He was an exemplary student; class salutatorian. He was a big boy, playing and excelling in football and baseball, and pretty much everybody loved him.

“When he failed to heed their warnings, the two officers began making good on their threats. Fleet was stopped multiple times while driving, for trumped up reasons: A tail light was out—one that they smashed after they stopped him. Mud was obscuring a number on his license plate, which amounted to a large fine. He fit the description of someone who’d just robbed a liquor store, so he needed to be detained.” She sighed. “I’m sure you get the picture.”

“I do,” Talia bit back the swears that bubbled up inside her at the outrage she felt. “And now I understand why he was so cautious around me and my law enforcement friends in the beginning.”

Mrs. Eggers actually chuckled.

Mr. Eggers grunted. “I’m surprised he let any of you get close.”

Talia was also able to force a laugh. “He actually didn’t realize that Everlee was an ex-cop when he met her. And he absolutely didn’t know she was dating a cop who’s my chief. Fleet became embroiled with a bunch of us before he could help himself. But that’s a story for another time. Right now I need to hear more from you.”

“What I’ve told you wasn’t, of course, the end of it,” Mrs. Eggers took up her story again. “When Fleet refused to stop seeing Bitsy, those two officers upped the ante. They planted a small amount of drugs in Fleet’s locker at school, then hauled him off to jail in front of Bitsy and all his friends. They thought that would do it, but what they didn’t know is we have a dear friend who’s a state cop. We called him immediately. Benny got a hold of the so-called evidence and ran the baggie for fingerprints, not finding any from Fleet, but a lot from the pair of officers involved. He also had blood drawn from Fleet as well as doing a urinalysis, and neither showed any indication of drugs in his system.

“He was eventually let go for lack of evidence.” She paused, obviously reliving the whole, painful period before starting up again. “You would have thought the two would stop there, but they didn’t. The next thing they did was even more chilling.”

Talia gritted her teeth. There was nothing worse than crooked cops. She’d seen her share over the years, but luckily had never served alongside any that she was aware of. Her closest brush with a disgruntled cop was her current association with her squad member, Doug. But would he be capable of what Mrs. Eggers was describing? She hoped not. And if he was, he’d get his ass kicked from here to Montreal.

Talia wasn't sure she wanted to hear the rest, but she steeled herself. "Go on."

"A few days before graduation, there was a murder in the city. It was a woman known by the police for being a...street worker. Her throat was slit in a boarding house downtown, and..."

"Don't tell me," Talia snarled. "The bastards pinned it on Fleet."

"They tried." Mrs. Eggers voice shook. "They'd planted some evidence that led to our son, and he was subsequently arrested. He was given a preliminary hearing, and due to the severity of the crime, he was held without bail in a nearby juvenile facility. It took far too long for a good lawyer to clear Fleet's name, but by that time the damage had been done. Fleet had missed his graduation. Bitsy's parents forbid her to ever see Fleet again, and his full scholarship to Princeton was revoked. It...hardened Fleet. He became so...withdrawn." There was a huge sigh from Mrs. Eggers.

Talia didn't trust herself to speak. So called righteous people could be such assholes.

"When he finally started looking at UMO, we thought maybe he'd gotten past the worst of his anger. We were hopeful, you know? But when he eventually enrolled, then refused to come home even for holidays, we knew he hadn't gotten over anything. He'd simply distanced himself from it." Another sigh. "We've missed him so much over the past sixteen years, not having him close. We visit him occasionally, and sometimes we meet in the middle at some resort, but it's not the same as having him home with us, sitting in our own living room."

Talia made up her mind, instantly. "You need to get on a plane and come here today," she told them firmly. "Fleet will be staying with me during his recovery... At least I'm pretty sure he will. I haven't exactly told him yet, but I'm determined to win any argument he puts forth."

That got a laugh from both Fleet's parents.

“You can stay at his place, and once he’s on the mend and the surgeon clears him, I promise, we’ll both come down to Huntsville and confront his demons.”

Silence met her offer.

Shit. Had she overstepped?

Talia recanted. “That is unless you don’t want me to—”

“No! We do. We really do.” She could hear the tears in Mrs. Eggers’ voice, and knew they had been the reason for the silence. Mr. Eggers, when he chimed in, sounded choked up, too.

“Talia, we’ll take you up on both of those things,” he answered gruffly. “And... Thank you.”

* * *

HAD she mentioned to his parents that she was white? *No*. But they might have figured it out, and it sounded like they’d been fine with that Bitsy chick, so they probably wouldn’t care. She’d used her brains to figure out that Bitsy had most definitely been white, and that Fleet had been targeted simply for his blackness. *Damn*, she hated people who used their positions of power to intimidate.

Now she had to find a way to overcome Fleet’s reticence toward building their relationship due to his past insecurities; insecurities that had very real roots.

She’d been doing a pretty good job of swaying him before his abduction, but now, of course, he’d be doubling down, figuring he’d been targeted once again for daring to date a white woman.

Fuck that.

Love was love, and hate was hate.

This time, she’d make sure love would win.

And *yeah*. She said love.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fleet woke up and the first thing he saw was the sun streaking in through his hospital room window. He'd quite obviously slept through the balance of a day, then an entire night.

The second thing he saw? His parents sat across the room; his father on his phone, and his mother keeping her hands busy crocheting some doo-dad or another.

"Hey," he croaked out, his voice still messed up from lack of use and from the breathing tube they'd had down his throat.

"Fleet!" his mother cried, leaping to her feet and rushing toward him beaming and fluttering her hands. Her yarn dropped on the floor, forgotten. Clearly, as she reached his bedside, she didn't know what part of him was safe to touch, and Fleet appreciated that. There were a lot of spots afflicted during his unconscious sojourn, that hurt.

Fleet's father was a little more controlled, but damned if his old man didn't look to be on the verge of tears.

"Son." Jim Eggers walked close and put a hand gently on the sheets resting over Fleet's knee.

"Hi Mom, Pops. You didn't have to come," Fleet coughed roughly. "I'm fine."

His mother picked up a water glass from his bedside table and filled it, adding a straw before she held it out to Fleet. He took a big, long sip and the liquid felt damned good on his parched throat.

“We know you are. Your friend Talia told us you’d come through everything intact,” his mother affirmed. “But if you think we were going to stay away while you recuperate, you can just think again.”

His father cleared his throat this time. “You should have told us you’d had the ruptured aneurysm,” his father grumbled. “We would have been here sooner, then maybe...” He trailed off.

“Maybe I wouldn’t have been kidnapped?” Fleet put in, his voice coming out stronger after drinking. Fleet shook his head. “I don’t think your presence would have helped. Talia was here until visiting hours were over that night. They managed to get to me after that. It would have been the same with you.”

“Well, we’re here now, and we’re ready to do anything we can to help you out until you’re on your feet,” Jim stated.

“Thanks, Pops. I appreciate it.”

“We can’t wait to meet your Talia, either,” his mother added impishly. “She sounds amazing; a very strong woman.”

Fleet snorted. “That’s putting it mildly. Talia is bossy. Period. And...” His countenance fell as he remembered his previous resolve. “I’m not sure she’s going to be in my life much longer because of some...differences.”

His mother scoffed. “That’s not what Talia told us.” She narrowed her eyes. “And she didn’t sound conflicted at all, sweetheart.” Her tone became more pointed. “Do you like this woman?”

“Well, yes. Of course.” Fleet couldn’t lie. Talia was everything he’d ever wanted in a partner. She was beautiful, smart, had a killer body and a curiosity toward life that couldn’t be quenched. *And* she made his heart thump in his chest in a way no other woman ever had. Not even Bitsy, who so very long ago he’d imagined he was going to marry.

Wow. Marriage and Talia. Fleet’s breath caught painfully in his throat at that thought because... It’s what he wanted. Anything else didn’t seem like it would be enough. And wasn’t that just jaw-dropping? They hadn’t done anything

more than kiss, but he already knew he wanted her in his life...

Goddamn *his* life. Why did things—meddlers—always make things difficult? Why couldn't people mind their own business and let others follow their own paths?

"But what you don't know," Fleet continued, swallowing down a lump in his throat that had arisen, thinking of cutting Talia from his existence, "is that she's white." He scrambled to get the words out. "And I'm pretty certain whoever buried me in the woods is sending a message that it's not acceptable, me and her, and that I need to back off."

He met his parents' worried eyes. "You have to understand. At this point in my life, I don't care about myself, but after what happened with Bitsy, I can't let Talia get hurt."

There was a bark of laughter from the door that startled Fleet. He looked up.

"Did you just say, 'let Talia get hurt'?" Kyle Sothard, in full uniform, stood at the door, consumed with mirth.

Of course, that was a normal state for the man. Fleet didn't think he'd ever heard anything come out of Kyle's mouth that wasn't a pun, a joke, or a quip. He was ultimately likeable, but often times annoying as hell.

"If she heard you say that," Kyle went on, "she'd kick your...tushy." He turned to Fleet's parents with a grin. "You'll meet the woman after she's finished with her shift later today, and if you want your son to keep all his appendages, you need to disabuse him of trying to 'take care of his little woman'." He raised a brow, in turn, at Fleet. "Did I neglect to tell you that during our first sparring session for SWAT, Talia had me *and* my brother Spence on our backs in under ten seconds? And not in a good way." Kyle winked. "I hate to burst your little protective, macho bubble, Fleet, my man, but if you like her as much as I think you do, you need to go for it."

"Easy for you to say," Fleet grumbled.

"Yeah, it is," Kyle agreed jovially. "I just did, didn't I?" He beamed and once again addressed Fleet's parents. "Permission

to swear?" he asked cheekily.

"Permission granted." His mother's dimple appeared, a twin to Fleet's. It was clear she'd been charmed by the handsome, gregarious man, regardless of her life-long suspicion of law enforcers.

He targeted Fleet again. "Fuck the loser who took you. Mason is on this, Fleet. He and the team are turning over every leaf... Get it?" He grinned widely. "Leaf? Because you were buried in them?"

Fleet groaned, but couldn't help his own lip-twitch. *Yup*. Nothing was sacred where Kyle was concerned.

Kyle continued confidently. "They'll find who did this. But in the meantime, if you think Talia's going to back off, your brains are in your ass. The woman wants your sorry, cranially-challenged self, Frankenstein stitches and all, so get used to it."

Fleet pursed his lips. "Well, hell, Kyle. Just give me your honest opinion. Don't hold anything back."

"I never do," Kyle laughed. "Now I need to go station my handsome mug in the hallway so the nurses have something good to look at. If you need anything at all, just yodel." He turned smartly in his polished black shoes and strode confidently back out the door, closing it behind him.

"I like that young man," Lodine Eggers sighed. "He's adorable."

"Yeah. Adorable." Fleet would have rolled his eyes if he didn't think it would hurt. "You understand a serious word never comes out of his mouth. Right?"

Jim Eggers shook his head. "I think he was damned serious telling you that your Talia can handle whatever is thrown her way. He might have made it sound like a joke, but I'm sure it wasn't."

Fleet thought about that for two seconds, and had to agree. "You're right. I just... I'm not sure if I can go through another episode like I did in high school," he told his parents honestly. "That just about sucked me dry of all my hopes and ambitions.

I wasn't sure I'd ever recover fully." Hell, he absolutely hadn't.

"But look where you ended up?" His mother sat down on the bed next to his hip, sending a hand forward to cradle his cheek. "You did so well in college, then you discovered what you wanted to do. After you graduated, you built your own, successful business, sweetheart. That doesn't say 'defeated' to me. That says you're a man who goes after what he wants regardless of the setbacks. So I only have one question. Do you want Talia?"

Fleet put his head back on the pillow and groaned. That was a no-brainer, but if Kyle heard him utter those words, he'd make some joke about that being good because Fleet didn't have a brain, post-surgery.

Still, his mother was waiting for an answer.

He could only be honest again. "I think Talia's the most fascinating woman I've ever met, Mom. I haven't been able to get her out of my mind since the first time I set eyes on her."

"Well, that says it all, then." His mother smiled beatifically as if that solved all his problems. "You can't let this set-back take away something that's so important to you." She leaned forward. "Talk to her, Fleet. Tell her your worries. She'll handle it. When you find the right person, you learn how to work things like this through, together."

Fleet's mother glanced over at her husband, her face softening perceptibly.

Fleet knew the pair had met all kinds of challenges in their lives, not the least of which had been seeing their only son get railroaded by the law, and eventually moving away because of it. Could Fleet do any less?

"You still blow me away, Mom," Fleet grumbled. "Always knowing just the right thing to say."

"It comes with being a mother," she stated, then a sparkle lit in her eyes. "Or a grandmother, which now has a chance of actually coming true."

Fleet groaned. “Mother. Don’t get cocky just because I gave you a few well-deserved kudos for being sweet.”

Jim Eggers threw back his head and laughed. “Sweet? Oh, son. You’ve been gone a long time. Don’t you know why you picked a strong woman like Talia? It’s because you’ve been looking for someone just like your mother.”

Fleet blinked, but certainly couldn’t refute that.

“Now,” his mother stated, figuring everything was all settled, “the doctor said she’ll be doing her rounds later this morning, and she’ll let us know when you can be released. But in the meantime, would you like anything interesting for lunch? We have the okay to bring you something, since the lunch they picked for you is creamed chicken on toast. They obviously forgot you’re a vegetarian.” She made a hideous face, and Fleet laughed.

“Mom, thank you. I’ll take you up on that. I’d actually love some veggie tacos from the truck that’s parked down by the river,” he allowed, knowing his capitulation would make her happy.

“I can find that,” she said happily, getting up and walking over to gather up her purse, holding out her hand to her husband for the car keys. “You stay here with Fleet, Jim. Do you want something, too?”

“Sure,” his father chuckled. “As long as mine has meat.”

She dropped a kiss on her husband’s cheek while snagging the keys. “Anything for my boys.”

She opened the door where Kyle stood at attention right outside. She addressed him with a smile. “And how about you, young man? Would you like something from the Taco Truck downtown?”

Fleet could see Kyle’s eyes light up all the way from his bed. “Hell, yeah.” Kyle fist-pumped. “Three number fours with extra hot sauce, and a side of Mexican rice.” He dug in his pocket for money.

“Uh, uh. This is on me today,” Fleet’s mother scolded, placing a hand on Kyle’s arm to stop him. “You’ve been

watching over my boy, so it's the least I can do."

Kyle's never-ending smile got broader. "I accept. Just don't tell my brother. He thinks I mooch too much."

Fleet had to hold in his laugh. He'd heard that Kyle got a lot out of life by using his charms, and sure enough, it had just worked on Fleet's mother.

* * *

THE PERSON LINGERING near the nurse's station heard the laughter and snarled internally. Did these lowlifes really think they could just continue on as if nothing had happened? Of course, as a deterrent, they *had* stationed that laughing-hyena of a cop outside the asshole's door. But that wasn't a deal breaker. If Fleet couldn't be reached because of increased security, there was always the *girlfriend*. That word felt bitter on the tongue. Or even the guy's parents who were now in town might make easier marks. There were so many avenues; so many options. For a person with a world of patience, the proper path forward would show itself, eventually, and then they'd all be sorry. Turning on a heel, the stairs beckoned because it looked like Mrs. Eggers could easily be followed. Had an opportunity just presented itself?

Upon reaching the foyer, disappointment hit again. The lucky woman picked up another champion in the form of one more of the fucking SWAT team, who then accompanied her to her car and joined her inside.

Well, shit. It looked like waylaying the bitch wouldn't happen today.

* * *

THE AFTERNOON SPED BY, with Kyle joining the three Eggers for lunch and regaling them with hilarious stories of the Sothard brothers growing up. Fleet hadn't known there were eight of them, ranging in ages from forty-six to twenty-two.

He'd met a few of them at Mason and Everlee's wedding, but he hadn't known the extent of the family.

Being an only child, Fleet's mouth hung open while listening to the outrageous tales Kyle told, but he wasn't jealous. Until things had derailed in his senior year, his parents had made sure he was lovingly surrounded by extended family and friends, and his upbringing had been nothing but happy.

And speaking of happy... Fleet, with a full belly, thought to close his eyes for a quick nap, but...

When he awoke it was dark, and Talia was in a chair next to his bed.

"Hello, beautiful," he said sleepily.

"Ooh. I like this half-unaware, Fleet," she teased. "Are you always this nice before your brain starts dictating directives?"

Fleet snorted, feeling much better, *and* much more settled after the conversations earlier with Kyle and his parents. And speaking of parents... He looked around. "Did my mother and father leave?" he asked.

"They wanted to get settled in at your apartment, so when I called and told them I was on my way, they took that as their cue to leave. I'll meet them sooner, rather than later, but I think they wanted me to feel free to kiss you without an audience."

Fleet raised a brow, challengingly.

"Oh. Right." Talia pranced over. "I knew I forgot something." She stood and slid her hip onto the mattress until it butted up against his, cradling his face gently in her palms before leaning forward to press her lips to his.

Fleet relished the delicious contact, but groaned as she pulled away far too soon.

"Uh, uh," she chastised, sitting up straight. "Nothing too exciting for you right now. But when you're cleared for action, Fleet, watch out," she warned with a spark in her eye.

Yup. There was his bossy girl. She wasn't taking no for an answer, and now that he'd gotten some sage advice from his

parents and had a chance to sleep on it, he and Talia were on the same page.

He crooked a finger to bring her head closer, daring to deliver back better than she'd given. "Oh yeah?" he growled. "How about I can't wait to be buried deep inside you, Talia," he whispered. "We're going to be epic together."

He heard her suck in breath as her eyes glazed over and the pulse on the side of her neck beat double-time.

Hah. He'd done that.

Her haze didn't last long as she snickered and punched him playfully on his arm.

"Where's my Fleet, and what have you done with him? Do I need to call SWAT again?"

"Only if you want an audience." He raised a hand and threaded his fingers through her thick tangle of blonde hair, dragging her close for another kiss.

This time he didn't settle for quick, or light. He melded their lips together in a possessive clash, demanding her tongue come out to play, and he wasn't disappointed. Talia gave him her all, and he swallowed her down, breathing in the fresh-air scent that clung to her skin, purging the hospital smell from his nose, and becoming...lost.

"Damn," Talia swore when they eventually separated. "What did they give you for meds today?"

Fleet chuckled. He'd never met a woman more open, more willing to poke any hornet's nest, regardless of consequences. "No meds," he told her. "But I've been taken to task by both my parents, and Kyle. They basically told me not to be a paranoid dick; that you can take care of yourself since you're well trained, and that they'll all disown me if I send you away for your own good."

Talia laughed. "That's very smart of them...and you. But FYI, I'd already told them if you attempt to send me away, I'd tie you up and stash you in my house until you smartened up."

“Mmm,” he murmured as his lips trailed down her neck. “Now there’s a kidnapping I could get behind.”

“Ooh! And speaking of kidnapping,” she said, sitting up again with excitement tinged with a deep sigh of regret. “I hate to be a downer at our kissing-party, but we’ve made some progress on your case.”

“You have?” Fleet’s disappointment at having her lips so far away was mitigated. “I’m all ears, Sherlock.”

“Sherlock?” she repeated with a snort.

Fleet shrugged impishly. “I figure if we’re going to be an item, you need a nickname. So, I was just trying that one out.”

“Nix on the Sherlock,” she grimaced. “Not sexy at all.”

“Oh. You want something sexy?” he teased. “How about... Tiacapan?”

She giggled. “Not a clue who that is,” she admitted.

Fleet captured the back of her head in his palm once more and pulled her forward, giving a low growl. “Tiacapan is the Aztec goddess of lust. I can shorten it to Tia.”

Talia purred. “Now that I can live with.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Talia pulled away reluctantly. She'd never get tired of tasting Fleet, but it was important to bring him up to date on their investigation. Maybe later, after his parents had come back for their goodnight, then departed, she'd scoot next to Fleet in bed and make sure they did some heavy petting. Would it leave her even more frustrated than she already was? Definitely. Would it stop her from making it happen? Not a chance.

"Okay. Time to talk," Talia scolded as Fleet attempted to pull her back in.

"Spoilsport."

Clearly he was feeling more like himself tonight, after his long nap.

"Okay. I'm listening," he allowed.

"So you know we've got Mason's friend Quint examining all the hospital footage. Our own techies, Opal and Nolan are on it, too, and we already have facial recognition on nearly half of the people who entered the hospital that evening. We're arranging, with a local judge's help, to get DNA from all of them. But before that all gets underway, Welker still has the tarp you were wrapped in. He's given Muddy your scent, and somehow Harvé the dog-whisperer has managed to make the dog understand that you are not the target. The *other* smell on the tarp is the one Muddy's searching for."

"Damn, that pup is good," Fleet marveled.

"Smart *and* cuddly," Talia chuckled. "All I want to do is squeeze the stuffing out of her every time I see those big,

soulful eyes.

“Anyway, Harvé and Muddy have camped out at the front door of the hospital, and Harvé is giving her free rein to approach all the staff and visitors who enter. It could be a long, painstaking process, but Harvé says they’re both very patient, and even if it takes weeks, they’ll stick it out.”

“You really think the person responsible will show themselves again?” Fleet asked.

“Well...” Talia didn’t like this, but she’d fill him in. It might be for his own safety. “We actually, um, have a few... persons of interest.”

“You do?” Fleet attempted to sit up, and struggled, so Talia went to his bed and hit the button that raised it so he was more upright.

“Better?” she asked.

“It is,” he answered. “Please continue.”

“Okay,” Talia sighed. “Because you and your parents have been fairly adamant that your abduction was due to...us being together, we decided to take a closer look at all the people we’ve been in contact with who seemed to have some kind of problem with it.”

“Now you’re talking,” Fleet growled. “I don’t have any enemies in Maine, Talia. That’s what makes me certain this attack was racially motivated.”

“We agree. Which is why we’ve been able to narrow our possibilities.”

“Okay. Are you going to tell me who these mystery people are? I’d prefer to have a heads up if they approach me.”

“Which is the only reason I’m spilling the intel, Fleet. I didn’t want to influence you one way or another,” she huffed. “But Mason says for your own safety I have to give you the information.”

“And...”

The prompting didn't help. Talia still wasn't happy that one of her own was amongst the possible suspects. "Fine. You remember Doug, on my squad?"

"Yeah. I do. Gruff character. Never smiles."

"Uh, huh. Well, he hasn't been exactly overjoyed that we've been seeing each other." She snorted. "It's funny, though. He seems to have more of a problem with me being after you, than vice-versa."

"That is odd," Fleet agreed. "Do you think he has designs on you, himself?"

Talia gave a spontaneous chortle. "Not even close. He avoids my gaze like I'm Medusa."

Fleet chuffed. "And have you taken him by Muddy yet? Scraped him for a DNA sample?"

"No," Talia sighed. "We haven't been able to get to him yet. He's taken the week off for a solo trek in the backwoods. According to his friend and squad-mate, Cisco, Doug likes to go off by himself and hunt." Talia knew her scowl was pronounced, but she couldn't help it.

Fleet stroked his scruff-covered chin. "Huh. Trained in all kinds of stealth procedures. Physically capable. Familiar with the woods. Sounds to me like he has all the skills needed to have pulled off my kidnapping, so...why are you looking...sour?"

"Because he's on *my* squad," Talia complained with a whine in her voice she hated. "During our initial SWAT team training, Mason and Everlee were pretty sure Doug wasn't going to cut it, but I insisted because I saw... I *see* something in him that's worthwhile. It makes me disappointed as well as angry to think he could have done this."

"Okay. Then let's rule him out for now," Fleet said agreeably. "One way or another, it will be easy to prove if he's guilty once he gets back. Who else do you have?"

"Two more people, both of whom are AWOL," Talia grumbled.

“Interesting,” Fleet returned. “Keep going.”

“Your night nurse who was clearly annoyed that we were kissing earlier that evening, is one of them.”

“I remember her,” Fleet returned. “She was very grumpy that you were sitting on my bed, and pretty much told you to get lost.”

“Which I didn’t do,” Talia added. “That could have made her very pissed off.”

“Yeah, but... Pissed off enough to abduct me?” Fleet screwed up his face, obviously concentrating. “And wait. Wasn’t she the one who alerted everyone that I was gone? You said a night-nurse called it in.”

Talia sighed. “Uh, huh. She was the one. But that doesn’t mean she didn’t do the bad stuff first, before subsequently alerting us. It’s an action that would point to her innocence, which might be what she was aiming for.”

“So... AWOL, huh?”

“Yeah. Her supervisor said she was so upset that someone was taken off her floor, right from under her nose, that she put in for some mental-health leave. She’s currently somewhere in Upstate New York, according to her boss, but we don’t have an exact location.”

“Well, shit,” Fleet grumbled. “That sucks. So, who’s the last one who can’t be reached? And don’t tell me. They’ve not only taken some time off from their job, they can’t be found, either.”

“Right again.” Talia was furious that the three most likely suspects had suddenly gone off-grid. “The third person of interest is an asshole EMT named Brian who was with us when we rescued you after your fall. He was...extremely unhelpful, to say the least. He didn’t step up to do anything for you, all while trying to throw orders at Mason who was doing a professional assessment of your injuries.”

“Phht. I’m sure that went over well with Mase,” Fleet snickered.

“You think? The boss looked like he was ready to chew the guy up and spit him out.”

“But why does that make the man a suspect rather than just an asshole?”

“Just... It was the way he looked at you, then at me while I held your hand. He had a definite attitude. And he didn't once offer to take a turn carrying your litter down the mountain.”

“Huh,” Fleet grunted. “That's interesting. So three possibilities, with no way to confirm or dismiss. So right now we're in a holding pattern.”

“We are. But don't worry. We'll continue with a security detail for you until we've caught our perp.”

His brows scrunched together. “A security detail for me, but,” he gave Talia a narrow-eyed glare, “what about you? And what about my parents?”

She sighed again.

“A few added complications, but Mason asked his chief at OPD to assign someone to your mother and father, and he agreed. They already have a 24/7 tail, although—according to Mason—your parents just think that helpful officers are popping up randomly as if our small town has a cop for every citizen,” she laughed. “Also, as you've seen with Kyle's presence outside your door earlier, Bangor PD has stepped up, agreeing to have the officers who are on our SWAT team keep an eye on you for the duration.” Talia winked and pursed her lips at him provocatively, trying to distract him from asking anything more.

“And you?” Clearly Fleet wasn't to be led astray by any contrived cuteness she could conjure.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I'll be fine, Fleet. First of all, when I'm on patrol I'm already armed and keeping my eyes peeled for danger. And when I'm home at the end of the day, we'll be together. Can I trust you to have my back?” she teased.

“You know you can,” he practically growled, and Talia's insides lit up. She loved that he'd instantly gotten all

possessive and grumpy. She hadn't really seen that side of him before.

She pushed her luck. "And you're not going to fight me on coming to my house, or deny anymore that I'm your girlfriend?"

Fleet snorted. "Fat lot of good that did me. While I was busy trying to push you away, somebody copped an attitude anyway, so..." He beckoned with his finger for her to lean closer. "The fates declare I might as well go for it."

Talia didn't fight the invitation. She bent forward to kiss Fleet again, but dammit, the door behind her opened with a whoosh.

"Oh!" The exclamation from the portal sounded... delighted? "I can see we're interrupting. We'll just...take a little stroll around the hospital until you two kids are finished."

Fleet and Talia both burst out laughing at the same time. Talia felt like a teenager who'd been caught necking on her parents' couch.

"Uh, we're through, Mom." Fleet grinned, edging his head around Talia to address his mother. "Come on in and meet Talia."

"We'd love to," the excited voice answered.

Talia turned slowly and took in the clearly thrilled woman. She was pretty and petite, but Talia saw the determination in her eyes, and didn't mistake Fleet's mother for a pushover.

"Hi Mrs. Eggers. Mr. Eggers," she said shyly. And damn. How uncharacteristic was it for her to feel nervous? Of course, she'd never had to meet a boyfriend's parents before, because...she'd never had what she considered a boyfriend. Hook-ups, *yes*. Significant others, *no*.

"Talia, I presume," Mr. Eggers was the first to step forward and offer his hand, but before Talia could take it, Fleet huffed loudly.

"Geeze. Give me a break. Let me do the honors, will you? I feel like you're all treating me like I'm incapable of anything

but self-centricity right now, just because I've been under the knife, but you couldn't be more wrong. *I'd* like to make these introductions."

They all turned sheepish looks to Fleet, and with a raise of her brows, Talia urged him to take over.

He cleared his throat.

"Mom, Dad, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Talia Spires. Talia, this is Lodine and Jim Eggers."

Talia got up and took the hand that Jim Eggers still had extended, getting a warm feeling when they connected that he didn't disapprove of her at all. When she went to give the same gesture to Lodine, the woman avoided Talia's outstretched digits and went directly for a hug.

"It's so nice to meet you in person." She wrapped Talia in an enthusiastic embrace that Talia returned while Lodine's voice dropped to a whisper in her ear. "Since Fleet hasn't introduced us to anyone of interest since high school, this is me, officially welcoming you into the family."

Talia spluttered. "Thank you?"

Unaccustomed color moved up into her face. Talia wasn't one for blushing, but something about this whole heart-warming situation was bringing out her girlie side.

"Mom, are you embarrassing Talia?" Fleet sounded amused.

"Not in the least," his mother said, backing off and sending a wagging finger toward her son. "I'm just making sure she knows we already love her."

Talia caught Fleet's eye, and his gaze turned possessive. She guessed he liked his mother's declaration, regardless that it had contained the word "love". Not to say that Talia was averse to the term, herself. Since Fleet had been in the hospital, the word had been flitting around the edges of her brain. But she wouldn't use it now. When she finally let Fleet know exactly how she felt about him, they'd be alone...and preferably in bed.

There was a slight moment of discomfort before...

“Did you get the good news, son?” Mr. Eggers spun the conversation off the “relationship ledge”.

“What good news?” both Talia and Fleet asked together, both clearly appreciating his intervention.

“After you fell asleep this afternoon, the surgeon came in and gave the okay for your release tomorrow.”

“No way,” Fleet answered excitedly, then turned to Talia. “Did you know?”

“Nope. I didn’t have a clue. I worked all day, remember?” She snorted. “But I’ll kill Kyle for not texting me with the update.”

“Oh. No need for that,” Mrs. Eggers assured her. “He’d already gone off duty by the time we got word. It was the other handsome Sothard brother watching Fleet’s door by then.”

“Spence?” Talia questioned.

“That’s right. Spencer.” The approving look on Lodine’s face showed that she was smitten with all the Sothard’s she’d met so far. “He said he’d let it be a surprise.”

Talia knew Spence’s gentle nature, and wasn’t taken aback at all that his soft heart thought the revelation of Fleet’s release should come while she and Fleet were together. Kyle, on the other hand? He would have made a massive guessing game out of it, and relished in any frustration he could cause her. Talia was just the littlest bit disappointed she wouldn’t be kicking his ass.

“That’s great,” Talia finally announced. “I’ve got some of my team on standby to go get all Fleet’s stuff he’ll need from his apartment.” She grabbed Fleet’s hand. “Just tell me what ___”

“I hope I didn’t overstep, Talia,” Fleet’s mother cut in. “But once I heard the good news, Jim and I went back to Fleet’s apartment and I put together all the clothes and toiletries I thought he’d need...as well as his laptop.” She

turned to her son. “I’m surprised it hasn’t been attached to you here in the hospital. I can’t remember a time when I’ve seen you without it.”

Fleet chuckled. “That’s because the doctor forbid me to use it until I was released.” He played it off as if it were nothing. But he couldn’t fool Talia. She could see the anticipation in his eyes that he’d soon be able to get his hands back onto some work.

“I hate to burst your bubble,” Talia told Fleet. “But I’ve chatted with your surgeon, and you’ll be limited to no more than an hour a day at the computer until she sees you again, and that screen-time will be divided into twenty-minute increments.”

“That sucks,” he grumbled, and...right. She could already tell he was planning a way to get around the order.

Talia bit back a snicker. Wait until she told him she’d asked the straight-laced surgeon about sex. And not just fucking. *Nope*. Once she’d been more or less shot down on that, she’d inquired if it would cause too much havoc on Fleet’s blood vessels if she gave him some oral attention.

Yup. Talia wasn’t shy when it came to asking about something she wanted. And the surgeon, putting it mildly, had ended up being highly amused.

Which is more than she could say for how Fleet would take the news when she finally told him.

No intercourse for at least six weeks, and no blowjobs for four.

It was going to be a long *un-fucking* month.

* * *

POSING as a janitor wasn’t all that difficult. What was tricky, had been avoiding the fucking dog out front all day. It was a good thing egress to the back doors was de rigueur for the maintenance staff, and nobody questioned those comings and goings.

Hauling another bucket of water across the floor while keeping a very low profile, the door to Eggers' room came open and three out of four possible targets filed out. The time would come when they weren't being monitored. Sooner, rather than later would be good.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Talia looked like she'd never "played house" with a man before, and Fleet couldn't keep the grin off his face as she fussed around him. Of course, he'd never *been* a long-term guest in anyone's house, so the experience was new for him, too. But once he'd agreed to the idea of staying in Talia's home, he'd rolled with it, and was now enjoying himself immensely.

May, the cat, much to Talia's amazement, had taken to Fleet instantly, and was currently cuddled up on his lap while Talia flitted about in the kitchen.

"You're sure you don't have any dislikes," she called out from the other room.

Fleet couldn't see her, but he could hear her just fine. Hers was no open-concept dwelling. It was a sweet little cottage with several rooms adjoining each other. The living room was the first space upon which one entered through the front door. The kitchen was to the back, and two small bedrooms with an adjoining bath between were down a T shaped hallway to the right. It was cozy and tidy, and held so many items of interest, Fleet couldn't keep eyes from bouncing around like the ball in an arcade machine.

"Nope. I like everything as long as it's not meat," he answered back while catching a glimpse of several—unidentifiable to him—wooden handled tools propped lovingly on a shelf in front of him. "Bland, spicy, raw, cooked," he assured her. "I'll eat it all."

While she was concocting lunch, Fleet couldn't help himself. He moved a disgruntled May off his person, then lifted himself off the couch where Talia had ordered him to stay put. He trod quietly, hoping to avoid detection, because he needed to poke around the small spaces surrounding him and discover more of Talia's treasures.

There were a few pictures of her family on the walls, which Fleet studied surreptitiously. He knew her familial unit consisted of her mom, her dad, and an elder sister, Pixie. The images he saw were old, though, from Talia's teenage years by the looks. And as much as he hunted the walls for newer photos, he couldn't find any.

He might work up his courage to ask why that was, or... Maybe he wouldn't. Talia had hinted at something dark in her past, and if she wanted to share that, he'd let her do it in her own time.

Snooping around some more, he noted that Talia owned a few nice watercolors; clearly old, but still bright and cheery. They fit in with the mish-mosh of odd furniture and textiles she had artfully positioned around the room. The one thing, however, that puzzled him to the extent of head-scratching—albeit carefully because of his stitches—was the strange collection of iron items that filled almost one entire wall in her little hallway. The puzzling things ranged in size from two inches to five or six, and he'd never seen anything like them.

“Talia?” he called out.

He heard her footsteps just before she stuck her frowning face into the hall where he stood. “Hey. You're supposed to be lying down.”

Fleet snorted. “I've been on my back for days, and the PT said I needed to move around. So that's what I'm doing,” he countered.

Talia huffed, but clearly bit her tongue, not fighting his assertion. “Fine. What did you need?”

“I'm curious about these things. What are they?” He pointed to the peculiar array of items, some crude, and some of

which were quite elaborate in design.

Talia gave a laugh. “They’re lid-lifters,” she chortled.

“Lid what?” Fleet asked. It was a completely foreign paring of words for him, which was unusual. He prided himself on the eclectic extent of his knowledge.

“Lid lifters,” she laughed. “You, being from the warm south, might be unfamiliar with them, but up here in Maine, most people would recognize them.”

“Are you going to fill me in or make me guess,” he chuffed.

“You’ll never guess,” she goaded, then put him out of his misery. “They’re for use with old wood or coal fired stoves,” she explained. “At the advent of cooking on those behemoths, pans were made to fit into open holes on the top of the monsters. When the cast iron appliances were being used for heat only, they fit round lids into the holes to keep the fire inside from getting too much oxygen. These babies,” she picked one up and handed it to him, “are what were used to *lift* the lids and secure or remove them.”

“Genius,” Fleet said, turning the item over in his hand. “It almost looks like designing them became an art form.”

“Which is why I collect them,” she enlightened. “Some of them are wonderfully detailed.”

As was Talia.

She was a woman who defied being put into a specific box. Some would say she was a cop, through and through. Others would say she was an exemplary squad leader. Fleet was sure her parents thought her the perfect daughter. And May, obviously saw her as the ideal cat-mom. But Fleet was coming to realize there were so many sides to the woman, he couldn’t wait to explore them all.

“Where do you find them?” he asked, carefully hanging up the one that she’d handed him. They walked companionably back into her living room.

“Antique stores, flea markets, yard sales...” she trailed off and shrugged. “It’s something I do in my off time; poke around in other people’s old stuff.”

Fleet had never indulged himself that way, always buying new because... Well, he guessed it was because he was lazy. He’d go to a big-box store, point to a display, and within days, whatever he chose was in his apartment. He’d thought his place was well-appointed and warm. But now, when he looked around Talia’s home, he realized he’d been living in a bubble. The items he surrounded himself with were sleek and beautiful, but they had... Fleet ran his hand over the scarred top of a table that sat next to her sofa. *No character*. No previous life to proclaim. No interesting past.

He groaned. “Damn. You’re going to hate my stuff,” he said with certainty, giving a self-deprecating snort. “The kindest thing I can say about my furnishings is that they have interesting Swedish names.”

Talia giggled and held up a finger before she bent to look under an armchair, retrieving a stuffed toy she’d obviously bought for May. “Like this?” she asked cheekily. “His name is Ratta.”

Fleet laughed. He recognized the iconic rat from his favorite store. “Ahh. So you don’t just shop for antiques?”

“Shop, yes.” She shrugged. “But sometimes I *slum* it at retail stores. Besides, here in Maine when it’s minus twenty degrees outside in the winter with snow up to your waist, those places are great to walk around and get some exercise. But you know about all that. You’ve been in town for sixteen years.”

“Right. Hence my décor,” he chuckled.

“I’ll set you straight and start messing up your perfectly pristine decorating,” she teased. “You may have just given me another reason to hang on to you.”

When he gave her a curious look, she laughed and explained. “I’m running out of space here to fill with fun things. If I have access to your self-proclaimed Spartan

apartment, it'll be like having a completely blank canvas to work with."

Fleet could picture it, and it made him feel undeniably happy.

But he could also picture himself living here, with Talia. Maybe putting on a small addition so he'd have workspace... *Right*. He was getting ahead of himself. He actually didn't even know if she owned or rented.

"Is this place yours?" She certainly looked well-settled in, like she had no intention of ever moving.

"It certainly is. Well, mine and the bank's," she allowed, laughingly. "But I got a great deal on it, and it came with three acres which gives me a ton of privacy. You may have noticed that I keep most of it in tall grass and wildflowers. I'm not big on mowing a lawn, so I only cut the fields down in the late fall so small trees don't take over."

He *had* noticed when they'd walked out of her car earlier that the area surrounding the house was a tangle of leggy blooms, with the farther reaches having recently been shorn. Which made sense. October was just ending, so she was in the middle of her yearly maintenance.

"You're a woman of many talents, Talia," he told her, reaching for her wrist. When she didn't object, he drew her close and threaded an arm around her waist, pulling her muscled frame up against his. "And to think I've only just begun to scratch the surface."

She tilted her head up and nuzzled his ear with her nose. "As long as that's the only thing you plan to scratch," she warned. "If in the immediate future you're aiming for another kind of itch, I have bad news."

Dammit. He'd tried to put that out of his mind.

"Yeah. I know," he grouched. "No sex for at least six weeks. I've been warned." The surgeon had told him to keep all strenuous activities off his to-do list until she cleared him. But, he brightened, that didn't mean—"

“Nope. Don’t look like you’ve figured a work-around. I already had the forethought to ask about *otherly*-induced orgasms for you,” Talia said without a trace of contrition or embarrassment, “and the good doc put the nix on those, as well.” A big, disgruntled sigh left her mouth.

“You seriously asked about...?” Fleet snorted.

“I did. And she gave *that* agenda four weeks. Something about not getting your blood pumping too hard.”

Well, that sucked. And newsflash, his blood was already pumping. But not in a dangerous kind of way. He pondered for a few seconds, and... Bingo. Just because he couldn’t come to completion, it didn’t mean he couldn’t do a few wonderful things for Talia, now did it?

He leaned down to her lips, brushing across them provocatively. “You know, I’m pretty talented with my fingers.”

He felt a quiver run through her body.

“But...that’s so unfair,” she demurred, but not aggressively. “I’m not sure I can let you...take care of me without giving back.”

Fleet grinned and shrugged. He already had her. “Look at it like a banking transaction. I’m making some wise deposits so I can reap the interest down the road.”

Talia slapped his chest playfully. “I’m not sure I like being compared to an ATM.”

“Mmm.” He took a small nip of her bottom lip. “Item A—my tongue, not a plastic card—into slot B. You can use your imagination for that one, all to receive a big payout.”

“You’re nuts,” she told him, but her heart had sped up against him, and her eyes held nothing but lust.

He persevered, waggling a brow. “You want to see if I can guess your PIN?”

“Right now?” she squeaked. “I have lunch going.”

“Anything that won’t hold?”

She gently extricated herself from his arms and answered breathlessly. “Let me just...put a few things in the fridge.”

As she fled, Fleet momentarily wondered if him being as hard as the iron Talia collected would mess with his recovery, but quickly dismissed it. He could control himself. There’d be no climaxes on his end. This would be solely about Talia. He’d be fine as long as he could keep his clothes on—

“Time to get naked,” Talia declared with a gleam in her eye as she walked back into the room. “I’ve been dying to see you in the buff, and the whole johnny thing where your ass was hanging out doesn’t count. That was medical. This is personal.”

Fleet dragged in a shaky breath, not appreciating the picture of his posterior framed by hospital green. “I was, uh, just thinking I should keep my clothes on so I don’t, you, know, accidentally...”

“Brush up against something and shoot for the moon?” Talia finished, then grew serious, chewing on her lip. “You’d know about that better than me. But I’m calling no-fair-sies if I have to strip and you don’t.”

“How about a compromise?” Fleet suggested, his tongue firmly in his cheek.

“Why do I think this isn’t going to be much of a compromise?”

Fleet snorted. “Because you’re a smart woman,” he acknowledged. “Here’s my proposition. I take off my shirt. You take off your pants.”

Talia burst into laughter. “You think *that’s* fair?”

“Hey. I’ll have you know I have very sensitive nipples,” he provided. “And they’re one of my finest features.”

“I’m not doubting you on that, Fleet, but nipples versus pussy? Not a fair trade. Can we add your ass to the ante?”

“It’s there for you to touch through my jeans,” he told her succinctly.

There was a sigh, but...

She moved close, slyly, and slowly undid the buttons on his shirt, baring his pecks to her hot perusal. Slipping it down his arms to whisk it off, it fell to the floor, then she boldly leaned in and flicked one hard brown nub with her tongue.

Fleet hissed. *Damn.*

Without letting up, Talia did a reach-around, cupping one non-exposed cheek in each of her palms, but compounded his jeopardy by thrusting her muscled belly into his strident cock.

“Shit,” Fleet groaned. “I’m not sure this is going to work.”

Talia giggled. “Oh, I think it’s working just fine.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he grumbled. “You keep this up, and I’ll have a blow-out. Hopefully just the good kind, but...” he trailed off with a sigh and Talia immediately put space between them.

“Geeze, Fleet. You’re right. I’m sorry. I got carried away. Your safety is the most important thing. We can be done, here.” She bent to pick up his shirt, but he snagged her wrist on the way down and pulled her back to standing.

“Uh, uh. Not so fast. I thought we had a deal? My pecs are already bared, but you’re still in your jeans.” He raised a brow.

“You’re sure about this, Fleet?” Talia asked, concern clear in her voice.

“I can control myself,” he returned gruffly. “As soon as I get a taste of you,” he growled, “my needs will be the farthest thing from my mind.”

“If you’re certain,” she answered breathlessly, hooking her fingers into the waistband of her form-fitting, black leggings.

“I am.” Was that his voice, all deep and growly? *Dammit.* The thought of seeing Talia’s pussy for the first time had him practically cave-manning.

Boldly, Talia stepped back and shucked out of her pants in one, smooth move. No undies. All Fleet saw before him was smooth, pink skin. Gorgeous, completely unadorned, flawless flesh.

“You shave,” he breathed out in a hiss.

“I do. You...okay with that?”

“Oh, Tia.” In mind-spinning lust, he used his new, truncated nickname for her. “I’m more than okay with it. I can’t wait to have my tongue on you,” he hissed. “If I weren’t following doctor’s orders about taking my muscles out of the equation, I’d already have picked you up, carried you off, and splayed you out on your bed.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” she answered in kind. She turned around, giving him a full shot of her gorgeous, tight ass; full, high, and proud as she sashayed away and led him toward heaven.

God, he was a goner. There was no hesitation from his woman as they entered her bedroom. She yanked back the colorful covers on her queen-sized bed, then immediately spun, dropped, and laid herself out on her crisp, white sheets, like a banquet just for him. Her pretty pink lips glistened with her excitement, and Fleet knew an answering droplet had similarly and spontaneously wept from his cock.

He toed off his sneakers, glad they were old and loose so he didn’t have to waste time with the laces. He went to the bed and placed one jeans-clad knee between hers, leaning over to breathe in her heady scent.

“This is going to be fast,” Talia warned him huskily. “I’m already close to there, just from the way you’re looking at me.”

“I’m good with that, as long as you don’t mind me wanting seconds,” he answered.

She mewed her approval.

Fleet walked his hands up either side of her body until his face was even with her sweet pussy, and without another second’s hesitation, gave over to his desires. He took one long, slow lick of her slit from bottom to top, catching every bit of her honey to savor.

“Fleet,” she keened and thrust her pelvis up.

“Settle down, Tia. I’m just getting started.”

And oh, she made everything so easy, being completely shaved.

He unerringly located her clit with his tongue, pressing down on it as he moved a finger to her opening and slid it eagerly up inside. Talia was drenched, and tight, and he moaned around her distended nub, thinking about the moment his aching cock would fill her to the brim, but that was a thought-trajectory he wouldn’t be able to follow for weeks, so he’d make do, gladly, with what Talia now offered.

Her fresh, delectable cunt was all his for the taking.

Sliding another finger into her channel, he suctioned her little button into his mouth and gently scraped it with his teeth. Talia moaned, telling him he was on the right track, so he did it a second time, and a third...

When he leaned into his fourth foray, his sensitive woman reached her limit, and suddenly came apart beneath him, clutching at air. He wanted to crow and chuckle at the same time, knowing he’d done well by her, and that she wanted nothing more than to dig in and score his scalp with her nails, but was still vaguely cognizant enough to spare his beleaguered cranium.

Still, she wasn’t shy about taking what she needed, pushing up into his mouth, and down onto his fingers until her quaking eventually eased and subsided.

She heaved out a breath.

“Damn. That was...so good,” she rasped. “I almost forgot to be careful with you.” She came up on her elbows. “Are you okay?”

“More than okay,” he assured her.

In actuality, Fleet was pumped. He’d done his woman well, while at the same time not blowing any gaskets in his head. A huge, win. And his heart soared because...

It wouldn’t always be this way, their coming together without exploring everything in his arsenal. Fleet foresaw a

lifetime of mind-blowing explosions between them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Talia was boneless, and it didn't bother her in the least that she lay beneath Fleet, half naked and replete. She worked hard making her body tight, and was not in any way ashamed of her physique. Were her boobs a little small? Maybe. Was her ass a tad big? Yes, to that. But Fleet hadn't complained. He'd looked at her with nothing but awe and lust on his face, and she'd eat that shit up all day.

Fleet moved languidly off to her side and sat up, leaving her slightly chilled.

"Hey. Where are you going?" Talia grouched.

"To the kitchen to get food," he answered with what she could only describe as an over-the-top leer. "I was imagining bringing it back here and having a picnic on your stomach."

Said stomach jiggled up and down as she laughed. "Uh, I hate to burst your bubble, but I was warming up some tomato soup. Not exactly a neat meal."

"Then... I can sip from your belly button," he returned with his quick wit, moving smoothly to his feet. "Hold that thought."

He walked, shirtless from the room, and Talia gave a deep, girly sigh over the man's glorious back muscles. Evidence of his bouldering sessions was apparent in his enormous deltoids, traps, and lats. *Uh, hell yes.* Talia wanted an opportunity to lick each and every one.

But soup in bed? Not such a great idea. She removed her shirt as she arose, and grabbed her robe from the back of her

closet, slipping it on and cinching the belt up tight. If Fleet wanted to apply his mouth to her skin again, it wouldn't be for lunch.

She was just entering the kitchen when her phone rang with a SWAT alert.

“Shit,” she swore. “Looks like food might be out for me.”

Fleet stood still, ladle poised aloft as she picked up.

“Spires,” she barked.

“Notify your squad,” Mason snapped. “We have an active shooter situation.”

“Address?” Talia wasted no time, sprinting back to her bedroom to throw on clothes and grab her go-bag.

He spouted an address that sounded damned familiar, and when he added the name of her home town, Skowhegan, Talia's blood ran cold. “That's the elementary school.”

“It is,” Mason confirmed.

Talia swallowed down bile and tried to concentrate on what she was required to say. “Uh... ETA just under an hour, Mase.” *Dammit.* That trip normally took her an hour and a quarter, but she'd be flashing her blues all the way this time. Her sister, Pixie, taught at that school.

Talia immediately sent out the call to her entire squad while pulling on her BDU's and lacing her boots. The only one who didn't respond immediately was Doug, who was off back-woods-ing, but if he was following protocol, he'd have scouted out a spot where he'd have cell coverage, and would be checking his messages every hour.

Once her team had been notified, she drew in a sharp breath and attempted to call her sister. It rang once and went to voice mail. That wasn't good.

Talia gave Fleet a quick, distracted kiss goodbye, but couldn't work up the spit in her mouth to tell him why she was so wired. Luckily, he took it all in stride. He'd probably been with Everlee when she'd been notified in the past. Hopefully

by the time Talia was able to explain things to him, the entire episode would be behind her.

Talia was almost to her car when her phone chimed. She picked up, hoping it was Pixie, but... It was Doug responding. *Twenty minutes north of location. Heading out now. I'll be on site in fifteen.*

Yes. Clearly, he'd be first of their team to arrive, and it took only a moment of internal debate before Talia rang Doug up.

"Lumous," he barked.

"Doug, I..." Talia choked up, which wasn't like her at all, but dammit, this operation was going to be beyond personal. "My sister is a teacher at that school. Room 418. She...has some pretty horrendous memories of something similar happening like this once, so she'll be a mess. She's not answering her phone. Can you let me know if she's okay, and what the situation is as soon as you arrive?"

She hated asking a favor of a man who was still on their suspect list, but Pixie's wellbeing overrode any hesitation she might have had. Hopefully her sister had managed to get out of the building, and was safely behind police lines.

"Will do, LT," he clipped back. "If I can ascertain her location and she's still inside, should I try for a targeted extraction?"

As much as it pained her, she had to deny his request. "Negative, Doug. It's safer to wait for the team."

"I knew you'd say that," he growled.

"Thanks anyway," she told him sincerely. "I appreciate it."

He huffed. "I'll be in touch as soon as I'm local."

"Spires, out." She hung up, then got in her car and drove like a bat out of hell.

Ten minutes later she was just passing Herman Pond when her phone rang again. Seeing it was Doug, her heart leapt into her throat as she answered.

“Yeah, Doug?”

“The situation is all kinds of fucked up, LT,” he clipped. “Nobody has made it out of the building, and the local PD isn’t equipped or well-staffed enough to go in. They’ve had some bug running through their department, and half their officers are out, so they’re waiting on us.”

And rightly so. Without the proper workforce, things could go sideways very easily.

Talia was familiar with the police chief in town, and knew him to be highly capable and smart. Without the man-power behind him, he’d be frustrated as hell to hold off. She knew it probably was killing him to wait.

“That means this one’s on us,” Doug continued. “And it’s going to be a tricky bastard. The only intel they have from inside is coming from a staff guidance counselor who locked herself in a supply closet with a few kids when she heard the shooter blast open the front door. We know, from surveillance footage the chief was able to pull up, that the man is alone, a single shooter, but we have no idea where he is in the school right now, or if there have been any casualties.”

Talia had been afraid of that. “Doug. Tell the chief to send off that footage to Opal and Nolan.” She barked off their tech experts’ secure email address. “Maybe they can get an ID on our shooter.”

Mason would already have their techies downloading the interior layout of the school. Not that Talia needed it. She’d attended this elementary institution a million years ago, and had visited her sister’s classroom every year since Pixie began teaching, answering the kids’ questions about her job as an officer. If anyone was to take point on this, it should be Talia and her team. *If* Mase would allow it. Protocol often dictated that if someone close to you was involved, you took a back seat, and sometimes even sat things out in the command bus.

Screw that. Just let the boss try to sideline her.

She put her foot on the gas and flew down the interstate, willing the miles to pass quickly.

* * *

TALIA WASN'T the first to arrive, as she'd figured. The command bus, the Orono officers and those from Bangor had a shorter trip, as did some of those team members from towns west of her Old Town location. Her entire squad would have beat her on site, for sure.

She wasted no time, after parking a block away, to hurry to Mason's stated location where he was already snapping orders.

"Nine minutes until everyone's assembled," he barked. "Check your phones. Nelson has sent you all an interior diagram. Familiarize yourself with it. We'll go in the front. We won't have to waste time breaching that point of entry because the bastard already shot the hell out of it for us.

"We've heard several rounds coming from inside, and the chief says it's been going on, sporadically, since they began monitoring."

He paused, waiting for a few new team members to jog up. "Nine minutes," he reminded them grimly. "Everybody weapon-up."

Talia moved toward the bus with nearly fifty additional bodies. They all carried their own service revolvers, Talia's being a Glock 23, but the AR-15's were kept under lock and key in command central. The squads lined up at the bus door almost as soon as Mason gave the word. JD was currently passing out the high-powered rifles, one by one, so this was her opportunity to talk to Mason.

Talia approached her boss and cut right to the chase. "Full disclosure. This is my hometown, Mase. I went to this school, and my sister is teaching here. She's inside."

Mason's brow scrunched. "You think you can maintain your professionalism; not do anything that will jeopardize the mission?"

"I can. But to ease your mind..." Damn. This killed her, but she'd come to the only conclusion possible on the last part

of her drive. "I'm putting Cisco in charge of my squad for this one." She hated to do it, but nerves were eating away at her belly. And not in a good way. During a normal op, there was always an air of anticipation, a good kind of tension snapping like live wires throughout your body, but today her hands actually shook. Giving her squad to Cisco was the smart thing to do.

She walked over to her group of...three? Seriously? Where the hell was Doug?

She hadn't seen him since she arrived, and that worried her. He'd definitely been the first SWAT member on scene. "Cisco. Two things. First, have you seen Doug?" she asked her second in command quietly.

"I only got here a few minutes before you did, so no," he answered. "You were able to get in touch with him?"

"Yeah. He was hunting just twenty minutes north of here, and he rolled in before all of us," she stated through tight lips. "He said he'd keep me apprised, but other than a situation report when he first arrived, I haven't had any updates."

Cisco grunted. "And the second thing?"

"I need you to lead our squad on this one." She didn't prevaricate. "My sister is a teacher. I know she's in there, and I'm not sure I can maintain my objectivity."

"You got it." The man uncharacteristically laid a hand on her arm. "Don't worry, LT. We'll get her out." Cisco quickly turned away, clearly having displayed more emotion than he was comfortable showing, and addressed Jess and Azis, their two attendant squad members. "Either of you seen Doug?"

They both shook their heads in the negative.

"Dammit." He pursed his lips and keyed his mic. "Lumous. What's your position?"

Cisco received no answer.

"Lumous. Answer me."

Still no reply, and Cisco looked pissed.

Talia wasn't just angry, she was worried. She'd told Doug—the loose cannon—to stand down and not enter the building until back-up arrived, but knowing the man, she doubted he'd listened.

She leaned close to Cisco again. “I told him about my sister being in there. He wanted permission to go in for an extraction. I told him no, but...”

“But he's a hot-head,” Cisco growled. “And that's probably the reason he's not answering. If he's in the building, he doesn't want the shooter to hear his mic.”

Another burst of gunfire sounded from the interior of the school, this time from the gym wing, which was situated well away from the school's entrance.

“Chief,” she keyed her mic to contact Mason, all synopsis snapping. “Our shooter is in the gym wing on the east side of the school. There's only one egress, one long hallway leading from there to the rest of the school. If we cut that off, we're clear to remove everyone in the rest of the building.”

“Copy that, Spires,” Mason barked. “Squads A thru E, get your best snipers on the roof, and if they see our shooter so much as stick his nose out, they have permission to fire. Everyone else, A thru E, will be going in the front doors. Carini, take point and make assignments. Send in squads to block the west hallway, then evacuate all rooms on the east, north, and south sides. I repeat, send everyone out the windows in the rooms farthest from the gym wing, which is the western most position.

“F and G squads. Station yourselves outside those windows to escort everyone to safety with the help of the Skowhegan police.”

Apparently, Mason had interfaced with the chief to utilize the officers the man had.

Talia chewed her bottom lip, anxious to get moving. If the shooter stayed in the gym wing, they'd be able to clear three quarters of the school. Which was good. But Pixie? Her classroom was in the hallway leading to the gym, which was

outside the parameters of the evacuation. She wanted to demand Mike assign her squad to that hallway, but managed to hold her tongue. For now. Because Mason was still giving orders.

“Squads H thru J, cover the three exterior emergency exits from the gym. Do not breach unless you get the word from me, but keep that shooter contained at all cost. Does everyone know what they’re doing?”

“Copy that,” each squad leader responded, and they all mobilized, heading to their assigned places, carefully and rapidly.

Things suddenly became more real as they headed in, and Mason pulled out his bullhorn. “Attention in the school. This is Downeast SWAT. We have the building surrounded. Lay down your weapon and come out with your hands up. I repeat, we have the building surrounded.”

Talia knew from her short experience with the team, that Mason’s hail would most likely not get a response. But it was necessary to establish contact with the shooter, letting him know he wasn’t going to run rampant without consequences. Mason waited for a quick thirty seconds and repeated his demands, but got nothing in response.

As five squads entered the shattered front doors of the school, Mason’s voice came over their shoulder-mics again. “We have an ID on the shooter. Peter Bentensil. Thirty-eight. Worked as the night janitor for the town hall, and was fired last week for rifling through desks. Ex-military. Served in Afghanistan. Firearms trained. We’re contacting his family and hacking into his social media to see what else we can find that might help us deescalate.”

Another round of gunfire erupted, still isolated to the gym wing, but that did nothing to calm Talia’s nerves. Her sister’s classroom was in that direction, and that’s where Talia’s mind was fixated.

“Cisco,” she hissed. “See if Mike will send us into the gym wing.”

Cisco grunted. “That’s where your sister is?” he asked.

She nodded, holding her breath. He didn’t have to acquiesce to her demand. She’d given Cisco command, and he could very well use that authority to keep her away from the heart of danger, but—

“Mike. Permission to head the squad cutting off the gym.” Cisco hadn’t hesitated.

Mike grunted. “Why are you acting as squad leader?” He snapped off the question while pointing in various directions, sending the other squads scurrying in opposite directions.

Talia didn’t want Cisco taking the heat. “My sister is down there,” she told him. “Room 418. She’s a teacher.”

“Shit, Talia. I can’t let you go—”

“Mike. Please. I’ve given Cisco control, and I’ll follow his orders. I promise.”

“No.” Mike speared her with a grave look. “You’ll follow *my* orders. My squad and yours will be going in. Together.” He nodded toward the doors to their right. “But if you so much as blink in the wrong direction, Spires, I’m sending you out.”

“Copy that,” she agreed, her heart beating out of her chest

She was going in, and that’s all that mattered.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Where’s Lumous?” Mike asked quietly as they traversed the empty corridor leading toward the occupied gym-wing. Talia kept her mouth shut since she’d put Cisco in charge.

“We haven’t been able to contact him,” Cisco replied with a grimace. “He was on scene before anybody else, and...we think he might have gone in.”

Cisco looked at Talia and she nodded, giving him the go-ahead to reveal everything.

“When he checked in earlier, saying he was the closest one on scene, Spires told him her sister was inside, mentioning her room number to him. We speculate he might have taken it upon himself to head there.”

Mike looked contemplative, then grunted. “That might mean the gunfire we’ve been hearing has all been exchanges between Lumous and Bentensil, since we haven’t seen any evidence he’s targeting individuals. It’s possible Doug is purposely drawing the perp’s attention away from innocents.”

Not sanctioned protocol, for sure, but Talia read between the lines. She knew Mike was not averse to how Doug was acting, and buoyed up by the idea they might not find any student or teacher victims from the newest, repeated gun reports that sporadically echoed down the affected hallway.

Talia fortified herself for whatever they found, but following Mike and Cisco was one of the hardest things she’d ever done. All she wanted to do was rush ahead, especially when she heard that concussive gunfire, repeatedly, and in the

vicinity of her sister's classroom. But she hoped and prayed it was Doug draining the guy's ammo.

If Mike believed, so could she.

Before they breached the jeopardized hallway, Mike called a halt, moving forward himself and ducking low to risk a glance through the bottom glass panels of the separating doors. After a good long look, he moved back stealthily.

"Our perp is twenty yards down on the left side of the hallway, taking cover behind a partially opened steel door."

"Janitor's closet," Talia whispered. "It's directly across from my sister's classroom."

"And if I'm correct, there are two more occupied rooms between hers and the gym. Is that right?" Mike asked.

Talia knew he'd studied the schematic and was simply confirming his understanding of the layout.

"You've got it," she said, her voice shaky in its low cadence. "But there's a big equipment closet between the final classroom and the gym, and it has doors that open into both places."

Cisco spoke up. "Excellent. Doug's smart. He'll have asked all these questions of your sister. And...I know him. While he's engaging the shooter, he'll have sent her and her students into the next room, then instructed them to gather up those people and the ones after them, eventually sequestering everyone in that equipment closet."

Talia agreed. "It will be a tight fit with sixty kids, but it's big enough. They'll manage."

"Are the doors lockable?" Mike asked.

"Not from the inside," Talia informed him. "And not from the outside without a key, but..." She felt her optimism rise. "That's the place where the coaches pile all the thick gym mats. My sister's not dumb. She'll know to drag them in front of the doors and line the walls with them to keep bullets from possible penetration."

That was, if her sister was functional. Who knew if this would have Pixie's anxiety ramping up and spiraling out of control. Talia chose to believe it wouldn't. She figured her sibling would do everything in her power to fight through her own issues to keep all her kids safe.

"Let's say that what you surmise is true," Mike speculated. "It means we still have three full classrooms on the right between us and the shooter, three on the left before his position, and two more between him and the gym, also on the left. That's a lot of teachers and kids we can't risk. I say we attempt to deescalate. It's time to bring in a negotiator."

Mike keyed his mic. "Mason?"

"Sothard up," Mason immediately replied.

Mike explained the situation succinctly, then asked Mason's opinion.

Mason's frustration came out loud and clear over the air. "I've already thought of that, but our negotiator isn't here. He had a medical emergency and couldn't make it. Still..." Mason sighed. "Spencer's not fully certified yet, but my brother has been undergoing training in hostage mediations. If we need to initiate a conversation with our shooter, Spence is our only option right now."

"Send him," Mike barked. He already knew Mason agreed, or the chief wouldn't have brought it up.

Time ticked slowly until a door let out a low hiss, opening down the hall from where they all crouched.

"On your six," Spencer keyed into their mics so he wouldn't get shot.

"Copy that," Mike replied, and in seconds, Spence ghosted up behind them.

"Mase told me the situation." He looked grim, but confident. "Let's see if I can talk the guy down."

"You got it. E-squad," Mike barked. "Move to the right side of these doors, A-squad stay to the left. I want cover on Spence at all times."

Everyone moved quickly and silently, then Mike gave Spencer the nod. He moved in low, taking a knee and opening the door a scant two inches.

“Peter Bentensil,” he called out. “This is Officer Spencer Sothard of Downeast SWAT. We have the building surrounded, and will take every precaution to assure there are no casualties. All we want is for everyone to leave this situation safely, including you. What can we do to facilitate that outcome?”

“Fuck you!” Came the loud reply. “Nothing’s going to make me surrender. I don’t give a shit if I die. I haven’t got anything to lose. Do you understand? The assholes I worked for wouldn’t pay me enough to live on, then they got mad when I looked around in their desks for a few coins. So screw them, and screw you, too.”

“I understand your frustration,” Spence’s calm voice replied. “But the people in this school aren’t part of your beef, Peter. These are innocent kids and teachers. And if you want to hear some truths, these teachers are probably as poorly paid as you are. They don’t deserve to be terrorized. They’re just trying to do their jobs, and you’re scaring them.”

Silence met that statement, so Spence continued. “Is there any way you can let us evacuate the classrooms in this hallway, then we can talk some more?”

The man gave a bitter laugh. “You mean lose my hostages? I don’t think so. It’ll be over too quickly then, and nobody will know why I did this.”

As the dialogue continued in that vein, with some of it simply devolving into rants, Doug’s voice finally came quietly over everyone’s comms.

“Sorry I’ve been keeping a low profile, but I’ve been working to secure three classrooms. Between exchanges of fire with our perp, I’ve managed to get everyone from this room and the two between me and the gym barricaded inside a huge equipment closet. I’m back in room 418 now, with eyes on the shooter, and I’ve let him know I’m here. I’ll keep him busy while you quietly evacuate the other rooms in this hallway through their back windows.”

Mason, always part of the conversation, called for a status report from the squads clearing the other parts of the building. “B, C, and D squads, report in.”

“Julient up. East wing clear.”

“Conide up. South wing will be empty in approx. two minutes.”

“McGee up. North wing clear.”

“Okay. Julient, your new assignment is to evac rooms 412 through 416 through their outer windows.”

Every squad member had the school layout on their phones and would locate the objectives Mason gave them.

Talia didn't need that. In her head, she pictured the even numbered rooms between her location and Pixie's class.

“McGee, take 413 through 417. Conide, as soon as the south wing is clear, you'll take rooms 419 and 421. We have eyes on the shooter. If his position changes, evacuation ceases and your job becomes protecting any civilians who haven't yet left the building.”

“Copy that, Chief,” the three squad leaders replied in tandem.

Now that things were in motion and it seemed like Pixie was in a safe place, Talia could fully tap into her brain once again. She took a few deep breaths, hoping the shooter would continue engaging with Spencer, negotiating. Or perhaps he'd fear a bullet from Doug if he moved from his position in the supply closet. Those two things might afford all persons enough time to get out of the building.

Spence, ever patient, called out to Bentensil again. “Come on, Peter,” Spencer appealed, using the man's first name once more. “So far, you've only shot up a bunch of infrastructure, all of which can be easily repaired. I know you don't want to hurt any kids. You're a veteran. You spent a lot of years protecting innocent lives, and eventually got an honorable discharge. You did some good in the world, so why throw it all away, now? To do what? Go out in a so called blaze of glory? Is that what you want? I understand your frustration, but isn't

there a better way to solve things than by scaring a bunch of babies?”

“I... I’m sorry, but I tried following the rules and doing it the way people told me,” the man responded angrily, then spat. “It turned out the rules were shit. Nobody gives a fuck about me. Nobody. So I’m making a stand.”

Spencer turned to his mic and contacted the support staff in the command bus. “Have we found out about any family for this guy, yet?”

Opal’s voice came back. “No relatives,” she acknowledged regretfully. “It *was* just him and his mother, but she died last year.”

“Shit,” Mike grunted. “He wasn’t kidding when he said nobody cares.”

They were interrupted by the man’s anguished voice again.

“At least if I’m killed here,” their shooter stated, loudly, “people will remember me.”

And what a legacy that would be.

Spencer, clearly leery of continuing down that track, tried a different approach. “Say, Peter. Did you go to this school when you were a kid?”

There was a moment of silence before... “Yeah. I did.”

“Nice place. I’ll bet you had some great teachers back then,” Spence attempted.

Mason, it seemed, was already into those records, which he now fed to his brother. “Ask him about Mrs. Achison,” Mase advised quietly. “Our man had all A’s that year.”

“Do you remember Mrs. Achison?” Spence called out.

“Yeah. Second grade,” Bentensil replied with hesitation. “She was...nice.”

Mason was still sending info into Spencer’s ear, and he used it to his advantage.

“I understand she’s still here, and getting ready to retire,” Spence stated. “I’m assuming you’d hate to see her get hurt, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d never...” It seemed the man choked up a bit before he coughed and regained his posturing. “Shut the fuck up and stop trying to confuse me. This isn’t about Mrs. Achison, or this school. This is about the assholes who screwed me over. Everybody I worked for at the town hall. Every government official I asked for help. This town is crap, and they all let me down.”

“Which is a damned shame, Peter. They should have rewarded you for your years of service. And speaking of service, what about the guys you served with, Peter? Your platoon? You still have some friends in the military?”

It was clear to Talia that Spence was trying to ascertain if there were a few people out there who knew the man, and still cared for him.

“My...best friend, Hack, was killed. Drove his Humvee over an IED and there wasn’t anything left of him to scrape up.”

That had to have sucked and played havoc with the man’s mental health.

“But... There are a few guys I’m still in touch with.”

“That’s good. Have you asked them for help? Advice?” Spence questioned gently.

There was a snort. “Not likely. They all have problems of their own. It’s not easy coming back and figuring out what to do. For any of us. I...don’t want them to know I’m...not okay.”

“Understandable,” Spence agreed with just the right amount of sympathy. “But I bet they’ll be kicking themselves if something happens to you. You know how it is with buddies. They blame themselves for not seeing a bad situation before it happens. They’ll regret not reaching out.”

“Stop trying to twist things around,” Bentensil cried out. “This has nothing to do with them. And besides, they’ll all get

it, eventually. Once I'm gone, they'll figure out how hard things were for me, and they'll move on with their lives as if I never existed."

Spence suddenly stopped soft-peddling and got real. It was almost a whiplash about-face. "So this is a suicide thing?" he probed pointedly.

"What if it is?" the man sneered.

Mason's voice came quietly back over everyone's mics, so Talia missed Spence's response.

"Where are we on the evacuations?" Mase asked of his assigned squads.

"McGee up. Two rooms empty, one to go, Chief."

"Same," Julient affirmed.

"Conide up. We're just getting started."

"Copy that," Mason clipped. "Let me know when we're clear."

Talia, along with the squad members who had been biding their time at the doorway, kept silent, with their eyes and ears once again glued to Spencer and the shooter.

But when Doug's voice rasped out of their mics again, she felt like either strangling or kissing the man.

"As soon as everyone is safe, I think I can take him," Doug said.

"Lumous, you will stand down," Mason barked. "There'll be no stray bullets flying in that hallway. Understand? Have you forgotten there are still sixty-plus teachers and students waiting things out in an equipment closet?"

Doug growled. "Of course I remember. I put them there. But if Spence can keep the perp talking, I can sneak into the adjoining classroom one door down, then make it unseen out of there and into the hallway. I'll be able to come up behind his partially open closet and tackle him before he knows I'm there. Nobody dies today, boss. Nobody."

Damn. It could just work.

There was a moment of silence from Mason. Was he seriously considering Doug's suggestion? Talia held her breath.

“Okay. Wait for my go, Lumous. If you so much as twitch before I give the word, your already two-week suspended ass will get booted off the team so fast you won't know what hit you. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, Chief.” Doug didn't sound contrite. At all. And wasn't that what Talia found she liked about the guy? He was ready to step up, even when he went rogue.

“Squads A and E,” Mason snapped out. “As soon as Lumous has the shooter down, you move in immediately and cover him.”

“Roger that, Chief,” Mike responded.

They were all amped up for some action after being sidelined on the evacuations.

This wouldn't take long.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ten minutes later it was all over.

With her arms firmly wrapped around her sister, Pixie, Talia had all she could do to keep the tears of relief at bay.

It had gone down exactly as Doug had suggested.

While Spencer had continued engaging Bentensil, they'd all watched Doug slowly and surreptitiously sneak out of room 420, his firearm holstered—which might have the higher-ups suffering even more fits—his body poised and ready. At a particularly heated juncture during the ongoing conversation, Doug wrenched the closet door fully open and immediately tackled the man to the ground.

During the skirmish, one round was fired from the perp's gun, but luckily the barrel had been pointed downward at the time. The bullet only managed to take off the top layer of leather on Doug's right combat boot.

Lucky bastard.

Squads A and E had subsequently stormed in, secured the shooter—after Doug already had him disarmed—and Peter Bentensil was on his way to being booked and getting a much-needed psych evaluation. Where he'd go from there was anybody's guess. Since no one had been hurt during the incident, but there'd been reckless endangerment and damage to the building, his sentencing would eventually reflect that. But his final fate would also depend on whether his lawyer could prove Bentensil had no intent to harm anyone but himself.

Good luck with that.

Talia was glad she wasn't a lawyer.

As for Doug...

Well, while Talia took time to digest the man's current transgressions—and actually felt thankful he'd gone against her orders and kept Pixie, her colleagues, and several dozen students out of harm's way—Mason was... *Yup*. The man was ballistic. He was currently chewing Doug a new asshole over grandstanding, disobeying orders, not working as a team-player, and making solo decisions without prior approval.

Doug simply stood at attention with a stoic look on his face, taking the tirade in stride, but Pixie...

"Why is he getting yelled at?" she asked Talia, her voice soft and uncertain. "He...saved us, didn't he?"

Talia gave her a squeeze. "He did. But he didn't have authorization to go in alone. It's not something SWAT sanctions, so the boss has to give him a reprimand."

"Hmph."

Talia felt Pixie's shoulders straighten and her backbone stiffen. *What the...?*

Her diminutive sister shrugged out from under Talia's arm and walked toward Mason and Doug. Talia blinked. Who was this bold woman, and where was her sister hiding?

"Excuse me." Her tiny voice barely moved the air around the engaged pair as Mason continued his tirade.

She coughed and tried again, this time coming close to lay the fingers of her right hand on Mason's sleeve. "Excuse me," she repeated.

"What...?" Mason's bark turned to a muted rumble as he looked down...way down at Pixie.

"Umm, I'm Pixie, Talia's sister," she told Mason, studiously avoiding the scowl that Doug was sending her way. "And I think you're...being too hard on your officer. He was..." Pixie blushed to the roots of her fine, platinum hair.

“...magnificent. A comfort to us all. We were terrified; immobilized until he slipped in through our window. Then without blinking, he galvanized us into action, and made sure we all got to safety. I don’t...” She took another huge breath. “I don’t think you should be yelling at him.”

Mason looked disconcerted. Unsure, which was a new thing for him.

Talia knew he’d grown up with seven brothers, and wasn’t used to dealing with females in anything but a professional capacity. Everlee, his wife, had spent her entire life in law enforcement, so wasn’t averse to his gruff ways. But Pixie... She was like some tiny little sprite appealing to his better judgement; an anomaly to Mason that clearly put him well out of his comfort zone.

Doug, not so much. He simply shook his head and tsked.

Turning and bending down to Talia’s older sister, his tone softened and his face gentled. “It’s okay, Pixie,” he assured her. “My chief is just doing his job. I messed up and went against orders. That was wrong of me.” He actually patted Pixie’s shoulder. “It’ll be okay.”

Okay. Now Talia was certain of it. Aliens had not only kidnapped her quiet, timid sister, but they’d taken the blustery Doug as well. There could be no other explanation.

Mason unglued his tongue from the roof of his mouth and still looking a little lost, deferred to Ever, who’d come up behind him during the strange conversation.

She sidled around her husband.

“It’s okay, Ms. Spires,” she assured Talia’s sibling.

“Pixie, please,” her sister responded.

“Pixie, then.” Everlee smiled. “Just to let you know, Doug is being suspended, not fired,” she explained. “We all realize he saved the day, but going about it the way he did, there has to be some consequences. Our officers can’t go off on their own without interfacing with their team. Giving Doug a few weeks off to reflect, we’re all hoping he learns from this.”

Ever narrowed her eyes at the man, and he ducked his head, looking sheepish. Another first for him as far as Talia knew.

“I’ll work on it,” he promised, and sounded like he meant it.

Holy crap. Was this change of attitude something to do with Pixie, who was looking at the man with near stars in her eyes? Even Cisco, when Talia glanced at him, looked confused as hell over what was happening.

And Pixie...

When was the last time Talia’s older sister had perused a man with any kind of warmth in her gaze? Uh, *duh*. That was a no-brainer. It had been sixteen years ago. Pix had been seventeen, and Talia sixteen. And what had happened at that juncture was the reason Talia felt like pinching herself right now. Everything had changed that year, and had never gone back to the way things had been before. This behavior of Pixie’s was just plain weird. But maybe it was good?

Talia walked forward and took her sister’s right hand away from Mason’s sleeve where she’d left it, and it seemed to snap Pixie out of her small trance.

“Oh,” she emoted, a familiar blush moving up into her cheeks. “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“You didn’t,” Mason returned gruffly, having been elbowed none-to covertly in the ribs by his wife in order to answer. “We’ll, uh, take into consideration your concerns.”

Talia almost giggled. *Almost*. She was still too stunned, herself, at the turn of events, to come up with anything more than a lopsided grin.

Lightly, she drew Pixie away from the group, wanting to see exactly how her sister’s mental health fared. If her championing of Doug was any indication, it didn’t look like the day’s cluster-fuck had set her sister back at all.

“Hey, hon. You want me to take you to Mom and Dad?” Talia asked her sister. She’d seen their parents in the crowd. Like everyone else, however, they’d been relegated to a spot

behind the police lines. If Talia knew them at all, she'd understand they were frantic at this juncture.

"Yeah. We should go see them," Pixie told her. "But Talia, I'm fine. Really."

"Are you sure?" Talia's brows drew together. "I know this probably brings back some pretty horrific memories for you."

Pixie shrugged. "It does and it doesn't. Back then, it was the person I trusted most who changed my life. Today," she actually smiled, "it was a handsome, take-charge officer who kept me feeling safe. I can't equate the two circumstances, because this one was...by and large, quite positive in the end."

Talia was confused. *Positive?* But if that was the way Pixie was viewing it, Talia didn't want to disabuse her of the idea.

"That's great, Pix. But let's go give some of those reassurances to our 'rents. They're probably freaking out right about now."

Pixie chuckled. "Agreed."

Marty and Helena Spires were indeed looking unglued by the time Talia and her sister found them. There was much ado at their coming together; a lot of embracing and waterfalls of tears. But oddly, it was Pixie who ended up doing most of the comforting.

"I'm fine, you guys. Really. Between keeping my kids calm, and following Doug's lead, I didn't have time to overthink."

Her mother huffed, clearly not fully convinced. "Well, if you have a delayed reaction and wake up in the middle of the night, panicking, please wake us up, sweetheart. We don't want you starting up with your nightmares again."

Talia sighed. Too much coddling?

Pixie still lived with their parents at the ripe old age of thirty-three, which Talia had always thought of as wrong. If this incident could prove to Pix that she still had some spunk, maybe it would help her find the courage to get a place of her own.

Talia hoped so. Her sweet sister deserved a life outside of teaching, and currently had none. It would also be cathartic for her parents, who'd inadvertently smothered and overindulged Pix for too many years. On another note, they also needed to find themselves, post-retirement, doing something other than hovering over their daughter.

"I have an idea, Pix," Talia suggested. "I overheard the superintendent say the school will be closed for a few days. Why don't you come back to Old Town with me and hang out? I have a friend staying with me who's recuperating from surgery, and he's a sweetie. I bet he'd love your company while I'm at work."

She wouldn't say that there were also officers guarding her home twenty-four seven. There was no need to bring that up. And maybe, if Pixie spent a little time with Kyle and Spencer Sothard hanging around, her mind would be diverted from the anomaly that was Doug.

"A male *friend*?" Her mother's brows rose extensively as she honed in on what Talia had said.

Ah, shit.

She'd never introduced any of her one-nighters to her family. There'd been no point. But now, in this sudden exchange, Talia found herself wanting to tell her family about Fleet. "Yup. I met him during an op where our friend Everlee was in danger, then again at Ever and Mason's wedding." She'd certainly chatted to them extensively about her friend *and* her boss. "His name is Fleet, and he runs his own recording studio in Orono. He's quite talented, has cred with a lot of bands, and has even produced several award-winning movie scores."

"You didn't tell me what I really want to know, honey," her mother chastised. "Is he a friend, or a *friend*?"

Now Talia did an uncustomary blush. "Well, we haven't exactly taken things to an intimate level yet because of his health issues, but we plan on it when the surgeon gives her approval."

“La-la-la,” her father chimed, covering his ears and dancing away. “TMI. Just say he’s your boyfriend, please.”

Talia grinned. “Okay. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Pictures?” Helena Spires wasn’t one not to ask for something she wanted, and clearly she needed a visual.

“I may have a few…”

Talia pulled out her phone and scrolled until she found one of Fleet, pre-hospital. The pain line between his brows was apparent, but she explained as she turned her device around to give her family a look.

“When this was taken, he was actually having some debilitating headaches. Then he went bouldering one day—that’s rock climbing—and suffered a brain aneurysm.”

Her mother’s mouth dropped open.

“That’s horrifying,” her father commiserated with concern, taking a good look at the picture. “Is he okay, now?”

“Perfect,” Talia told him with a smile. “He’s making a full recovery, with nothing to worry about in the future, or so they tell me. And that’s a good thing because, well, I’m pretty smitten.”

“He’s handsome, Tallie, that’s for sure,” Pixie said. “And if he’s smart and knows what’s good for him, he’ll hang onto you.”

“I think he’ll agree with that,” Talia admitted, grinning. “He’s a little worried about our…differences, but I’ve assured him there’s no problem with me or my family over skin color, so I’m sure he’ll come around.”

There was no way she was going to tell them about the possibly racially motivated attack on Fleet after what they’d all been through today. Time enough for that when her parents came for a visit.

“You assure that man that if you love him, we will, too,” her mother postured.

Talia almost choked. “I, uh... We, um, haven’t exactly said the ‘L’ word yet, Mom.”

Helena simply smirked. “I can see it coming.”

Talia needed a change of subject, realizing that her mother was reading her mind. She turned once again to her sister. “So Pix. Are you coming home with me for a few days?”

“You know what? I think I will.”

And there again, her sister surprised her. But not *so* much once Talia noticed where Pixie’s eyes were straying.

To Doug...who, if Talia wasn’t mistaken, had turned his own gaze away just before being caught out.

She sighed.

This should all prove to be very interesting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Fleet found Pixie charming and adorable like Talia. But in every other way she was so *unlike* Talia that he was amazed they were sisters. Once Pixie became comfortable, however, and started opening up, Fleet could definitely see the resemblance between the two. She was curious, open-minded, and loving. But unlike Talia, Pixie held back in the confidence department, and deferred to his opinion whenever he offered one up. What had happened to make the two women so different? There was something there...

Which led Fleet to the elephant in the room that neither sister had mentioned. Pixie had no use at all of her left arm. It simply hung by her side, pale and unmoving. Not that it bothered Fleet, or that he was owed any kind of explanation. But he had a feeling it was somehow related to Pixie's reticence to speak up, and Talia's near obsession with being heard.

He'd spent the night sleeping soundly in Talia's guest bedroom while the sisters had shared Talia's king-sized mattress. He'd heard them giggling in the dark, and had fallen asleep with that music in his ears, and subsequently felt fully refreshed this morning.

* * *

"WANT to accompany a recovering man on a quarter mile walk?" Fleet asked her as they finished the morning dishes together. Talia had left earlier for work.

“Sure,” Pixie answered agreeably. “But why only a quarter mile?”

“It’s all I’m allowed right now.” Which sucked. He made a face. To go from extreme hiking to shuffling thirteen hundred feet, was a real blow to his ego.

Pixie, as always, was agreeable. “Sure. Let me just grab a jacket.”

Early November in Maine was chilly before the sun rose higher in the sky, and Fleet felt it judicious to layer-up as well, so he grabbed a sweatshirt off the back of a chair before snagging leftover breakfast from the counter. He didn’t know who had babysitting duty outside today, but surely whoever it was wouldn’t turn down bacon. It wasn’t his thing, because, well, vegetarian, but he wasn’t blind. Most of the population salivated over the smoky meat.

Not waiting for Pixie, Fleet opened the door to a grinning Kyle, and a stoic Doug. He knew the less-than-friendly cop had been suspended from SWAT for a couple weeks, but he was still active on the OPD, Chief Ildavorg having eschewed the more drastic censure, and instead settling for a reprimand.

“Good morning gentlemen,” Fleet said as cheerfully as he could with Doug looking so dour. “I thought you might like some toast and bacon.”

“No shit,” Kyle beamed. “Thanks, man.” He went right for the crispy strips while Doug looked on.

“Not interested?” Fleet questioned the man, removing the plate from in front of Kyle’s greedy fingers to thrust it toward Doug.

He scowled, and was clearly about to decline when Pixie walked out of the house and smiled up at him. “It’s really good. I cooked it myself,” she told him.

His face did a one-eighty, and the smile that emerged on his lips made the man look ten years younger...and completely approachable. Who knew Doug had that in him? Lumous reached a hand out and grabbed two pieces, as well as one

slice of toast. He folded the bread around the strips and took a bite.

“Mmm. Good,” he announced after chewing and swallowing.

Fleet struck while the man was in a good mood. “You want to walk with us this morning, Doug?” he asked, sending a quick shake of his head to Kyle. Here was an opportunity to maybe get to know the man a little better.

Doug opened his mouth with what looked to be a decline, but Pixie jumped in. “Please, Doug? I’d love to have you join us.”

What Pixie didn’t know, however, was that one of the officers would *have* to accompany them; the unknown threat to Fleet still out there.

Fleet had been given the green light by Talia to fill Pixie in on things today, but only if the previous day’s trauma hadn’t done a number on her. It looked like Pixie had not only slept well, but was gung-ho to take their walk, suffused with a natural kind of cheer, which was great, but also meant Fleet didn’t want to bring up bad shit to make the morning a downer. He wondered if there would be a good opportunity to tell Pixie about his woes, but refused to perseverate on it.

“I’ll go,” Doug finally gave in, nodding to Kyle who gave him a sassy wink. Clearly the Sothard jokester wasn’t going to let the man’s moodiness affect him in the least.

“Great,” Pixie smiled, turning to question Fleet. “Which way should we head?”

He shrugged. “This is the first day I’ve been cleared for an outdoor walk, and I’m not at all familiar with Talia’s neighborhood. I have no clue what’s within an eighth of a mile from here.”

Doug actually jumped in with a suggestion. “Let’s head toward the damn. It’s close, and you can get a nice view of the falls and the sluiceway.”

Pixie looked at Fleet, and he nodded. “Sounds good to me. I thought I heard water running somewhere nearby.”

“Just don’t fall in,” Kyle quipped as they all agreed on their destination. “I’d hate to leave my post here to help pull your ass out of the drink, then have to explain to Talia how we screwed up so badly.”

“Not interested in taking a November swim, thank you,” Fleet returned. He glanced at Doug. “Lead the way.”

The man uncharacteristically offered his arm to Pixie, who took it with a smile, and they were off.

Doug was correct, they were only a couple streets from a large dam that stretched across the Penobscot River, and what a sight it was. Over a thousand feet long, water cascaded heartily over the barrier and also down a large chute. Beside the impressive falls, an empty lot held rubble from a building that once was quite large, alongside a newer looking brick edifice.

“I wonder what those are, or were?” Fleet asked, thinking his question was rhetorical.

“Old woolen mills,” Doug surprisingly replied. “One was torn down in the 60’s, and the one still standing is apartments.”

Who knew the man would be familiar with his history. Fleet was beginning to think there was more to Doug than first met the eye, and clearly Pixie thought so, too. She began to engage him in more “local color” conversation, and it became quickly apparent that the two were finding they had historical interests in common.

Still, Fleet wasn’t sure he liked how much Pixie let Doug have the lead with whatever they talked about, but he wasn’t familiar enough with her personality to know whether it was done purposely to draw the man out, or was simply a part of her stepped-back personality.

He hated to interrupt, but...

“My watch says I’ve done half my steps, so as much as my curiosity says keep walking, the doctor and Talia would have a fit if I disobeyed orders and didn’t turn around, now.”

Pixie chuckled. “Tallie told me not to let you over-do, but I knew you’d be good.”

Fleet joined her laughter. “And I’m not going to cross your sister. She’d kick my ass.”

It seemed Doug let out a small growl, which confused Fleet even more, but Pixie clearly misinterpreted the sound. “Did some of your bacon go down the wrong way? I’ll bring you some water once we get back to Tallie’s.”

“Thanks,” Doug gruffed, but if Fleet figured he would hear something between the two that told the story of their attraction to each other that he could pass on to Talia, he was sadly mistaken. Other than their interest in the history of the region, Fleet couldn’t see a thing the big, gruff man and the meek, diminutive fairy had in common, and Doug had now chosen to clam up.

The eighth of a mile home actually seemed pretty damned long.

* * *

A SMILE GREW SLOWLY on the observer’s face. *Yes.* Another possible target.

The shadowy figure followed the small group, taking a snap of the little blonde woman. She was clearly the lady-cop’s sister, and someone much more vulnerable than the others on the list of possibilities. But what could be accomplished with her death or kidnapping? Not living in town, she was one step too far removed from the aberration of the blonde cop and Eggers. There would have to be some thoughtful consideration given to that before a move was made in her direction.

Slinking off, there was still satisfaction in what had been uncovered. It felt good to have five possible victims—Eggers, his parents, Talia, her sister—rather than just two.

* * *

WHEN HIS PHONE rang somewhere in the kitchen, Fleet was so deep into his future session-scheduling that he was arranging on his laptop, he almost didn't hear it.

"Shall I get that?" Pixie called out, which snapped him to attention.

"Sure," he mumbled, changing up his client slots for the fifth time to fit a couple solo acts in before he made room for a few more challenging groups. Of course this was all speculative, anyway, for *when* he was finally cleared to go back to his studio.

Listening in, there was no mistaking the change in Pixie's tone as she attempted to placate whoever was on the other end of the line.

"He's only been on for twenty-one minutes. I've been keeping track, and I was just about to tell him his time was up."

Right. It could only be Talia taking her sister to task.

"Pixie, bring me the phone please," Fleet requested. He closed down his program and sighed. Talia must have some kind of radar. He'd just been at the crux of figuring out his upcoming calendar, dammit.

"She's not happy," Pixie said, whispering as she held the phone to her chest so Talia wouldn't hear. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be sorry," Fleet told her. "This isn't your fault, it's mine." The other two times he'd been on the computer that day, he'd watched his time carefully and shut things down, knowing Pixie wouldn't dare tell him what to do. He'd blown it this time, however, and he'd take the heat. He held his hand out for his phone, which she readily gave over.

"Hey Talia," he said cheerfully.

"Don't 'hey Talia' me," his intrepid girl replied. "I was just told you've been on your computer for a minute longer than you're authorized. If you can't follow the rules, I'll have to take it away from you."

Fleet just chuckled. *Yup*. Talia was a ball-buster, but one he adored. And when he was well again, he'd give her a good run for her money. He loved a strong woman; a challenge, but he was no pushover. Neither of them were.

And now that she knew why he'd been so fucked up about moving forward with their relationship—affected by past injustices—she'd basically told him to stuff it because she didn't give a damn about some present-day asshole's agenda. She'd assured him that she could take care of herself, and with those assertions, Fleet certainly felt more comfortable thinking of them in terms of having a future.

“My laptop is closed for the duration of the day,” he told her. “And I haven't had a headache since before my walk this morning. So, Florence Nightengale, it seems my extra minute of CRT time hasn't set me back.”

“Fresh,” she said, but he could hear the humor in her voice. “I wasn't actually calling to check on you, I was calling to see what Pixie might want for dinner tonight. I already have your veggies in the cart.”

“You know I won't mind watching you eat anything if it's cooked. Just no raw stuff, okay?”

“Yumm,” Talia replied. “Oysters on the half shell with a bunch of lemon, a little tabasco. They slide right down so sweetly...”

Fleet mimicked a gag. “No thank you,” he reiterated.

“Just teasing. Ask Pix what she's in the mood for,” Talia told him.

“Pixie?” he called out. “Talia wants to know what shellfish you'd like for supper? But not oysters,” he added.

“Anything is good,” she answered agreeably after coming up behind the sofa where he sat.

Fleet turned back to the phone. “Did you get that?”

“I did. And tell her thanks a lot. I wanted something definitive.” She huffed. “I had a feeling I wouldn't get a direct answer, though.”

And why exactly was that? Fleet was determined to find out before Talia got home. It didn't seem like any woman these days, especially a sister of Talia's, should be so...demur.

"Fine." Fleet took the reins. "I'll pick for the two of you. Shrimp. To be cooked on the grill I saw out back. Alongside a bunch of veggies. All with a side of rice."

"See? That wasn't so hard. Thanks, handsome." He could almost hear her smiling over the phone. "I'll be home in half an hour."

"Sounds good," he said. "I've missed you."

And he had. But the thirty minutes before he saw her gorgeous face again gave him time to probe into the anomaly that was Pixie.

He hung up with a grin.

"That's good. I like shrimp," the conundrum told him happily, moving to sit in a chair across from his position on the sofa.

"Then why didn't you just say so?" Fleet questioned, determined not to let her off the hook.

"Because..." Pixie frowned prettily, then shrugged. "I didn't want Tallie to be disappointed if I picked something she didn't like."

Fleet sighed. "She wouldn't have asked if she didn't want your opinion, Pix. You know how it is once you're in the grocery store. Your mind tends to go blank with all the choices."

Pixie ducked her head. "I...wouldn't know. My mother does all the shopping for the household."

Shit. That's right. Talia had mentioned that her sister still lived at home, but Fleet had figured she was perhaps between apartments or something. Pixie was a year older than Talia, and at thirty-three, she should be on her own, or at least shopping for her own food. This sounded way more convoluted than he'd imagined.

“You’ve never gone to the market? Even to pick up snacks for yourself?” Fleet inquired gently.

“No. I...” She tucked an errant strand of her fine, platinum hair behind her ear and sighed. “I only go to school, and home.”

Fleet knew his expression was skeptical. “But you went out for a walk this morning,” he ventured.

“That’s because Doug was going with us.” A smile touched her lips. “He makes me feel...safe.”

Did Fleet dare explore deeper? *Hell, yes.* “And why wouldn’t you feel safe doing something as simple as going to the grocery store? People do it every day; moms, kids, grandparents...” he trailed off.

She brought her gaze up and regarded him steadily. “Tallie hasn’t told you, has she.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Told me what?” Fleet got skitters up and down his spine. This sounded bad.

“Told you we were both shot when we were teenagers.

Ah, shit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Well, hello...not.

Talia walked into her living room juggling two bags, and could tell by the look on the faces of the two people sitting there that the time had come to reveal all to Fleet. How much had Pixie told him?

Not much, if the confusion in his eyes was any indication.

“Huh,” she grunted. “Food first, or conversation?” There was no reason to pretend she didn’t know what was going on.

“Conversation.” There had been no hesitancy in Fleet’s reply.

“Fine. Let me put the perishables in the fridge and pour myself a glass of wine, then I’ll be back to fuck up your head.”

She stomped to the appliance in question, and without sorting things through, shoved the whole bag on a top shelf. Reaching above the fridge to her sparse liquor cabinet, she pulled down a dusty bottle of red, removed the screw-off cap, and poured herself an entire juice tumbler.

That ought to do it.

Going back to the living room, she took a good long swig, and sat on the opposite end of the couch from Fleet.

“Okay. How much do you know?” She eyeballed Fleet warily, but gave her sister a slight quirk of her lip, letting her know she wasn’t pissed, just...caught off guard.

“Only that the two of you were shot at some point when you were teenagers,” Fleet revealed.

“So, not much, then,” Talia replied, taking another fortifying drink.

“Nope.” He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest, clearly staying mum until she gave over everything.

Hesitation wasn't in her make-up.

“I was sixteen. Pix was seventeen,” Talia began. Damn, she hated revisiting this memory. It had changed the dynamics in her childhood forever, and she retained a lot of bitterness to this day. Of course, it had also changed her life in a positive way, setting her on the path to her career in policing. But that had come later.

“And you wouldn't know it now, but Pixie was the live wire in the family; smart, social, opinionated...”

Talia could see the look of disbelief on Fleet's face, and she understood. She almost snorted. Wait until he heard the next bit of intel.

“She dated a lot, flitted from flower to flower, and loved being part of the fast and dangerous group at school.”

“I was an idiot,” Pixie grumbled, but Talia wasn't having any of that.

“You were young,” she corrected. How many times would Talia have to assure her sister that the things that went down weren't her fault? That number had to be in the thousands by now.

Talia cleared her throat and kept going. “I was actually the shy kid in the house. Helped out with chores, stayed in a lot, did my homework when I was supposed to, and always had my nose in a book. I didn't feel the need to have a lot of friends. Pixie was my best buddy, and when she wasn't around, I stuck to a small group of girls who weren't even close to popular. That was all fine with me.”

She knew she was blowing Fleet's mind.

The way she operated these days was completely opposite to who she'd been way back then.

“Pixie started dating this guy who was...volatile to say the least. He was always in trouble in school, and lived sort of off the grid with his dad and brother. Pixie saw him as a...challenge.”

She looked at her sister, who had gone even paler than normal, and understood. Not only was bringing this up difficult for her, it made her feel like she'd failed everybody she loved.

“Our parents were very concerned, and pleaded with her to leave the guy. I kept my opinions to myself, but lamented at the change in my previously sunny, gregarious older sister. Pix became moody, combative, and no longer wanted to hang out with me. I missed her terribly. It affected us all, but mostly it was doing a number on her, which she managed to keep secret. Then one night she came home with a big bruise on her face. The guy had hit her. For the third or fourth time, but that night it apparently woke her up.”

Much to Talia's surprise, Pixie took over. “I told him before I drove away from his place that I wasn't his punching bag, and I wasn't going to see him again. I thought... I thought it would end it. That everything would be all over, but I was wrong.”

As quickly as Pixie had interjected, she just as quickly shut down again. Talia filled the silence.

“Our parents were out for dinner one night a week or so later. Pix and I were home alone. There was a knock on the door, and when Pixie pulled the curtain back and saw who it was outside, she told me to go hide and call 911. I didn't know exactly what was going on, but I did as I was told. I heard her open the door while I was on the phone to dispatch. I had just given them our address when a gunshot sounded, followed by a scream.”

Talia glanced at her sister and saw tears streaming down her face, matching the ones that Talia refused to let loose from her own eyes.

Talia's shoulders stiffened. "I couldn't stay hidden any longer. I ran out to see what had happened and saw Pixie lying in a pool of blood on the floor with that asshole standing over her, sneering. I launched myself at him, furious, but he was easily a hundred pounds heavier than me, and knocked me off like I was a gnat.

"I kept coming back at him, incensed, and that's when he shot me, too."

She raised her shirt, revealing a section of skin Fleet hadn't seen since she'd only removed her pants in front of him. "Luckily, it was a through and through, just below my ribcage, but the impact tossed me back on my ass, and he must have felt like he'd done his job, because he turned to go."

Pixie picked up the thread again. "There's something to be said for small towns," she choked out. "The police station was only two minutes from our house, so the police arrived before he'd even had a chance to step off our porch."

"And I was able to get up and move into the doorway behind him, letting the responders know he was armed, and had already used his firearm."

Talia took another deep breath. "They ordered him to the ground, but he ignored them and started firing as they took cover. That's when I...lost my mind." She gave a wry laugh. "I tackled him from behind, and we went tumbling down the stairs, which was probably stupid, but it gave the officers just enough time and opportunity to move in and disarm him."

"Holy shit, Talia. You could have been killed." Fleet's eyes were suspiciously wet, now.

"But I wasn't. I was only mildly injured. And the cops who witnessed the whole thing said I saved the day. Not one of them got shot, and they were able to cuff the prick and haul him away."

"But Pixie?" Fleet clearly understood there was a bit more to the story.

"She wasn't so lucky." Talia's chest filled with regret. "She'd been shot in the left shoulder, and the nerve damage to

her arm was so extensive, the surgeons were unable to fix it.”

“Which is why I’ve got this useless appendage today,” Pixie added pragmatically.

It still rattled Talia, even after fifteen years, that she hadn’t been able to save her sister.

“And the asshole who did this?” Fleet growled.

“Behind bars for the rest of his life.”

Talia had checked, directly following Fleet’s kidnapping, just in case the incident had anything to do with the prick. It hadn’t. “Yeah, he’s serving hard time because the police discovered that he’d also killed his old man and brother before he came to take vengeance on us.”

“Holy shit,” Fleet gaped, but clearly his internal engine-of-astuteness was running on all cylinders. She could see the ah-hah moment come into his head. “That’s why you came out of your shell and became a cop. You saw…”

“How much they can make a difference. Yeah,” Talia affirmed. “I decided right then and there that I wasn’t going to hide myself away from life any more. I set my sights on a career as a cop, then turned so outspoken that my parents couldn’t believe I was the same kid.”

“And I went the other way,” Pixie added softly. “I felt so stupid and guilty for what I’d done, what I’d been, that I couldn’t make sense of life, so I withdrew. After a lot of counseling, I was able to function again, but not in the way I had, previously.”

That was an understatement.

Pixie sighed. “I kept my head down for the balance of my senior year, graduated, then went to a local community college. My father drove me there every day, because he knew if he didn’t, I wouldn’t go. I eventually got my teaching credentials, and I’ve been at the elementary school ever since. I drive now, but I don’t really go out. Just to school and back. Sometimes to a restaurant with my parents. And when Talia insists, I come here some weekends, but that’s all.”

Which made her new fascination for Doug even more confusing. A definite head-scratcher for Talia. Was Doug a throwback to the bad-boy type Pixie used to fall for? Or was he the hero who'd come and saved her from the shooter? Talia wished she had the answer. But now, only time would tell where the odd relationship would go.

"I think you both turned out just fine," Fleet stated magnanimously.

Talia wanted to snicker. She already knew he liked her bossy side.

"But," he added, turning toward her sister, "I also think it might be good for you to get out more, Pixie. With our help. That is, if you think you can handle it. A trip to the local supermarket might be a good start," he grinned cheekily.

Pixie pondered for a moment before nodding. "Okay. I think I can do that. But..." She looked him square in the eye. "Can Doug come?"

* * *

LATER THAT NIGHT after some discussion, and a little unaccustomed arguing from Pixie that Talia secretly relished, it was decided that Pix would take the guest room, and Fleet would share Talia's bed. Not that anything would happen, Talia had assured the pair. Fleet was not cleared for hanky-panky of any kind. Yet.

In order to keep her hands to herself, Talia had demanded she and he both be completely clothed, and even though Fleet had pouted and cajoled, she'd won out in the end. And didn't that suck, even though she'd suggested it out of caution. Sometimes it wasn't good to get your way.

After retiring, she and Fleet held hands as they talked from opposite sides of the bed.

"Do you really think we can help Pix?" Talia asked.

Guilt rose within her. She knew she was partially at fault for Pixie's introverted self. She could have done more for her

sister, but by the time they'd both finished college, their divergent careers had made hanging out together difficult.

Truthfully? Talia hadn't quite known how to deal with the timid woman most of the time.

Fleet seemed determined to change all that.

"I know we can," he answered. "She's just got herself into a routine that's turned into a rut, and needs a helping hand to lift her up and out of that ditch. And I hate to tell you this, Tallie." He'd eschewed the nickname he'd previously given her for the one Pixie always used. "Whether we draw her out, or not, it looks like Doug might be able to do the trick."

"Which is really weird," she replied with a huff. "The man is...abrasive, at best. Why couldn't she have gone for Spencer, or Kyle?"

Fleet barked a laugh.

"Okay. Spencer. Kyle would drive a saint, nuts."

Fleet squeezed her hand. "Who knows why the heart does what it does. If someone had told you a couple months ago that you'd be dating a black sound engineer, would you have given it credence?"

Talia hummed. "If someone had told me what a nice ass he had, then maybe," she quipped. "Not that I've seen much but a hospital-glimpse of those glutes yet. I'm holding out hope they're as fine as I remember."

Fleet snorted. "I don't know if I've ever had anyone quite so fixated on that part of my anatomy before. Does that mean you're an ass-woman?"

"Phht," she countered. "I'm a cock woman all the way. And from the bulge and tent show you've managed to perform for me so far, I'm not going to be disappointed in any way."

"Well, thanks. I guess," Fleet chuckled. He pressed her hand again. "Have I told you how much I like that you always say what's on your mind?"

"It's not...annoying, or too arrogant for you?" Talia asked. She rarely worried about the way people took her, but Fleet

was important. Very important.

“Not in the least. And when I’m one-hundred percent myself again, I’ll give you a run for your money. A lot of people have labeled me cocky over the years.”

“Mmm. Cocky,” she repeated. “Back to the good stuff.”

She didn’t get the laugh she was after, however, and turned on her side to study Fleet and see why.

His face, in the dark, was inscrutable, but she didn’t have to wait long for him to assuage her curiosity.

“Talia... You talk about the good stuff, but the *really* good stuff is...”

He took a deep breath, and when he let it out, he seemed somehow lighter. He’d made a decision. Clearly.

“The really good stuff is, I’ve fallen for you. Completely.”

“You...have?” Was that her voice, cracking and unsure?

“Uh, huh. And in case I’m not making myself completely clear. I love you, Talia. Without the added benefit of fucking, and despite the danger I’m bringing into our lives. I can’t imagine my life from now on, without you in it.”

“Oh, Fleet. I feel the same way. I...” she trailed off, a long silence ensuing as she struggled for words. She needed to say the words...

“For fuck’s sake, Tallie,” came the grumble from the room next door. “Just tell the man you love him and give him a toe-curling kiss. Then we might all be able to get some sleep.”

Fleet snorted.

Yup. That’s just how thin the walls were.

Talia, however, took her sister’s suggestion and rolled closer to Fleet, whispering those three very special words in his ear.

Then she kissed the stuffing out of her man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fleet woke up for the third morning in Talia's house, far more settled than he had been in a long time. Talia loved him, and to that point, he was feeling...invincible.

He almost laughed out loud. He must be recuperating well, because vulnerability had been part of his persona since the headaches had begun, and he hadn't liked that at all. After being railroaded out of Huntsville, where he'd been made to feel weak and defenseless for the rest of his senior year, he'd left, and kept his nose down to work hard in college. Then during his rise to success in the recording industry, he'd eventually regained his inner fortitude. Self-assuredness had become an integral part of his being until the damned health issues had made his day to day life so very difficult.

Now, here he was on the mend, thinking of a future that involved more than mixing boards. He was suddenly brightened by the idea of having a woman he loved by his side. Goading him; keeping him on his toes. Which he knew Talia would, whenever he hit glitches, personal or work related. He also dared think about a future family, which he'd never allowed himself to ponder before. Yup. His mother wasn't the only one who'd been lamenting the possibility of never having little ones running around.

"You're thinking awfully hard over there," Talia grumped, turning over and punching her pillow into a fluffed-up mound. She blinked sleepy eyes at him. "Is your head hurting?"

"No." Fleet smiled. "Just the opposite. This is the first day I can remember in a long time where I haven't woken up with

my head pounding. I think the saying ‘love cures all’ has some validity,” he teased.

Talia snorted. “If that’s all it takes, you’re going to be super human because I plan to remind you of that all the time.” She yawned and stretched. “But right now,” she turned and cracked an eye toward her clock. “I have to get up for work. The early shift sucks.”

“Yes, but then you’re through by three,” Fleet countered. “Hey. What about you and me taking a solo walk after you get home? I’m getting a little tired of the duty-cop escort I’ve been suffering.”

“Oh really? Kyle is beginning to annoy you with his dad jokes, and you’re beginning to trip over the stick that’s up Doug’s ass?” she quipped, even though the pair weren’t scheduled to be on duty every day.

“Something like that,” Fleet returned. “Your sister’s company is good though. She can come with us.”

“Noted.” Talia sat up and swung her legs out of bed. “We’ll figure it out later. It’s early. You should see if you can get a little more shut-eye.”

“I’ll try,” Fleet told her. “But I’m just going to lay here thinking about you, and how satisfying it’s going to be to finally be here with you, naked.”

“Uh, uh. Shut those thoughts down,” she scolded. “I can already see the sheets moving in an upward direction, and erections aren’t good for you. Remember?”

“Who says?” Fleet chuckled. “I think it’s damned fine. You wanna see?”

Talia moaned. “Thanks for the visual. Showering now.” She moved adroitly toward the adjoining bath. “And I *won’t* be taking care of myself under the spray, so don’t be picturing that.” The door snicked closed, and...

Well, shit. That’s all Fleet could think about now, the little minx. She’d known exactly what she was doing leaving him with those words.

He must have fallen back to sleep, because the next thing he knew when he opened his eyes, the sun was bright behind the window shades, and gentle clunking sounds emanated from the kitchen. He looked at the clock. Nine A.M. When was the last time he'd stayed in bed that late?

Oh. Right. At the hospital. But that wasn't part of his life, typically. Still, did he want to move? His head felt great, and although he wasn't one to persevere, he was afraid once he became upright, the pounding might return.

Chicken-shit. When had he become such a wuss? It must be a mild case of pain-induced PTSD. *Suck it up, Eggers,* he told himself. *Life is pretty damned good right now, stalker notwithstanding.*

He forced himself to rise, then blinked. No icepick to his eyeballs. No vice squeezing his temples. *Hot damn.* Maybe this was going to work. How awesome would that be?

He trod softly to the bathroom and inhaled. He could still smell Talia's shampoo from earlier, and he eyed the purple bottle. *Nope.* Not going there. If he used her products, he'd be hard all day, thinking she was near.

He shrugged and took care of business, made fast work of his shower, then sauntered out to the kitchen where Pixie was fussing about. Fleet looked around, but he didn't see breakfast. He noted counters. Full of...stuff.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously.

Pixie grinned. "Talia may not like it, but her cupboards were a mess. It was almost impossible to find anything. She had plates mixed with glasses mixed with canned goods. Her silverware drawer had no dividers so everything was a mish-mosh. And don't even get me started on her pans and bakeware. I may not shop, but I cook, and finding a saucepan in her dark lower cabinets is like a safari."

Fleet laughed. "I guess I had noticed that," he admitted. "But I figured it was just part of Talia's charm."

"More like part of her 'can't be bothered with minutia' personality. Give her a bad-guy to chase, or a partner with

whom to spar, and her attention to detail is uncanny. Ask her to find you a slotted spoon, and you might as well suggest she travel to the moon.”

Fleet was highly amused. “So you’re...”

“Organizing her. Whether she likes it or not. Then...” She turned to place a box of teabags next to a jar of instant coffee. “...Doug has asked me if I want to go for a ride and have dinner with him later today. I said yes.”

He nodded, but...

Fleet didn’t know how he felt about that. Cheered, because Pixie was coming out of her shell. But bummed it had to be Doug. Sure, the man was no longer on their suspect list—Mason saying he’d been fully sniffed and cleared by Muddy right after the debacle in Skowhegan—but the guy was still a jerk.

“That’s nice, Pix.” Fleet took the high road because Talia’s sister looked so pleased. He’d have to warn his woman, though. He didn’t want her blindsided so she blew a gasket in front of Pixie. “You’ll have your own bodyguard and I’ll have mine. I told Talia I’d hold off my walk today until she got home. I’m keen to explore a little more of that damn, and I plan on contacting the surgeon to ask if I can add to my steps today.”

“You *are* looking well this morning,” Pixie returned, her tongue poking out as she weighed a can of peas in her good hand while eyeballing a heavy glass pitcher. Her decision made, one by one she placed each in a separate cabinet, then began loading in like-items. “No headache today?” she asked.

“Nope. My noggin is clear as a bell. I’m going to grab some food, then get back to my computer. I might even have a look at a new score one of my more ambitious bands sent for my perusal.”

“Don’t overdo,” Pixie warned as she looked at the date on a bottle of salad dressing, wrinkled her nose, and tossed it into the trash. “The only reason you’re feeling so good is because you’ve been following the rules.”

Fleet saw the validity in what she said, and he'd take it into consideration. But right now it was going to be an internal battle on which would be more stressful for him; working a little longer, or ignoring everything that was piling up. He'd have to find a balance that satisfied both him and his surgeon.

* * *

BY LATE AFTERNOON, Fleet was tired but happy. He'd had a discussion with the doc this morning after he'd downed a couple slices of avocado toast. She'd been pleased with his progress and lack of pain, so had cleared him to monitor himself, work-wise, warning that if he suffered even the slightest twinge or any unusual eye fatigue, he was to immediately shut things down.

He'd listened, and behaved, even taking a mid-day nap. But he'd managed to cross off a number of things from his work docket, and it had left him feeling pretty mellow. He'd since had the chance to walk outside, waving to the two officers stationed by the door whom he vaguely recognized, before placing a call to Talia, warning her of Pixie's plans.

Other than some heavy sighing, his girl took it well. She didn't raise the roof. Which was good. He wanted Talia to be in an upbeat mood for their jaunt this afternoon. He had a serious question to ask her.

He might be jumping the gun, but... Well, time would tell.

Fleet's parents dropped in for a quick visit before heading off to sight-see, their ever-present security detail glued to their sides. Fleet was happy to spend time with them, but even happier they were getting to see some of the area he'd fallen in love with. His next move with them would be convincing them they needed to move north to be near him. It was a long shot, but with the advent of a possible daughter-in-law and grandchildren added to the mix, they might not be able to resist.

During the hour after his parents left, Pixie sat across from him reading a book while he took up work again. He smiled

when he eventually closed his laptop and looked over at her.

“What time are you leaving?” Fleet asked.

“Probably shortly after Talia gets home,” she answered, glancing at her watch. “Doug is working a seven to three shift today, but he’s in Orono. He said he’d go home, get out of his uniform, then pick me up.” She looked down at the jeans and t-shirt she’d donned that morning. “Do you think I should change my clothes? I’m not sure where he’s taking me to dinner.”

“There aren’t a lot of places that are formal around here so I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Fleet answered judiciously, “but it never hurts to doll yourself up. Not for your date’s sake, but because it will give you confidence.” He’d heard that sentiment plenty of times from musicians who were taking the stage. They might be a nervous wreck inside, but if they decked themselves out like peacocks, it gave them a huge boost with poise.

“I think that’s good advice,” Pixie said, standing. “I’ll go see what’s in Talia’s closet, since I didn’t bring much with me.”

Fleet was also curious about Talia’s wardrobe. Did the woman have anything other than the pragmatic clothing she normally favored? She’d looked damned fine at Ever and Mase’s wedding, that’s for sure, wrapped up in some sky-blue, wispy confection that had shown off her figure and revealed a luscious portion of her legs. But he guessed that wouldn’t be appropriate for Pixie’s first, casual date.

When Pixie emerged fifteen minutes later, Fleet gave her a definite thumbs-up. “You look awesome,” he said sincerely. If Doug’s mouth didn’t drop open in appreciation, he’d deck the guy.

Talia’s closet had rendered up a pair of tight black leggings, knee-high, deep-brown leather boots, and some kind of soft—maybe mohair—beige sweater that hugged every one of Pixie’s curves. She’d clipped her hair up into a sweet but messy bun on top of her head, and brushed some pink onto her cheeks. She looked fresh, and innocent, and... Fleet wanted to

give a protective growl. He was feeling very brotherly toward the heretofore vulnerable woman, so Doug better keep his hands to himself.

Not long after, with the two of them seated and again making small talk, Talia waltzed through the door, a forced smile on her face as she got a gander at Pixie. Not because of what her sister had on, but because the reality of Pix going on a date with Doug had clearly hit her.

“I see you raided my closet,” she grumbled half-heartedly. “You know I haven’t had a chance to wear that sweater yet.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Pixie immediately jumped to her feet. “I’ll find something else.”

Talia immediately became contrite. “No. No. It actually looks fabulous on you, better than it did on me when I tried it on in the store. You should keep it.”

Fleet could see the doubt on Pixie’s face, until...

“You know what?” Talia snapped her fingers. “I have the perfect necklace to go with it. Wait right there.” She came back seconds later, a long chain in her hand, at the end of which were several black, concentric rings nested amongst each other. Talia strode forward and looped it over Pixie’s head, settling it between her breasts. “There. Perfect. Your... date is going to be blown away.” She smiled brightly.

Fleet could tell how much that statement cost Talia, and rose to put his arm over her shoulders to give a comforting squeeze. “You look beautiful, too.” He nuzzled her cheek.

“Right. Fresh off patrol and in my uniform,” she scoffed.

Fleet didn’t miss a beat. “You know, I’ve always had a thing for hot women cops.”

“Liar,” Talia snorted. “You’ve always hated police.”

“Until you and your friends came along and proved me wrong. I’m man enough to admit that.”

“I can’t wait until you’re man enough to do something about it,” Talia responded, turning to capture his bottom lip with her teeth and give it a saucy nip.

“Okay you two. I call time out. The sexual tension in this place is so incendiary I might pass out from lack of oxygen. Damn. I’m just as anxious as you are for the surgeon to give Fleet clearance to...do stuff, Tallie, just to keep your house from burning down.”

They were all laughing as a knock sounded on the door.

“That’s my date,” Pixie rasped, suddenly looking nervous.

“You’ll be fine,” Talia assured her, scooting away from Fleet and surrounding her sister in a hug. “Doug is actually a really good guy. I recognize it in him even though he tries hard to hide it. And since you’ve been around, Pix, his mood has improved exponentially. But that being said, if he does anything out of line, I’ll kick his ass.”

“Thanks, Tallie.” Pixie threw back her shoulders and went to the door, pulling it open then standing back.

Doug walked in, and... To say he was gobsmacked was an understatement. He looked Pixie up and down and clearly couldn’t find his words.

Talia stepped forward. “Don’t you think Pixie looks nice, Doug?” she prompted.

Doug’s head moved up and down in the affirmative, but his hands twitched at this sides as if he didn’t know quite what else to do. Pixie solved it for him.

“I hope this is okay,” she swept her good hand down her body. “I wasn’t sure how to dress, not knowing where we were headed.”

“You look...awesome,” he finally said, and Fleet had to admit that Doug cleaned up pretty well, too. He’d only seen the man in uniform and in his turn-out gear, and here he was sporting brown slacks with an impressive crease, and a button-down white shirt, crisp and... *Wait*. Were those fold lines? Fleet bit back a snicker. It looked like the man had doled out some bucks for a brand-new shirt. *Good on him*.

Doug turned to Talia and found his tongue again. “We’re going to take a drive up route 2 to Lincoln, and grab some prime rib at a little place there that’s good.” He suddenly

looked unsure and glanced at Pixie. “Uh, do you like prime rib?”

“I do,” she assured him with a smile.

He looked relieved, and even more so when Talia spoke up.

“That’s a pretty trip, Pix. I’m sure you’ll have a nice time.” She nodded at her sister, then linked her arm through Fleet’s. “We’re headed out soon, too.”

“Okay then.” Doug shuffled his feet.

“Go,” Fleet assured him with a grin. “We’ll all have a good time tonight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Talia let the smile slide from her face as the door closed behind Pixie and Doug. “Do you think she’ll be alright?”

“She’ll be fine,” Fleet comforted. “Did you see the way Doug held the door and gently put a hand to her back? I’d say the man is smitten, and will do everything to make sure Pixie has a good time.”

“But... I talked to Mom when I was on break today. Pixie hasn’t dated since the incident. That’s almost sixteen years, Fleet. What if she freaks out?”

“Then Doug will deal. Also, he has your phone number, right?”

“Yeah. He does. For work.”

“Then he’ll use it if he feels there’s a need.” Fleet cradled Talia’s cheeks in his hands, relishing the feel of her soft skin. “I know you’ll worry, but isn’t it time for Pixie to see if she can have a life? I feel like...” Fleet swallowed the lump in his throat. “...you’ve given me that opportunity. I love my work and all, but I was just going through the motions, socially. Then you marched into my orbit in those hideous black combat boots, and I was a goner.”

“Flatterer,” Talia snickered. “And speaking of which, I’m getting out of these shit-kickers and into my sneakers, so sit tight.” She spun on her heel and headed for her bedroom, making a quick segue to the kitchen to grab a power bar and a bottle of water.

Fleet watched her go, enjoying the way her ass swayed as she walked. Was there anything about Talia he didn't like? He couldn't come up with a damned thing.

While she changed, Fleet also put on his sneakers and picked up the heavier jacket his parents had brought him at his request. Being inside so much, he'd become a bit wimpy where the temperature was concerned. He chuckled, thinking of how he'd fair when he got back to winter hiking. It could be a difficult transition, but he was certain if he mentioned his misgivings to Talia, she'd make sure he got his ass back on the trails...once he was fully cleared for exercise.

Of course, the exercise he was most interested in was some horizontal tangling with Talia. And that would be all about warmth...and sweating...and breathing heavily...

Fleet groaned. It wasn't good to have his mind go there when he was just about ready to head out for a walk. Stiff-cocking wasn't conducive to fluid motion, except when it was plunging into— *Gah!* There he went again.

Input connectors. Auxiliary sends. Preamps. Faders. Mixers. Effect processors. He listed off components of a sound board, hoping to distract himself, but when Talia emerged from her bedroom in tight jeans with a cinched belt over a curve-hugging red sweater, his brain short-circuited again.

“Did you just say ‘effect processors?’” she asked, quirked an eyebrow.

“Yes. And it isn't helping. I was distracting myself from thinking about having you naked underneath me, then you walked in looking like...that,” he huffed.

“Well first of all, I'm glad you like what you see. But second, who says you get to be on top?” She gave him an impertinent wink and turned to get her coat out of the closet.

“Not helping,” Fleet groaned. “I hope you dismissed our babysitters outside so they don't get a look at my rampant hard-on.”

“Mmm. Rampant,” she returned, donning her jacket and zipping it up. “For me?” She eyed the front of his pants and he

felt an answering throb in his dick before she took pity and looked away. “Too bad we can’t use it. But don’t worry. Our security detail is gone for the night, so there’ll be no show.”

“Small favors,” Fleet grumbled. “Let’s go. Maybe the cold air will make things...subside.”

She simply grinned, heading for the door first to hold it wide for him. “Do you think you can fit through?” she asked cheekily.

“Keep it up, Talia,” he groaned.

“Isn’t that my line?” she returned, once again besting him.

He growled mock-fiercely this time. “Sassy. Move that fine ass before I decide to paddle it.”

“Promises, promises,” she sent back, but luckily walked away.

Smart girl.

* * *

THE TIMING WAS PERFECT. The two dumb cops at the door had been dismissed, and now the woman had emerged from her fortress with the asshole following behind her like some drooling dog. Was it ideal that there were two of them to deal with? It wasn’t part of the plan, for sure. But was it doable? *Yeah.*

Weaponing up earlier; two knives, one Glock 23 with an Omega K suppressor, and a pocket of zip-ties made up the ready arsenal, along with a syringe filled with more of that ever-handy rocuronium. The girl would feel that, first; incapacitated, but in a small enough dose that her muscles wouldn’t work but her eyes would stay open. She’d witness every minute of her boyfriend being carved up into little pieces. Then she’d die, because it wouldn’t do to leave any witnesses. And if her tastes ran to men like Eggers, better to kill her off now before she decided to procreate with another of his ilk.

* * *

“YOU SURE YOU want to go to the dam again?” Talia asked. “I mean, I know it’s beautiful, but that’s where you went yesterday.”

“Right. When all I could think about was how many feet I was allowed to walk, and how a certain someone would kill me if I overstepped.”

“And today?”

“Today, that ball-buster is with me, and understands that my surgeon has given me leave to do as much as I feel fit to accomplish. That means, walking to the damn, having a nice long look around, then strolling back.”

“You’re easy to please today.”

“Being stuck in a house, bored, will do that to a person.”

“Does that mean it wasn’t you who reorganized my kitchen?”

Ah, she’d seen that, had she?

“As much as I’d like to take credit, it was Pixie all the way.”

“I figured,” she chuckled. “My sister has become a real neatnik.” Her expression sobered. “I think it’s her way of keeping things in her life under control.”

“Probably. But look at the step she’s taking today. Maybe someday soon it will be you cleaning *her* cupboards.”

“I can only hope...” Talia stumbled a bit, then stooped to pick up a pretty rock from the side of the road. As she arose, her eyes blazed. “Uh, Fleet?”

“Yeah, Tallie?” Should he be worried at how tightly she was holding her lips?

“Don’t look behind us, but someone’s following.”

Fleet sucked in a breath. “How do you know?”

“I thought I heard a person’s footsteps keeping time with ours, so I bent to pick up that stone and took a glance back. And I’m right. It’s a big, hulking individual with a hoodie pulled down over their face.”

“ID? Is it either of your suspects?”

“They were both about the same size,” she huffed. “It could be that EMT, Brian, or your bruiser of a night nurse. But we have to figure it’s one of them.”

Either way, they were in serious trouble.

“So what do you want to do?” Fleet asked. He was worried, but didn’t let it show. He wasn’t trained to take on this situation, but Talia was. He needed to defer to her and follow whatever plan she came up with.

“We’re going to keep walking because I don’t want anyone in the neighborhood getting hurt if there’s gunfire. One stray bullet into any of these houses and someone could die.”

“I get it, but how are we *not* going to die once we get to the damn?”

Talia looked grim. “I’ll figure that out once I ascertain how our perp is going to approach us. I have to assume he or she is weaponed up; guns, maybe knives. Perhaps even more of the drug they shot into you. Let’s have them make the first move.”

“Talia, just in case anything happens...” God, Fleet hated talking like that, but he wanted her to hear what he’d already planned to say. “...I love you. Completely, with all my heart. I want to marry you someday and have children. But in the meantime, I want us to live together until you’re certain of me. You can move in with me, I can move in with you, or we can find a new place for the two of us to call our own.”

“Cripes. That’s a lot to throw at me Fleet while I’m attempting to save our necks, but I get it. The words are on my tongue as well, and I won’t stop them, either. I love *you*. And as far as I’m concerned, this is the beginning of us, not the end. We’ll make beautiful babies, and I don’t give a fuck where we live, as long as we’re together.”

As amazing as all that was in the face of danger, Talia also managed to send him an impish grin. “How’d I do?”

“You make my heart smile,” he said despite his trepidation, already scoring the lyrics she’d inadvertently put in his head. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

As if she didn’t have a care in the world, Talia laced her arm through Fleet’s and hugged tight to his side. “Okay. Reach over and unzip my jacket,” she whispered.

He knew it was so she could readily access her firearm, which was in a concealed shoulder-holster.

Hoping his hands didn’t shake, he stroked her cheek, then dropped his fingers to make it look like he was copping a feel, but instead slid her zipper down all the way.

“Nice job,” she turned and kissed the underside of his chin while darting her eyes behind them. “He’s moving closer,” she warned. “When I give the word, I’m going to let go of you. The minute that happens, I want you to hit the ground, flat. Got it?”

“I can’t do—”

“Yes, you can,” she interrupted. “And you will. If I’m worried about you, I can’t do my job.”

Dammit. This was worse than the trust falls he’d had to endure during some of the festivals he’d been forced to attend with his bands. Only this time, gritting his teeth wouldn’t be to keep him from scoffing, it would be for worry.

“Okay,” he finally agreed. “But if it looks like you need help, I’m stepping in.”

“Don’t,” she clipped. “You’re just recovering from surgery. We don’t need to set back your timeline.”

“Tallie, they’ll be no recovery if we’re dead.”

She paused for a moment, then nodded. “Point taken. But only intervene if I call for help. Got it?”

Fleet crossed his fingers where she couldn’t see them. “Got it.”

The nearer toward the water they traveled, the more Fleet became aware of the person moving up behind them. Clearly, whoever it was had scouted the area before, and knew just where to strike before they were completely clear of the tree line.

Fleet held his breath and heard...

A growl.

Felt...

A launch.

Talia abruptly pushed Fleet away and it took everything in him to drop to the ground as she had ordered. But from his vantage point, he made sure he had a clear view up under the hood of their assailant as he tackled Talia.

“It’s a male,” he yelled to her, then saw the flash of a cylinder with a needle as the man pulled it from his pocket, sending a plethora of zip-ties flying. “He’s got a syringe,” Fleet roared.

Talia, ever aware and trained beyond anything Fleet could have possibly imagined, grabbed the man’s wrist in one hand and forced it backward until...

The lethal injection—if that’s what it was—dropped to the dirt and luckily rolled Fleet’s way.

Without hesitation, he grabbed it up and lobbed it toward the water, only letting out a breath when he saw he’d hit his target. One weapon down.

He turned back to the struggle, seeing that Talia looked to have the upper hand. She’d slapped the assailant’s nose up into his face with an open palm, which had caused a gush of blood that slowed him down but hadn’t stopped him. Still, he wailed, and Talia took advantage, going for the guy’s balls with her knee. He doubled in pain, but holy fuck... He pulled a gun from his pocket. Talia landed a two-hand chop to the back of his neck, not seeing the weapon as he managed to raise his firearm up, up, up. Right toward Talia’s gut...

“Gun,” Fleet screamed, rising to his knees against his woman’s orders.

He grabbed a rock, and wrapping his fingers around the familiar substance, swiftly sprung to his feet and threw it with all his might at the man’s head.

A direct hit, and the blow had the assailant reeling. But it still didn’t render him down and out as Fleet had wished. The man rose again to growl and re-aim. This time toward Fleet. But he didn’t care. He’d kept Talia from being shot, and if it was his last living memory on earth, he wouldn’t regret it.

As the man leered at him and mouthed the words, “die, you uppity asshole,” Fleet could almost see his trigger finger tightening. He braced for impact, but as if in slow motion, Talia did an amazing spin and kick, coming into direct contact with the shooter’s wrist.

Fleet heard a crack...then a report, and waited for the pain, but...it never came.

The large man went down under a flurry of hits and kicks as Talia’s fury took hold and she pummeled him to the dirt. She followed him down, unhesitatingly.

Once again, the intended weapon flew from the man’s hand and landed near Fleet, and he picked it up. He had no clue how to use it, but he hoped since it had just fired, there was no safety or anything he’d have to worry about to keep him from shooting. Because if the hulking man looked like he was getting the upper hand with Talia, Fleet sure as shit was going to fire on the bastard.

With one final scissor of Talia’s legs, she flipped the colossus to his stomach, then whipping off her belt, looped it around his neck and tugged hard until the man lost consciousness.

Fleet’s numbing fingers would have dropped the gun, but he had the clarity of mind to bend over and place it on the ground before he lost all feeling, figuring it might fire if it landed wrong. Then he managed to make his feet shuffle to where his intrepid woman sat atop her quarry.

He was rattled, but she looked like it was all in a day's work.

"I'm going to stay here and make sure he remains knocked out," she told Fleet conversationally, then sent her eyes to the scattered zip-ties. "Do me a favor? Pick up a couple of those and secure him, will you?"

That, Fleet could do. Unlike the gun, he used those suckers all the time to bundle wires. He'd handle it, *if* his digits would stop shaking.

Once he'd managed to accomplish what Talia wanted, lashing the man's hands and feet together with a number more than the two it should have taken to do the trick, Talia rolled off the still comatose victim and took a deep breath.

"Hmph," she grunted. "You didn't stay put."

"I know, but—"

"Thank you. I'm glad. He might have gotten to me without your intervention."

"Wow." Fleet was still jittery but he wouldn't let this moment pass. "Is that my tough-cop girlfriend saying I was a good little helper?"

"Asshole," she chuckled. "But, yes. However," she cautioned, "if you so much as breathe word of it to any of the guys, I'll deny the hell out of it."

"My lips," Fleet responded, "are sealed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Talia tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep. Today had been a close one, and it weighed on her mind.

How many times had she been part of a stand-off or a take-down in her career, and performed coolly and professionally? She couldn't even count.

But today? Today had been about Fleet's safety, and she'd known the minute the prick had turned up behind them that she was the only thing standing between him and death, and it had rattled her.

That she'd performed as she was supposed to was small comfort, knowing she'd made several mistakes as her confidence faltered, but damn... What a teammate Fleet had been. He'd picked up her slack and they'd won the day.

When she'd put out the call to her department once the perp was secured, and her fellow officers had shown up, the congratulations were all hers, but later, when Mason brought in her squad to help debrief the situation, Talia made sure her man got all the kudos he deserved.

His stalker/abductor was indeed none other than Brian, the nasty EMT who had come to the mountain when Fleet had suffered his aneurysm. Apparently, he'd once been an officer on a small police force well north of Old Town, but had been fired when it was found he was part of a white-supremacist group.

Somehow, he'd managed to slip through the cracks when he'd applied for a job riding shotgun on an ambulance as an

EMT, and unluckily for them, Fleet and Talia's relationship had been shoved right in his face. Which had set him off.

Now the man was facing multiple charges, and it was pretty well established they'd never have to worry about the racist jerk again.

Mason and her chief in Old Town, as a precaution, were widening their investigation to make sure Brian had been working on his own, but right now all signs pointed to him acting solo; his brain going rogue. That meant no more looking over their shoulders, no more security details, and no more stress on Fleet that would hold back his recovery.

She knew from a few things Fleet still let slip, that he continued being nervous about dating a white woman, but he also readily admitted he couldn't deny the love that had blossomed between them.

"Can't sleep?" Fleet asked from the other side of her bed.

Pixie was no longer in the next room. Having enjoyed her date immensely, she'd come home only to hear about the attack on Talia and Fleet. In lieu of that trauma, she'd chosen to have Doug drive her home over Talia's protests that she was still very welcome. But the astute Pixie had known Talia needed to be alone with Fleet.

Indeed, with a spare bedroom, Talia hadn't relegated Fleet back to guest status. She needed him close.

"Just rehashing the day," she sighed.

"It all turned out," he offered, and she felt him roll to his side to face her. She canted her head his way, and could make out his broad, bare chest in the moonlight, knowing he only wore boxers beneath the sheets. It was a provocative thought; one that was frustrating as hell since they couldn't act on it.

"It was a close one, though," she admitted, attempting to ignore his luscious body. "I was so worried for you."

"And I was determined that *you* not get hurt," he countered. "So between the two of us...mostly you, we ended up thwarting the bad guy and now everything's good."

She turned to her side so she could better see his face. “We’ve run into an awful lot of shit since we started seeing each other,” she huffed and enumerated. “My misunderstanding over your reluctance to date me, your emergency on the mountain and subsequent surgery. Then you went missing, and because of that were forced to stay here with me...”

“Not forced, sweetheart. I came willingly. If I hadn’t wanted to, you would have seen a lot more fight.”

Talia snorted. “You’re saying you orchestrated your kidnapping so you could end up in my bed?”

He grinned. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Too far away,” she grouched, sending a questing hand toward him. She didn’t have to ask twice. Fleet slid toward her, closing the gap between them to send an arm across her middle, and one bare leg over her thighs. She felt the crisp hairs against her skin and wiggled happily.

“Better?” he asked.

Talia purred. “Much.” And she wanted more, but she needed to ignore her libido. They were having a semi-serious discussion here. “I just wonder...”

Had that huff come out of her mouth?

“Spill it,” Fleet demanded.

“...if we hadn’t had all those troubles nipping at our heels, would we still have gotten together?”

“Absolutely,” he answered without a second’s hesitation. “I might have kept my head up my ass a little longer, but there was no way I could stay away from you. And Everlee—”

“Everlee was working us on both ends,” Talia supplied laughingly. “She was not-so-subtly urging us both on, and wasn’t about to take no for an answer.”

“Exactly. So we would have succumbed, just maybe not so fast.”

Talia cuddled up to Fleet's hard chest, inhaling his fresh scent while he continued.

He began again, this time a little hesitantly. "Uh, Tallie? What I asked you while that asshole was following us? It wasn't said in the heat of the moment. I'd already made up my mind to broach the subject on our walk."

"You mean about loving you, or living together?" she asked.

"Both. And I hope you meant what you said. That you love me back, and it doesn't matter where we settle down as long as we're together."

"Welllll..." she prevaricated purposely.

Fleet groaned. "Don't tell me. You were just placating me."

She gave him a playful punch, not interested in keeping him in suspense. "No. I meant every word. There's no backing out now. I am completely, head over heels in love."

"I am, too," he reiterated, clearly relishing the newness of it.

"But...on the living arrangements," she attempted. "If it's okay, I prefer we live here. Can you stand that? Not bunking down over your studio?"

"I love your house, and would be honored to move in," he stated sincerely. "Maybe, eventually we can add a small studio off the back, but in the meantime, I think we should keep both places," he amended judiciously. "That way we can take advantage of Orono *and* Old Town. We'll make this our primary country residence, but if we want the big city lights..."

Talia knew he was teasing. There was no "big city" about Orono. But she got it. There, they would have access to great restaurants, and the ongoing college-town night life; it was something they'd miss if they gave up his place altogether. Still, she could discern he had an ulterior motive, calling him out on it.

“And when you want to work late, you’ll be able to stumble upstairs at an ungodly hour and crash. Am I right?”

“Busted,” he said without any contrition. “Hopefully with my woman warm and waiting if I give her enough notice.”

“Hah. Warm and sleeping, more likely,” she snickered. “Remember, I’ll still be keeping vastly different hours than you.”

Because of the nightlife Fleet’s bands enjoyed, Fleet didn’t open his doors until ten in the morning, which had him closing around seven P.M. Then there were times he followed certain performers to their venues to record them live. Those were extremely late nights. She sighed. With her seven-to-three shift, it was going to take a little juggling for them to spend time together.

She had an idea.

“You work a lot of weekends, right?” Talia inquired.

“I do,” he admitted.

“What days are you slowest?”

He didn’t even stop to think. “Mondays and Tuesdays.”

She nodded in the dark. “Great. I’m going to see if I can switch my days off. Instead of Saturday and Sunday, I’m going to aim to match my schedule to yours,” she told him. Talia assumed it wouldn’t be hard. A lot of her colleagues coveted a Monday through Friday schedule. She’d easily find someone to switch, pending the chief’s okay.

“You’d do that for me?” Fleet’s heart beat steadily under her palm.

“Since you’ve pretty much said you’ll live here, then, duh. Aren’t relationships all about give and take?”

“I think so,” he chuckled. “I haven’t been in one in so long, I forget.”

“You haven’t forgotten anything else, have you?” Her voice got smoky, and she knew it was meant to goad Fleet, but he *was* half-naked, laying here wrapped around her...

“Not a chance. Looking at your gorgeous body brings everything right back to every one of my fingertips.”

To prove his point, he took those fingers and ran them over the peaks that strained beneath the cami she'd worn to bed, stopping to tweak one hard nipple on his journey.

Talia moaned. “Damn, that feels good.”

“Take your shirt off,” Fleet gruffed.

“Are you sure?” Talia felt guilty. He'd already gotten her off once without finding his own satisfaction, but he was under strict orders not to have orgasms. Was it unfair of her to enjoy another when his were forbidden?

“Seeing you come apart under my hands and my tongue is reward enough.” He'd read her doubts, and shut them down.

Talia slipped out from under his leg, stood up, and shed her panties and her shirt until she was standing before Fleet, completely naked in the moonlight.

“I've never seen anything more beautiful,” he breathed. “Cup your breasts for me.”

Ah, so he was a visual man. That was good to know, because Talia wasn't shy. She could put on a show for him.

Hefting her needy flesh, she threw her head back and moaned for his benefit, tweaking her own nipples. She heard the bedclothes shuffle.

“Damn,” Fleet hissed. “Get back down here. I have to taste.”

Talia decided to make him wait while she continued teasing. “Taste what, exactly?” she asked, purposely making her voice breathless while she ran a hand slowly down her body toward her bare pussy. She spread her nether lips, then ran one languid circle around her clit before bringing her questing finger back to her mouth to suck on it. Once it was good and wet, she sent it down and dipped in again, moaning when the slickness of her digit glided easily over her silken flesh.

“Talia,” Fleet growled.

She played for another few seconds, but whatever Fleet had in mind, she knew it would definitely be better than her own finger. She moved toward the bed until her thighs bumped the mattress, then lifted first one knee, then the other to the sheet. She kept her legs spread while she eased forward toward her man, and he immediately took over.

Grabbing hold of one thigh, he drew it up and over him until Talia was straddling his face.

She heard him sigh. “Now there’s the sweetest view I’ve had in a while,” he groaned. He lifted his head and licked her long and hard, forcing her down onto his mouth at the same time.

“I’ll smother you,” she rasped hesitantly.

“No better way to die,” he assured her, his words vibrating on her sensitive sex.

Talia couldn’t have pulled back at that point if she tried. Her brain disengaged and her pussy took over. His lips formed a wide seal over her flesh and he sucked in while plunging his tongue deeply.

She keened, and then his hands rose and zeroed in on her nipples, playing them like she imagined he manipulated the dials on his soundboards; with fervor, assuredness, and expertise.

Talia wasn’t going to last long. How he knew exactly what she wanted when previously she’d had to spend hours attempting to school casual partners without any success, was a mystery. But maybe it was all about the man beneath her. Maybe love made the experience so much better; so hard to resist...

Talia felt her climax rising, unabashedly taking everything Fleet had to give. She rode his face to heaven, coming harder than she ever had in her life. Her knees shook with the force of her orgasm, and if not for Fleet’s steady support of her breasts, where his hands splayed widely, she would have toppled right over.

The aftershocks seemed to go on forever, but Fleet was patient. He didn't move her away. He didn't rush her in any way, but continued to softly lick at her folds until she felt like her body was once again within reach of earth, and she lifted her flesh from his mouth.

"How did you do that?" she breathed.

"Do what?" he asked, smoothing his hands down her sides to land on her flanks. She could see the extremely satisfied look on his face.

"Make me come so hard, so fast?"

"That's an easy one," he rasped. "When you love your job, you give it your all, and the rewards are infinite."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Fleet had just come home from the surgeon, and he was pumped. Four weeks from the operating table, and his dry spell was about to end. He'd had incredible fun over the past month, learning Talia's body and playing it like a virtuoso, but there was no doubt his cock felt neglected. And today? He'd been given a clean bill of health. Even though his six weeks weren't up, his surgeon had told him he was good to go. She'd assured him that his overall strong constitution and the way he'd judiciously followed her rules to the T since his surgery had hastened his recovery.

Talia, of course, knew none of this. He'd been driving to and from work on his own for the last five days, and had kept this follow-up appointment from her, knowing how much she worried. Right now, she thought he was doing another truncated day at the office, and would meet her back at the house sometime around five. Even his parents, who were visiting once again and had just this morning ensconced themselves in his apartment, weren't privy to the advent of his newfound freedom.

He looked at his watch. Three o'clock on the nose. Talia would just be getting off shift, so he had only minutes to prepare. Once she saw his car in the driveway, she'd probably assume he wasn't feeling well and burst in to find out what was wrong. But she'd quickly find out he wasn't ailing from anything other than a painful case of blue-balls.

Now, the balance of his well-being was up to her. Only Talia could make sure his recovery was one-hundred percent.

Leaving her a trail of clothing that was unmistakable, Fleet stripped down to his boxers, then left them draped over her bedroom doorknob before closing the portal behind him. He was already so hard his balls ached, drawn as tightly as they were to his body. But not for long. He was so close to emptying them...so freaking close.

Yanking the covers off the bed, he laid down on his back, his cock waving skyward like a semaphore flag, unmistakably signaling its intent. There was no secret code here that Talia had to decipher.

He fidgeted, looking at his watch rapaciously until finally he heard the front door open. Then...nothing.

He cupped an ear. As far as he could tell, there had been no forward movement from his girl and it confused the shit out of him. What the hell? He wanted to groan. Why wasn't she heading to him quickly, eager to jump his bones, heading straight for the storm that was brewing? He'd made his intent pretty damned clear, hadn't he?

Fleet watched the door carefully, straining to hear something. Anything. And just when he was about to call it quits and see why she hadn't come to him, the bedroom door crashed open.

Holy shit.

Fleet wasn't going to last more than five seconds.

Talia's hair lay wild and loose to her shoulders, clearly having been yanked out of its customary work-bun. Her uniform shirt was open, revealing she'd already lost her bra. There were no pants on his woman at all, no panties, and no shoes. But she'd repositioned her leather belt so it lay low on her naked hips, her holster empty but reminding him how lethal she could be.

So fucking turned on, he acknowledged silently. *Mouth-wateringly, heart-poundingly turned on*. And by the smug look on her face, Talia knew it.

"I take it you've been cleared for something?" she queried, and he could hear the gruffness in her voice that belied her

cocky approach.

“Uh, huh,” he replied, unable to find more words than that.

“Blow job first?” She raised a brow. “Or right to fucking.”

“Fucking, please,” he managed.

Eventually he'd love having her hot cavity of a mouth on him, but right now his heat-seeking missile was craving a different kind of warmth.

Talia strode right to the bed, then hesitated.

His heart leapt to his throat. “What?” he asked.

“Can you...” She rolled her eyes and grumbled. “Is it okay if you're on top?”

Fleet instantly understood. Talia had pretty much been in charge of every sexual experience they'd had so far, and she wanted to see what he had in him.

“Gladly.” He rose to his feet, and with his erection pointing the way, moved forward and wrapped her in his strong embrace, relishing the flesh-to-flesh contact that was finally real. He placed his hands on her bare bottom and lifted until her legs wrapped around his hips and his cock rubbed up against her now open pussy.

Without missing a beat, he spun them about and lowered them both to the bed, probing, probing, probing until... *Ahh*. He slid into place like a ship going to port.

He worked his cock slowly forward until it was fully settled.

“You okay?” he asked, managing to find his voice again.

“Mmm. More than okay,” she answered, her face rapt.

Fleet gritted his teeth. “Do you mind if I...finish fast? It's been a long time.”

“You do you,” Talia moaned as he slid in and out tentatively, trying to keep his toes from curling. “I'm damned close, myself.”

Fleet tried to think of anything other than how good his dick felt, but when he ducked to capture one nipple between his teeth, her hiss of excitement had him speeding up, which increased the friction quotient, which in turn sent all his remaining blood rushing to his self-serving cock. Frantically, he sent a hand questing, and grabbed onto her belt, tugging at the leather to bring Talia as close as possible while he continued to strike like lightning.

She arched.

He grunted.

And...

It was all over. His balls emptied in a tsunami of epic proportions, over and over and...

Shit! No condom.

He was brought back from the promised land with a jolt.

Fleet groaned.

“What?” Talia asked, her tone tight. Clearly, she was still reaching for her peak despite his speedy ejaculation.

Fleet sighed. The damage was done. The least he could do was bring her to completion.

“Nothing,” he assured her while loosening his grip on her belt and targeting the little hot button that would send her over the edge. It was the right thing to do as her eyes became vacant again, and she ground up into him as he kept up a very wet cadence with his dick inside her pussy.

When she finally grabbed hold of him with her interior muscles, he swore he came a little, again. But what a joy, watching Talia’s face scrunch up then flush with *her* completion.

Her body went limp beneath his, and he gave her a few minutes of bliss before he delivered the bad news.

“I’m, uh, sorry to say this, but in my haste, I forgot a condom.”

She cracked an eyelid.

“You telling me you’ve been banging something skanky?” she snorted. “I could have sworn you’ve been on bed rest.”

Somehow Fleet chuckled. “Nothing skanky, and I know I’m clean, but—”

“Are you questioning my pussy’s purity, then?” she asked, somewhat acerbically.

“No. No. Not at all,” he assured her. “It’s just that... We might have gotten you pregnant.”

She huffed, then smiled. “Not much chance of that, big boy, when I’m on the pill. Besides, I thought you wanted to give your parents grandchildren?” She blinked up at him cheekily.

Fleet sighed his relief and rolled off her. “I do. But I’d also like to spend this first year being stingy; keeping you to myself.”

She grunted her satisfaction. “It’s a plan, then. I stay on the pill, and you try not to have any more ‘holy shit’ moments, post-coitus. Got it?”

Phtt. Nothing got by Talia. He might have *thought* he’d hidden his little panic attack, but...? Not even close.

“Not even *good* holy shit moments?” he asked cheekily, now that he was back on solid ground.

She tilted her head up and gave him a heady smack on the lips. “We will be having lots and lots of those,” she guaranteed him. “Just not right now.”

“Why not?” he pouted, more than ready to go again.

“Because I invited your parents over for supper, and if they see the trail of textile-crumbs you left for me outside this bedroom, they may be scarred for life.”

Fleet wasn’t thrilled about the timing, but he loved that his parents were in town again. He’d been prodding them to explore real estate and move north permanently, and they’d set up a few house appointments the following day.

It looked like they might be getting serious about relocating.

* * *

THERE WOULD BE NO SCARRING.

Once Talia had told him of the impending visit, Fleet had leaped up, snagged a warm facecloth from the bathroom to wash them both off, then slipped on his sweats. He'd retrieved all his and her clothing from the living room to stash away in the laundry, after which he'd looked around to see that the place was sex-train-free.

"What are we making?" he finally called out, opening the fridge after having heard Talia get out of the shower.

"Chicken parm," she yelled back. "I defrosted the chicken overnight, and we'll make a separate vegetarian version for you."

Ahh. Here was something he could help with. He made a stellar sauce.

* * *

FOUR HOURS LATER, with food eaten and a lively round of whist played, Fleet's mother Lodine clearly couldn't hold it in any longer. "Are you two living together now? Your apartment looks more sparse than usual."

Talia grinned and deferred to him.

"We are, Mother," he revealed. "We've decided that this place suits us both. Although I'm keeping the apartment above my studio in case I have late nights and feel the need to crash. Also...if you want to pack up and leave Huntsville *before* you find a place, we can put your big stuff in storage and you can stay there."

He'd had this plan in his mind for weeks, and he wondered how his parents would respond.

“I think we’ll take it slowly.” Jim Eggers was not to be pushed. “We want to make sure we find our perfect retirement home.”

“Which you can do better, if you’re local,” Fleet sent back gently.

“If something new comes on the market, it’s better if you can jump on it right away,” Talia added.

Lodine laughed. “Are you two sure about this?” she asked them.

“So sure,” he responded without a second’s thought. “We want everyone we love here, together.” He took a deep breath and bit the bullet Talia had been urging him to take between his teeth. “We’ll even go down to Huntsville and help you pack.”

Damn. That was a hard sentence to say. Fleet hadn’t been back since he’d been railroaded out of town sixteen years previous. But he knew, with Talia’s strong backbone propping him up, that he’d survive the ordeal.

“Really?” His father’s brows couldn’t have raised higher if they’d been helium-filled.

Fleet eyed Talia who gave him an encouraging nod and a satisfied grin.

“Really,” he stated succinctly. “How does three weeks from now, sound?” Talia had already told him she’d asked for time off that Sunday and Wednesday, surrounding her new regular down days.

“Jim?” Lodine looked so hopeful that Fleet chuckled to himself. There was no way his father could possibly deny her.

“Yeah. Well. Okay,” he grumbled, but only half-heartedly. “We already made up our mind to move. What’s a few months, one way or another.”

“Yes!” Talia got up, then leaned down to hug his parents one by one. The three had formed quite a bond during the time they’d been here previously, helping Fleet recuperate, and he

could see that connection growing even tighter in the future.
He couldn't be happier...

If he could make it through his return to Huntsville.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Flying into Huntsville and looking out his window at the now unfamiliar city, Fleet wasn't sure what he felt. Trepidation? Numbness? Memories threatened to flood his brain, but he thrust them aside. He wasn't the same man he was when he'd left, and he had a partner by his side who wouldn't let him forget who he now was. He also knew if any ass needed to be kicked, she'd be first in line to do it.

"It's going to be fine," Talia assured him.

After they'd buckled up to land, she'd laid a hand over his on the armrest. "We'll help your parents do some packing, we'll walk your old neighborhood, we'll go out to eat a few times, then we'll come home. End of story."

"Yeah. I know," Fleet grouched. "It's just... All my memories are playing havoc inside my head. I missed being here, at the same time I hated it." There was no mistaking some of the great times he'd had as a kid, playing football and being a popular figure in school. But all that had been overshadowed when he'd lost his girlfriend and his social standing all in one swoop; basically cast out of town.

He couldn't help but wonder who was around to remember him fondly, and who might still linger in the shadows, determined to bring those long-ago, trumped-up charges into the present.

"I'll kick anyone's ass who gets in your face," Talia told him, fiercely.

Fleet chuckled and gave her a wry smile. “How is it you always know what I’m thinking?”

“Magic powers,” she quipped. “That, and it’s written all over your posture. Now relax. I’ll handle anything sensitive that comes up.”

Fleet rolled his eyes. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Just remember, if you kill anybody, they’ll lock you away and everyone will gloat that my love life is cursed.”

“No killing, sweetheart,” she assured him. “Maybe a little anonymous hurt, but there’s no way I’m getting thrown in the clinker. I need to spend the next fifty or sixty years protecting your ass, up close and personal.”

“And why do I like the sound of that so much?” Fleet leaned over and kissed her fervently. He hoped everything went as planned, but had a feeling there might be a few surprises for him at home. His gut said so, and how many times had he been told by the intrepid Everlee to never ignore his gut?

* * *

THEY DISEMBARKED with the rest of the passengers, then went to the carousel to pick up their luggage. After snagging their bags, they made their way to the car-rental desk. His parents had said they’d gladly come to the airport to pick them up, of course, but Fleet had wanted his own wheels so he could come and go as he pleased.

“Sweet,” Talia exclaimed as they eventually perused the lot and found the car they’d been assigned. Fleet hadn’t paid much attention to the make and model, having requested a mid-sized sedan. When he got a look at the sporty red rocket-ship that awaited them, he groaned.

“Seriously? I was looking for low profile.”

“Suck it up,” Talia told him excitedly. “If you don’t want to drive it, I will.”

“Right. What were you saying about jail? All we need is for you to get picked up doing ninety, and we’re toast.”

“Worrywart,” Talia teased. “But damn, Fleet, with you behind the wheel, anybody observing will wonder why a granny has such hot wheels.”

Fleet loved this teasing side of Talia. It took his mind off his worries, and kept him grounded.

They loaded their luggage into the trunk, and without consulting the GPS, they were on their way. Fleet remembered the directions to his old neighborhood without electronic help, and pointed out landmarks to Talia on the way. They were only five minutes from his childhood home when he passed a police car tucked onto a sides-street. Inexplicably, it pulled out behind them and turned on the blues.

“Fuck,” Fleet swore. “Are you kidding me? What did I do?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Talia attempted to calm him. “Don’t jump to any conclusions. We’ll see what they want.”

Fleet engaged his turn signal and eased over to the curb, the cop inching up right behind him.

Lowering his head with a groan, he banged it on the wheel before reaching into the glove compartment for the car’s registration. He also quickly extracted his license from his wallet, so he wouldn’t be reaching for anything when the cop finally approached.

“Welcome home to me,” Fleet snarled sarcastically under his breath as he rolled down his window and waited.

“It’ll be fine,” Talia told him. “You haven’t done a thing wrong.”

Clearly, his woman still didn’t understand what it meant to be black; getting pulled over for the smallest of reasons, only to be harassed and provoked. Of course, now maybe it was he who was showing prejudice; creating cop stereotypes, when he knew full well there were so many good officers out there. Case in point, *all* his non-recording friends in Orono—not to mention the love of his life—wore badges. If someone had

told him fifteen years ago he'd be hobnobbing with cops, he'd have laughed in their face.

Turning a mild—and what he hoped was calm—smile to the man in blue who approached, Fleet already proffered his paperwork a few inches out the window. “Good afternoon, officer,” he intoned mildly.

“Good afternoon,” the man answered back, reaching for Fleet’s information. “Do you know why I stopped you?”

Fleet wanted so badly to throw out something sarcastic, but he bit his tongue. “I have no idea, sir,” he responded politely.

“I understand this is a rental, but the registration decal on the plate is expired.” He unfolded the registration papers Fleet had provided, and... “Ah. Here it is,” the cop snorted. “They renewed, but somebody at the agency forgot to put the sticker on your plate.”

Fleet let his shoulders relax just slightly. The officer didn’t seem combative.

“Let’s just put this on. Then I’ll write the rental company a citation, and you can be on your way.”

Now Fleet let out a relieved sigh. “That sounds good. You want me to do it?”

“No problem. I’m already here. It’ll only take me a minute.”

The officer went to the back of the car and squatted, affixing the proper decal.

“See?” Talia said almost smugly. “Not only was he a professional, he’s also a nice guy.”

Fleet didn’t want to say that once upon a time, something like this would have been an anomaly in the city of his birth, but he knew he’d simply end up sounding bitter, so he agreed.

“Yup. A nice guy.”

“Don’t smile so widely,” Talia goaded. “Your face might crack.” She took another look at him and relented. “Fleet

honey, I know this place gives you the skeeves, but try to keep an open mind, yes? It's been sixteen years since you've been here. A lot can happen in that amount of time."

Fleet didn't want to disagree, and Talia might just be right. He'd try to be more receptive to the idea that things could have changed for the better.

"All set," the officer told him, approaching again to hand back Fleet's credentials along with a ticket for the rental agency. "I see you're from Maine." He bent down and tipped his hat at Talia. "Are you here for business or pleasure," he asked.

Here we go, thought Fleet. Pulled over for a minor infraction, then grilled for any nefarious intent.

Fleet answered through stiff lips. "I actually grew up here," he said. "We're helping my parents pack so they can move to Maine near us."

"Wow. They're going to miss the mild winters here," the cop replied conversationally. He shook his head. "I don't think I'd be able to brave all that snow."

Oddly, Fleet couldn't see the conversation taking any dire turns, so he responded spontaneously. "It's not so bad. And the skiing is a real plus."

"You can have it," the officer countered. "Between that, the moose and the bears..."

Talia leaned over and chimed in. "Don't start on bears," she teased. "Wasn't I just reading about them becoming more prevalent here, even in the city?"

"Yeah. We've had a few calls. But I tell you what. The next one we catch, I'll ship it up to you."

Talia laughed easily. "Nah. Just keep it. We have plenty."

The man actually gave them a jaunty salute and chuckled. "It was nice to meet you two. Enjoy your stay," he told them, and walked away.

"Shit. Did that just happen?" Fleet questioned the interaction.

“It did. And hah!” Talia returned. “You see? Not all cops suck.”

“Fine. First point to you. But don’t gloat too hard. I’m sure your bubble will be burst before too long.”

“Cynic,” she teased.

“Idealist,” Fleet countered with cheekiness, but he couldn’t help feeling a little more upbeat. He’d had his first run-in with Huntsville’s finest, and it had gone well.

Five minutes later, he pulled up to the house in the historic district where he’d spent so many years. His mother emerged from the good-sized bungalow style home, his father on her heels.

“Fleet! Talia!” she exclaimed excitedly. “It’s so good to see you.”

Talia exited the car and was engulfed in a huge hug while Fleet rounded the car and waited his turn. “It’s only been three weeks, Mom,” he laughed.

“Three very long weeks. But I think you’ll be pleased. We’ve gotten a lot done during that time, in preparation for our move.”

Fleet hugged his parents one by one, and secretly rolled his eyes. He knew exactly what kind of pack-rats they were. Not hoarders. Not at all. But they loved their knick-knacks and collections, and he’d be surprised if they’d dismantled a damned thing.

“Well let’s see,” he responded amusedly. “We’ll give Talia the tour and you can show us your progress.”

As he thought, not a thing had changed. Oh, they had some boxes stacked in one corner, having packed what looked like a few books, and maybe some of his father’s tools, but every shelf was still full; every doily still in place.

They certainly had their work cut out for them in the next few days.

* * *

HALF AN HOUR LATER, he and Talia were ensconced in his old bedroom, which his mother said she'd turned into a guest room, but it still retained at least half of what Fleet had left behind. Some old trophies, a favorite childhood stuffed animal, and... a picture of him and Bitsy on the dresser.

“Is this your childhood sweetheart?” Talia asked, going right to the frame, not hesitating to pick it up.

“Yeah,” he answered, somewhat uncomfortably. “That’s me and Bitsy.”

Odd. Saying her name didn’t cause the pain it used to. He put that down to being head-over-heels in love with Talia.

“She’s pretty,” Talia continued. “Do you...” She hummed a little under her breath. “Do you think you should find out where she is and talk to her while we’re here?”

The thought had occurred to Fleet, but hearing it from Talia’s mouth made it seem like something he should do more than simply consider.

“I might, but I don’t even know if she’s still around,” he answered lamely. Now that he was here, the possibility of seeing Bitsy was a possibility.

“We can always ask your parents if they know.” Talia looked a little smug. Like she knew something he didn’t.

“Okay. Spill,” he said, moving forward to place his hands on her waist, tugging her into his body.

“What?” she asked, attempting to seem innocent.

“Don’t ‘what’, me, Talia Spires,” he countered, leaning down and nipping her ear. “I can tell when something’s afoot.”

She sighed prettily, turning so he could get better access to all the little places on her neck that he knew drove her crazy.

“Mmm. I might have discussed a few things with your mother previous to our trip.”

Fleet raised a palm as he nibbled, laying it over Talia's breast to feel her nipple turn to a sharp point from his attention. He honed in and gave it an encouraging pinch.

"What kind of discussion?" he ordered.

Talia sighed happily again. "If you're trying for torture, Fleet, you're going about it all wrong. Keep doing what you're doing, and I might never answer your questions."

Fleet couldn't have backed off if he wanted to. He'd never get enough of touching Talia.

"Just spill it," he whispered into the shell of her ear, expelling a stream of warm air into her whorls as he worked her perky nub.

"Okay. Fine," she agreed languidly. "Your ex owns and runs a restaurant in the city, and your parents have reconnected with her in the past year. Bitsy knows you're coming, and wants to see you."

"Geeze." Fleet pulled back, not sure how he felt about that. It wasn't as if his parents had gone behind his back to find Bitsy, but they could have told him they'd been in touch. "If I say no, I'll be an asshole, won't I?" he asked.

"Not an asshole," Talia assured him with a sigh now that she wasn't receiving his attention. "But it might be good for some closure, don't you think?"

"I think the people who love me are terrible busy-bodies," he groused. "But yes. It might be a good idea." He relented. "We can go to dinner at Bitsy's restaurant."

"Great," Talia said with a brilliant smile. "We have reservations in an hour."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Fleet wasn't exactly sure how he'd been railroaded into this, but he couldn't say he wasn't curious...and a little excited. What did Bitsy look like these days? Was she married? Did she have children? How had she come to own and operate a restaurant?

His parents refused to answer any of his questions, saying that Bitsy knew he was coming, and had agreed to join them when they arrived. Most of all, Fleet couldn't wait to introduce Bitsy to Talia; to let his old flame know he was more than okay with his life, and had not only moved on from the debacle of their senior year, but had fallen in love.

Wasn't it the Roman poet, Virgil who said "love conquers all"? The man had been damned astute. If this had been a year ago, Fleet never would have been ready to face any of his past, Bitsy included. But with Talia at his side and his heart full, he felt almost invincible.

Pulling open the door to La Casa Verde, Fleet let his parents precede him, but Talia stuck by his side, looping her arm through his determinedly.

"You can do this," she whispered in his ear.

"Only because of you," he countered softly, his butterflies settling even more. "I'm good."

"I know you are," she returned sincerely.

And then he spotted her.

Bitsy. The only other female he'd ever loved. His smile blossomed, but all he felt now was a special warmth when he regarded her. Happily, he knew then that he was about to put the past where it belonged; in the past.

"Fleet!" Bitsy cried from across the room, and sped toward him. When she got within a few feet, she abruptly stopped, searching his face for...acceptance?

"Hi, Bitsy," he said easily, and Talia moved aside so he could open his arms to his old flame.

She came to him readily.

"Damn," she huffed. "It's so good to see you." She fell into his arms and he could feel a couple sobs wrack her still tiny frame. "Rats. I told myself I wasn't going to cry."

He felt his own eyes tear up a bit, as he gently patted her back. "Well, it *has* been a long time." Over her shoulder, he noted a handsome, mocha-skinned male watching them closely from behind the bar.

"I'm so glad you came," she told him, pulling back to wipe her face on a towel she had tucked into her belt. She turned purposely to Talia. "And this must be your girlfriend," she stated with a smile, holding out her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

Talia took the gesture and grinned. "It's nice to finally meet you, as well. I've certainly heard a lot about you."

Bitsy grimaced. "Me, or the circumstances surrounding our epic breakup?"

Fleet appreciated that Bitsy wasn't going to dance around the past.

"Both," Talia answered. "And for the record, nobody blames you."

A huge sigh emanated from between Bitsy's lips. "That's what Ed told me you'd say."

"Who's Ed?" Fleet asked, already knowing it was the man with an upward quirk to his mouth, watching Bitsy's every move.

“He’s my husband,” Bitsy replied almost giddily, drawing them into the dining room and toward the bar. “Come. Come. I’ll introduce you to Eduardo.”

Fleet blinked. So she *had* gotten married, and to a man—if Fleet wasn’t mistaken—who’s skin was anything but pale.

Bitsy confirmed his suspicions.

“Eduardo’s from Mexico originally. I met him at culinary school in Southern California. We fell in love, and eventually decided to come back here to open a restaurant.”

“That’s wonderful, Bitsy,” Fleet answered sincerely. “It sounds like you have everything you ever wanted.”

“Hah,” she responded almost giddily. “You haven’t even seen pictures of our two little ones yet. Our world now revolves around them.”

Wow. Bitsy had kids. Fleet was feeling a little overwhelmed as well as joyful.

“But I’m getting ahead of myself,” Bitsy told them all as she brought the group to the bar. “Eduardo,” she easily caught his attention which had never really strayed. “This is my old boyfriend, Fleet, his girlfriend Talia, and you’ve already met Mr. and Mrs. Eggers.”

Eduardo acknowledged Fleet’s parents with a smile, then leaned across the bar, extending his hand first to Talia, then to Fleet, whose palm he clasped for a heartbeat longer than he’d had Talia’s. “I’ve certainly heard a lot about you. And I hope that what Bitsy has to impart to you today will put any demons you still have, to rest.”

It was an interesting statement, but one Fleet didn’t have time to question as the bar became busy, and Ed had to go back to work.

“It was nice meeting you,” Fleet said honestly. He could tell that Ed was a very nice, genuine guy.

“Let’s grab our table,” Bitsy stated, and when she turned to lead them in the right direction, he noted that there was a liberal sprinkling of gray in her blonde hair. He wondered if it

was hereditary, or if running a restaurant and having children had fomented the change. Whichever it was, it looked good on his friend.

* * *

AFTER BEING SEATED, small talk was made, and orders were placed with suggestions having been taken from Bitsy. Fleet had no doubt that whatever was delivered to the table would be delicious.

When a silence of sorts finally descended, Bitsy cleared her throat.

“So, I know you probably have lots of questions for me, like I have for you, Fleet, but let me start by saying I’m extremely happy with my life, and I’m overjoyed that you’ve finally found someone, who if I’m not mistaken, means an awful lot to you.”

Fleet felt no need to play coy or say otherwise. He loved Talia, hands down. And there was a box in his pocket to prove it; one he wasn’t sure he’d have her open tonight, but he’d brought it along, just in case.

“I’m madly in love with her,” Fleet chuckled. “Anyone watching us can see that.”

“You mean because you’ve barely taken your eyes off her since you walked in the door?” Bitsy teased.

“Hey. Now you’re just embarrassing me,” Talia decried. “How about instead of getting all mushy, we slay a few old dragons? I’ll get the ball rolling since I have a feeling Fleet might shuffle around things for a while.” She sent her gaze directly to Bitsy’s. “How is it that you’re in Huntsville with a man whose ethnicity might be a problem to two, asshole cop-cousins I’ve heard so much about?”

Yup. Leave it to Talia. She went straight to the point, clearly wanting all the crap out of the way so nobody would suffer heartburn over food.

Bitsy didn’t seem to mind the direct approach, at all.

“I’ll tell that story,” she agreed. “And I’ll start by saying that when Fleet was framed by my cousins, I was devastated. My parents drew a hard line at that juncture, telling me in no uncertain terms that I was never to see Fleet again. My life felt like it had been turned upside down and inside out. I couldn’t understand any of it. Then when Fleet was eventually acquitted of all charges, Mom and Dad still refused to back down and let me renew our relationship. I became disgusted with their edicts, and barely spoke to them for the rest of senior year.” She turned to Fleet. “I, like you, took the first opportunity I had to leave town after graduation. I was accepted at a highly accredited culinary institute in California, and I left, never looking back.”

“Good for you,” Fleet praised. He could say that now, because she’d obviously parlayed her grief into very good things.

She snorted. “I was actually ready to settle down there, but my parents kept begging me to come back, with me denying and denying it, feeling...conflicted, until I heard about Duke.”

“Who’s Duke?” Talia asked.

“He was one of my cousins who made Fleet’s life a misery.”

“Was?” Fleet picked up on that past tense.

“Yeah. Was. Duke’s dead,” Bitsy confirmed.

Fleet couldn’t feel an ounce of sorrow.

Bitsy explained. “It looks like you weren’t the only one he was trying to frame. He was a bigoted piece of shit, and he kept doing what he’d done to you to a bunch of other people; planting false evidence and giving false testimony against those who he hated because of their skin color or sexual orientation. But he pissed off one too many people.”

“Who did him in?” Talia asked, avidly paying attention.

“Nobody’s certain.” Bitsy shrugged. “His brake-lines were deliberately cut one rainy night. And as he was headed home from a local bar he frequented, he went off the road, slammed into a tree, and was killed instantly.”

Was it wrong that Fleet gave an internal fist-pump? Who gave a fuck. It couldn't have happened to a better individual.

“And that spurred you to come home?” Fleet’s mother asked, obviously not having heard the story before.

“That, and the fact that after a long inquiry, Beau was kicked off the police force for his part in everything, shortly thereafter.”

Fleet growled. Beau was the second, asshole-cousin who’d been involved with engineering Fleet’s arrest.

Bitsy continued. “By that time, I’d met Eduardo, and told my parents in no uncertain terms that if they wanted a relationship with me; with their future grandchildren, they needed to put their own narrow minds to rest and accept the man I’d fallen for. It wasn’t a slam-dunk, but they eventually came around. Now, they think my hubby hangs the moon and stars, and they dote on our children.”

Fleet felt joy, vindication, knowing things had turned out so well for Bitsy. But didn’t she still have to contend with Beau at family functions?

“So how does your immediate family deal with Beau when you have to see him?” Fleet asked. “Or have you all just written him off?”

Fleet didn’t expect the blast of laughter that emerged from Bitsy.

“Do tell,” Talia prompted with a grin. “This has to be good.”

“Well,” Bitsy responded, snickering. “Beau’s wife left him when he was kicked off the force, and took his two kids with her. He had to prove competence to have partial custody, so he went to work for one of the two big car factories in town, starting at the bottom rung. He had to swallow a lot of pride.” She shook her head wonderingly. “Eight or ten years passed, then one day his oldest son, Dawson, brought home a black girl from college. He said he was going to marry her. Beau knew it was either swallow his stupid pride or accept that he’d be cut out of his son’s life forever. He chose the high road.

Now it's almost beyond belief to see him spoiling his two, dark-skinned grandchildren to pieces. It brings a smile to my face every time I see them together."

"Geeze," Fleet hissed. "I...never would have figured." For sure, Duke had been the bigger of the douchebags, but Beau hadn't been exactly innocent.

"Not that we have the best relationship," Bitsy cautioned. "He's never apologized to me for what he did. But he treats my kids like gold, and I think that's his quiet way of trying to make amends."

"Speaking of kids, can we see pictures?" Talia prompted. And she was right to change the subject. It was time to leave the past behind, and celebrate every good thing that had come into all their lives.

"Oh, you don't know what you've just asked," Bitsy quipped.

They spent the next hour, eating great food and passing Bitsy's phone around looking at her photos. To say that there were thousands would have been an understatement, but it made Fleet's heart sing.

Bitsy had gone on to enjoy a very sunny post-apocalypse, and so had Fleet, he had to admit, even before Talia came on the scene. But now, he had it all within his grasp. He wanted everything.

Without a moment's hesitation, Fleet pushed back his chair, grabbed the back of Talia's and turned it toward him. He dropped to one knee, and fiddled in his pocket, coming up with the box he'd brought with him to Alabama.

When color suffused Talia's face, and her hands fluttered nervously, he grinned and nodded his head.

"Yup. This is exactly what you think." He presented the little velvet box with no additional fanfare. "Talia Spires, you are the light of my life and the woman of my dreams. I love you with every ounce of my being. Would you... Could you possibly do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

One huge tear plopped down on Talia's heaving chest, a short sob escaping. But she beamed past all that, and held out her fingers, wiggling them gently.

He placed the box reverently into her hand, then helped her open it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, seeing the fiery opal he'd chosen.

Once he'd seen the stone, he couldn't have picked another—or a diamond—if he tried. The opal reminded Fleet of Talia. Calm and beautiful at rest, but a presence that could ignite into a conflagration when exposed to any catalyst.

"This is you, my love. Glowing, spirited... You've flamed your way into my life and changed me forever. So what do you say?"

She still hadn't answered, but held out her left hand, which he took as a positive sign. Still, he wanted her words. "Is it a yes, Talia?" he asked.

She nodded, putting a hand over her mouth before fanning herself. "Don't make me talk," she whined. "Just put it on my finger."

It was all the answer Fleet needed as he seated the ring.

And the restaurant burst into applause.

Downeast SWAT

Mason

Talia

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LJ Vickery began writing when the muses in her antique farmhouse refused to let her sleep. She found great joy and success in creating historical fiction, but then the gods in her Immortal series demanded to be heard. Heeding their pleas, she gave each of them a voice, a safe haven in the Blue Hills of Massachusetts, and of course, true love. Hot, hard bodied Mesopotamian gods and a contemporary United States make for a potent mix, and LJ hopes you enjoy reading the Immortal's stories as much as she has writing them.

When LJ's not scribbling away, she's practicing Chinese medicine, keeping books for a contracting firm, and growing organic vegetables.

She lives in a charming, seacoast town south of Boston with her husband, two children, a dog, two cats, and one intrepid fish...who refuses to let the fish-tank be retired.

<http://www.ljvickery.com>

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New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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