

A man in military gear, including a helmet and goggles, is shown in profile, looking to the right. He is holding a rifle. The background is dark and smoky. The text is overlaid in a bold, yellow-green font.

THE RENEGADES 4

TANGO

DOWN

CARA DEE

# TANGO DOWN

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THE RENEGADES

BOOK 4

CARA DEE

*Tango Down*

*The Renegades #4*

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# CLOCK'S TICKING FOR THE RENEGADES

*Romantic Suspense | Action | Hurt/Comfort*

*(The series should be read in order)*

Book 1: [Rogue Launch](#) | Elliott & Joel

Book 2: [Enemy Combatant](#) | Crew & Adrien

Book 3: [On the Double](#) | River & Reese & Shay

Book 4: [Tango Down](#) | Joel & Elliott

# CHAPTER 1

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“Are you a coaster?”*

*I grinned and eyed her in the rearview. “I think you mean Coastie. I’m in the Coast Guard.”*

*“Huh.” She twirled a piece of hair around her finger and looked out the window. “I’m pretty sure Gammie said coaster.”*

*I shook my head to myself. I guess I was a coaster.*

---

**A** slew of curses rushed through my earpiece, and judging by the anger from River and Reese, the man with a bag over his head currently being escorted to the center of the amphitheater was their Shay.

Reese growled under his breath. “I’m gonna kill all of them.”

“We will.” Greer spoke in a low, threatening tone.

I inhaled deeply and adjusted my scope, keeping Shay in my sights. I was about...fifty-six yards away from him.

“Everyone in position?” Emerson asked.

“JH confirmed,” I reported, like the rest did.

All of us were standing some forty yards apart, in the thicket between the entertainment area and the outer wall. Only Danny was hiding out somewhere on the other side of the stage, and he confirmed his position too.

Two men pulled the bag from Shay’s head and uncuffed him, followed by harsh spotlights suddenly flooding the stage.

Knowing that not everyone had eyes on the guy—considering the marble stands blocked the view on the sides—I inspected the kid and gave a brief report. “Minor visible wounds, some bruises, gaze focused, he’s alert.” Dirty-blond hair, pale, tatted-up, muscles tense.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and rain was just what we needed to really turn the Blanco estate into a muddy slip ’n slide. We were all covered in sweat, humidity, and grime as it was.

“Crew is on the second platform.” That was Elliott.

I clenched my jaw and shifted my scope to scan the surroundings. The bottom patio hosted primarily women and children. The second one—there. I saw Crew too. He was standing close to the balustrade, stare fixed on Shay. The men seated at the grand table behind Crew were in the process of standing up. Dinner was over. Time for the big fight.

Who could Mercier be? Cullen had shown me a photo of Crew, ’cause I couldn’t remember the kid from Elliott’s barbecue, but I had no idea what Adrien Mercier looked like.

“Where’s the Fed?” Thankfully, Greer had the same question.

“Tall guy right behind Crew, talking to the bald man in a blue suit,” Danny responded.

Okay, noted.

“Anyone got eyes on Marco?” I asked quietly. Because he was my target. He knew where my daughter was.

I kept seeing her face... Her wavy hair, her silvery-blue eyes lit up with mischief...



The light of my life.

I heard her too. Crying out for me, begging me to save her. Each sob was a knife to my heart, and the echoes of her agony distorted the images of her cute-as-fuck, happy expression. Wiping away the grins and replacing them with pain and fear.

“He might be on the third patio—I don’t see him,” Reese replied.

Fuck. We were on the damn ground; we couldn’t see that high up.

I blew out a breath and rolled my shoulders. We were running on too little sleep, and the general discomfort was fucking with my concentration. All I heard was the cacophony from the guests and the constant splats of waterdrops hitting leaves. Rainforests were never quiet.

Shay had been joined by more men, one of whom was speaking to the crowd.

*Welcome to tonight’s entertainment!*

*You got a preview last night. Everyone excited?*

Goddamn monsters.

They were done murdering. From now on, they served as my target practice.

Enzo and Marco Blanco were off-limits because of the intel they sat on, but that was it. The rest were going down. Not counting women and children, of course.

“I think that’s Enzo,” River reported. “The man walking up onstage now.”

I catalogued the old man’s features. He walked with a slight limp, not from an injury but possibly a bad hip. He looked to be around seventy. He soaked up the applause he received and spoke to their guests about the “American boy.”

Then the motherfucker announced another “warm-up,” and he fucking asked for volunteers. That sick son of a bitch. From what I’d heard, Shay didn’t lose. Enzo was sending young, inexperienced punks to a certain death.

“Motherfucker,” Reese whispered. “We need to—”

“Don’t even.” Danny cut in. “There’re too many children around, man.”

I checked my watch quickly. It was past midnight. According to Crew, most of the younger children were usually escorted to the village of villas past the entertainment area right around now. But that was more a guess than data. Crew and Mercier had been here twenty-four hours longer than us. We just didn’t have enough to go on.

Four young men took the stage, ready to challenge Shay in the warm-up, and everyone applauded.

Enzo Blanco left the stage, and I followed him through my scope until he disappeared up on the third patio.

“Suspected Enzo is on the third patio,” I said.

“Crew and Mercier still on second,” Elliott added. “Get ready, everyone. Emerson?”

“Joel will take the first shot,” Emerson responded. “Does anyone have eyes on the third platform? That’s where the family is, according to Crew.”

“Zero,” I answered. The others filled in with their own negatives. “Second-best option the middle patio?” I asked. “I don’t know who they are, but they look more important than the rest—”

“River, duck low—you have a sicario heading toward you,” Reese ordered.

“Wilco,” River replied.

Emerson spoke again. “Middle patio, it is. Once Danny gives you the signal, start taking out guards. We want the higher-ups unprotected. River and Coach, you take out guards around the theater and cover Danny—”

“Fight’s starting.” Reese rushed out the words, and our attention returned to Shay and the center platform.

As the first of the four guys volunteering to fight Shay stepped forward, I looked behind me quickly to make sure I

didn't have anyone coming toward me. Greer and Cullen were somewhere in the thicket, keeping watch, but they were about to take off. Emerson had Greer on two frequencies, ours and another that he shared with Cullen and Mathis. They were on C-4 duty.

"I'm gonna need therapy after this." There was only dread in Reese's voice. "May Shay forgive us—"

"Don't fucking go there, buddy," Elliott said firmly.

I swallowed hard and watched Shay completely own the other guy. Shay was a technical fighter, fast as hell, and ruthless. When he dragged the semi-conscious cartel guy closer to the edge of the stage and literally punched the teeth out of him, I peered up into the stands, past the first patio—*there*. I could see Enzo now that he was standing so close to the edge of the third patio. I hoped it really was him.

I tensed up. "Danny, get ready," I said quietly. "I think Enzo's gonna sic the rest of the guys on Shay at once."

River and Reese cursed.

For almost twenty years, I'd studied human reactions through a scope to predict their next move. The slightest twitch of an eye or a flick of their fingers could carry the message of a death sentence. We spoke more with body language than actual words.

Enzo wasn't as amused as he pretended to be.

Neither was the audience. Children were crying. Women horrified, men angry.

Shay looked up toward Enzo as well, all while he was ready to crush his opponent's skull against the marble floor.

Enzo gave the go-ahead, and two things happened at once. Shay slammed the guy's head into the marble, and the other three young men started moving toward Shay.

"Any second now," Danny said. "Remember, boys, don't leave the gun and take the cannoli. No evidence left behind."

"I'll tell Willow to initiate a blackout as soon as you have Shay," Emerson stated.

I eased my finger over the trigger.

Women in despair were scurrying off with the youngest children. The fuck had they expected? What was worse—most stayed. Boys and girls around my daughter's age scooted closer to their parents but kept staring.

Shay moved on to fight the other three.

*Slow and steady breaths.*

I shifted my focus up to the second patio and found one guard who stood out. He was on edge and heavily armed, unlike the civilian sicarios who moseyed around with their AK-47s. Fingers crossed this guy's job was to protect someone important.

"Okay, almost half the women and children are gone," Danny muttered. "We can't wait any longer. Joel, you're up."

*Gladly.*

I zeroed in on the man's forehead and gently squeezed the trigger, and the shot that cracked through the air like thunder ended all the "entertainment." Danny confirmed he was off, so did Greer, the theater erupted in chaos, I aimed at another guard and fired, orders were shouted in Spanish, guards lifted their rifles and pointed them at the sky, solidifying our guess from before. Their main threat was the Colombian government, and the only attack they'd made official plans for came from above.

*"Cover Shay and Danny! Cover Shay and Danny!"*

*"Alarm's sounding at the command center—their top priority will be to get the Blancos to safety."*

I had to listen on one ear and tune the rest out. I peered through the scope and shot every guard I spotted in the head, and they dropped like flies.

*"It's me, kid. Let's get you out of here. Where are we on the fucking blackout? Who has eyes on Enzo and Luca?"*

*"Coach is trying to get up there."*

*"Moving out!"*

The other guys kept speaking rapidly, and it felt like I missed every other word, but I couldn't focus on the chatter at the same time as I tried to take down as many guards as possible. Something about Mercier, something about Cullen, something about Danny. Where was Elliott? Emerson was reporting back from Willow, counting down till the blackout, and it only took seconds. Then everything went dark. The patios, the theater, the paths—except those with torches.

I sucked in a much-needed breath and switched to night vision.

I had two rounds left when I finally spotted Elliott hauling himself over the balustrade on the second-level patio. I automatically left my position, because he had guards all over the place trying to locate the enemy, and if I had to use my handgun, I needed to be closer.

“Sight for sore eyes, baby—stay with me.” At the sound of Reese’s voice, and the words he spoke, I allowed a pinch of relief. He’d been reunited with Shay. “Cullen, Greer, move toward the villas! Mercier went after Luca, Crew’s grabbing the woman—goddammit! Joel, Elliott needs—

“I’m on it,” I grunted, jumping over a cluster of ferns.

“Got it,” Reese replied. “Jesus Christ.”

“Cullen can’t hear you,” Emerson reminded. “They’re past the villas now. Willow has another mission for them.”

“We really need more missions?” Coach snapped.

I aimed at a guard who’d tensed up at the sight of Elliott, and I shot him before he could do something stupid. If someone was going to shoot Elliott, it was me.

“We have sicarios approaching from the outside,” Emerson reported, the urgency clear in his voice. “Everyone’s been called back to protect the Family.”

For a moment, everybody was talking at once, and it wasn’t like we were sharing mindless chatter about the goddamn weather. Each report had to be heard when it was a matter of life and death, and we were fucking surrounded.

I hauled myself up to the first patio, then swiftly jumped up to the second, where Elliott was killing off the last few men.

“Joel, I’m gonna move you over to the other frequency,” Emerson told me. “What caliber is your rifle?”

*“Cover Reese and Danny! They’re crossing the theater right now.”*

*“On it!”*

“Fifty,” I replied. Like a flip of a switch, I went from hearing everyone to hearing just two men cursing and shouting.

And Emerson. “Good. Can you make a fifteen-hundred-yard shot?”

“No problem. Where do you need me to go?” Because by the sound of things, shit was urgent.

“As high up as you can—you see a domed ceiling south of the main estate? It’s their weapons cache. Blow it to kingdom come. Cullen and Greer have rigged the whole building, but you gotta move right now. They’re facing heavy resistance.”

I sprinted up the steps to the third and last patio, seeing nobody around me, and I heard Elliott behind me, asking what the fuck I was doing. *Can’t talk right now*—actually, I could. I heaved a breath and told Elliott to send everyone to the main estate. Greer and Cullen needed backup ASAP.

“How big is the target?” I hurried over to the edge that faced the main estate, and I jumped up on the balustrade.

“Can you see the door?”

“Confirmed,” I replied. I had to slow down my breathing. Deep, deep breaths. Inhale...exhale... Fanciest weapons cache I’d ever seen. The building was shaped more like a chapel. I saw the door, though, and I saw the C-4 mounted to it. “I see the C-4.”

“Fire at will. Greer, Cullen, get the fuck down—Joel’s about to blow up the building.”

---

*Greer Finlay*

“Roger,” I growled, attaching a new mag to my gun. I fired two quick rounds, and the motherfucker finally dropped. “Cullen, move out!”

“I’m fuckin’ tryin’!” he yelled.

I hurriedly wiped sweat out of my eyes and closed the distance between us. Holy fuck, we were out of time. Everyone was headed this way, including women and children fleeing the scene over by the patios. This wasn’t a place for close combat. We were surrounded by buildings, with the grand mansion some hundred feet behind us. Command center, arms storage, garages, smaller villas—all connected by a grid of stone paths. And everything was pitch-black because of Willow cutting the power.

I fired at the two men trying to overthrow Cullen, and one of them fell dead at his feet. The other screamed in pain ten feet away.

*Now* we could run.

“Rocket launchers secure—we’re moving out,” I panted.

We darted between two buildings—and then we threw ourselves on the ground as an ear-deafening blast went off, sending a pressure wave right past us.

My heart pounded furiously, and I saw my family—the images of them, flashing before my eyes. Archie’s beautiful smile and arresting eyes, Sloan, Corey, our kids, everything that was *home*. My li’l Corey, rambling about frogs, Sloan’s wry amusement and kind grins... I groaned and rolled onto my side, pain shooting up my leg and chest.

I was too old for rough landings.

Cullen cursed, and then he fired at something. Or someone.

I adjusted my monocular so I could see clearly in the dark, and I grunted as I forced myself to sit up.

“Emerson, connect us to the other frequency again,” I said hoarsely. “We need everyone here.”

“Right away,” he replied. “You two all right, mate?”

Eh.

I lifted my gun and fired at another militia-trained guard.

---

### *Elliott Jones*

Joel and I ran as fast as we could toward the main estate—the very spot we’d been trying to avoid. We’d wanted to keep the fight near the patios, where the Blanco Family was farther away from a helicopter rescue.

At least two of Luca’s sons were dead. Mercier had taken care of them while pursuing Luca, who’d fucking vanished. We didn’t know where he was. Or Marco or Enzo.

“We gotta consider them having tunnels,” I panted.

Danny was just as breathless, wherever he was. “That’s what I’m dreading. Reese and I are almost at the estate.”

“Greer, Cullen, and Mathis are back on this frequency,” Emerson reported. “The Blancos’ weapons cache has been destroyed, but not before the Finlays stole three rocket launchers. They’re not using the helipads anytime soon.”

“Fucking A,” Danny replied.

“Where’s Mathis?” I asked.

The man himself answered. “Heading to the main entrance with one of the rocket launchers...”

All right, I was a fan of Willow’s extra mission.

Joel suddenly stopped in front of me, and I almost crashed into him.

*Goddammit!*



He lifted his handgun and fired at someone between two villas. To no surprise, the man collapsed instantly.

“Testing, testing!” Hot fucking damn, that was Crew’s voice. A rush of relief swept through me, and I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. “Coach found us and gave us earpieces and guns. How the fuck are you old guys?”

I let out a breathless laugh and scrubbed a hand over my face.

“Boy, I’m gonna wring your fuckin’ neck for worrying me!” That was Cullen responding.

So I didn’t have to.

Crew cursed. “Can we deal with this later, Dad?”

I smiled, and Joel and I took off in a run again. We were halfway there, running along the edge of the area with all the villas. Here and there, we heard children crying and women screaming for protection. If they received a response, it was only to hide. We’d killed too many of the guards for them to put focus on anyone other than core Blancos. The actual family. Luca, Enzo, Marco, their spouses, kids, and grandkids.

Over the next couple of minutes, our guys spoke over one another, and we decided to regroup near the side building that was closest to the kitchen in the main estate. That was where Reese, Danny, and Joel had hidden earlier.

In the meantime...

Greer and Cullen used the rocket launchers to destroy two helicopters, and Reese and Danny were next to arrive on the scene, so they shot up the remaining helicopter on the roof, until the engine caught on fire.

“Switching to units, guys,” Emerson stated. “Targets are the same—all remaining Blanco affiliates, except for Enzo and Marco. Mercier, Crew, Cullen, and Greer—you’re going after Luca. Mercier, you’ll be in charge. Willow’s changing your frequency now. Only the unit leader will hear what’s going on on the main line.”

“Understood,” a man answered. Presumably Mercier.

“Elliott, you’ll be in charge of the second unit,” Emerson continued. “You’ll run with Joel, River, and Shay.”

“Roger,” I replied.

“Danny, you’re with Reese and Coach in the third unit, and you’ll have Mathis in the background,” Emerson finished. “Try to find the remaining Blanco brothers and prevent anyone from leaving the property. You have roughly one hour, and then James and Griffin will be there to pick you up. Copy.”

Everyone confirmed, and soon I had Mercier and Danny in one ear, and Joel, River, and Shay in the other. Only, Shay didn’t have an earpiece, and I had a feeling we were going to protect him from engaging in any more fighting. But you never knew. Shay didn’t strike me as a guy who backed down.

“Joel and I are approximately two minutes away,” I said, barely able to speak at this point.

We let the burning helicopters guide us.

---

### *Greer Finlay*

“Before they can get closer,” I said, pulling the pin from the grenade. Then I threw it at the doors to the big garage, and half the structure exploded.

I hauled in a breath, smelling smoke and destruction mixing with wet jungle, and let the adrenaline course through me as Cullen and I ran for the next hideout between two smaller buildings. The others had been talking about tunnels and secret escape routes, and the way my brother and I figured, it was best to blow up every entrance where such an escape was possible.

“Danny and Reese coming through between garage and command center,” Mercier reported.

“Garage bay is torched,” I replied. “Go behind. Handful of guards trying to push through with women and children.”

I plastered myself to a house wall and grabbed my rifle once more. With so many civilians crowding this section of the property, we couldn't shoot willy-nilly anymore.

“What's your ETA, Mercier and Crew?” I asked, peering through the scope. Four guards—they were standing near the blown-up entrance of the garage, useless, just shouting in Spanish, running out of options. They wore uniforms and were more heavily armed than the regular hit men we'd encountered earlier. I counted seven sobbing women and their six, seven, eight, nine young children. Bare feet, mud over their fancy threads. “No more shooting around the garage—I'll get the guards. The rest are just women and children.”

“Roger that. Crew and I will be there in sixty seconds,” Mercier answered.

I took a steadying breath and let it out slowly, finding my focus in the scope. A shot to the forehead caused another guard to drop, and I got the remaining three before the group scattered.

I cursed. “Women and children spreading out around the garage—proceed with caution.”

Mercier reported back to the others.

“Fuck,” I heard Crew gasp. “Is everythin' on fuckin' fire?”

“We're workin' on it,” Cullen grunted, body checking a door till it opened. I covered him while he peered inside. “Supply storage. Clear.” He told Mercier and Crew to meet up with us in there, and we ducked inside to recharge and catch our breath.

“Third unit entering main estate through the back,” Mercier reported back. “Second unit's status, Elliott?” There was a pause before Mercier spoke again. “Understood. Second unit will search through villas.”

I flicked on my headlight and dimmed it low, not wanting to readjust to the darkness again in mere minutes—

The door opened, and Cullen and I immediately lifted our weapons, only to lower them again when we recognized Crew's form.

Thank fuck—we'd been worried sick.

Crew stepped into the poor light, and Cullen was there a beat later to crush his boy in a hug.

“This is *not* a rescue op,” Crew was quick to say, patting his old man on the back. “I need you to say it with me, Dad. You're not rescuing me.”

I cracked a smirk. Attaboy. And he was right. We were here as backup. Which he'd sorely needed before all these PMCs had crawled out of the Hillcroft gutters.

“Just shut up and hug me properly,” Cullen replied gruffly.

I gave Crew a pointed look, and he sighed and complied. He was thawing out. I understood him 100%; he wanted to be strong and independent, and he fucking was. He was better than he gave himself credit for most of the time, but when Cullen and I'd heard Crew was heading to Colombia with just one other man...?

It was finally my turn to get a hug, and I squeezed him tightly. “Good to see you, kid.”

“You too, Unc. Don't worry, I'll keep youse safe out there.”

I laughed and clapped him on the back, just hard enough for him to protest.

I knew my nephew. Now wasn't the time for a heart-to-heart. We'd get to that later.

He sucked his teeth and righted his suit, and I was sure he was uncomfortable as fuck. He was a grunt like his old man and me. He preferred combat gear.

To no one's surprise, Cullen removed his helmet and placed it on Crew's head. “Don't argue with me, son.”

Crew didn't argue. He let Cullen fuss a little bit before he smiled awkwardly and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “So this is my boyfriend. We haven't gone on our first date yet, unless we count jumping out of an airplane and—”

“And we don’t count that, sweetheart.” Mercier stepped forward and extended a hand to Cullen.

Shitty timing for introductions of this...nature, and nobody had patience for pleasantries when we heard explosions and gunfire going off around us. But here we were.

Cullen shook Mercier’s hand and side-eyed Crew. “Isn’t he like my age?”

Crew snorted. “You wish. He’s old, but you’re decrepit.”

I smiled and shook Mercier’s hand next, and his sigh didn’t go unnoticed. “Welcome to the family. I’m Greer, Crew’s favorite uncle.”

Crew lifted his eyebrows. “I mean... Roe—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I told him. “I’m your favorite.”

He smirked. “You are.”

Damn right.

Mercier smiled politely at the exchange. “I will do my utmost to collect brownie points later, but I’m afraid we have to get going. Danny’s team is leading the way inside the main estate, and I don’t think we’ll find anyone of importance in there. I want to go back to Marco’s villa and search it again. I must’ve missed something last time.”

Then let’s go. I was with him. We were dealing with senior citizens; they couldn’t have made it all the way back here before Cullen and me—or Danny and Reese, for that matter.

## CHAPTER 2

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“How much do you love me?”*

*Oh, I wasn't falling for that again. I swooped her up and blew a raspberry on her stomach to the sound of her squealed giggles, and then I sprinted down to the water's edge.*

*The sun was about to set over the horizon, but I didn't have to go back to base just yet.*

*“Oh my gosh, no! No, Daddy!” she laughed. “We just got out of the water!”*

*“Well, last time you asked me that question, it cost me three scoops of ice cream, and you barely finished one. So I think I need to toss you in. Maybe you'll think twice before you try to shake me down.”*

*“But I only want a popsicle!” She was laughing so hard she could barely breathe.*

*“Oh.” I came to an abrupt stop, knee-deep into the water.*

*“Why didn't you just say so? Let's go get a popsicle. I definitely love you that much.”*

*Her giggles came out all wheezy, and she clung to me. “You're a dork, Daddy.”*

---

I came to a screeching halt and immediately lowered my rifle at the sight of three young boys and presumably their mother hiding in the bathtub, crying and shaking like leaves. I muttered that they should stay there before I closed the door to the bathroom again. Fuck me. We were the enemy to these people.

*I just want my little girl back.*

I ran into Elliott as he left the bedroom across the hall.

“All clear,” he said, out of breath. “You?”

“One woman, three kids under ten.” I ran back downstairs, and we declared this villa empty of Blanco associates.

River and Shay waited for us outside.

Elliott reported back to the others. The incessant sound from the comms had messed up my concentration so much that I’d turned mine off for the moment.

“Repeat that, Mercier?” Elliott turned his back to us and peered around the corner of the villa we’d just searched. “Roger. We’ll meet you there.” He angled back to us. “Crew found a tunnel in Marco’s basement. We gotta go. Villa number twelve—”

“River can’t run any longer,” Shay said quickly. “You two go—we’ll join up with Reese and Danny.”

I dropped my gaze to River’s leg. Aw, fuck. That was the work of razor wire. He was cut up pretty badly. And the fact that he wasn’t arguing with Shay meant River knew it too. No high-speed chase for him.

Elliott adjusted his earpiece. “Emerson, connect River to Danny’s frequency. Joel and I will join Mercier. They found a tunnel. Out.”

“Get that looked at.” I gave River’s shoulder a brief squeeze, and then we had to go.

Elliott and I sprinted down the narrow path toward villa number twelve, the whole area seemingly abandoned. But as we'd discovered, many were hiding inside the houses. We'd taken down six guards and encountered countless women and children.

Marco's villa was much bigger than the others, and we followed Mercier's instructions and ran through the hallway, into the kitchen, where we hurried down the steps to a wine cellar. Rows upon rows of wine.

Damn, it was cold down here.

It turned out to be much more than a wine cellar, though.

"Over here." Elliott snuck between two rows of dusty shelves, packed with bottles that were probably more than my rent. Crew and Mercier must've moved the old barrel by the wall to find the opening. Another five or six steps down, and then we were in a tunnel.

We switched on our headlights.

"They started running about a minute ago," he said.

Then we had some catching up to do.

The cold blast from the wine cellar was long gone, replaced by humid, stuffy air that tasted like wet cement. It was completely dark down here too, and we couldn't see far up ahead for all the turns we had to take. Which led me to believe they'd built the tunnel *after* the villas were in place topside. Otherwise, they could have blown up the rock foundation when building the tunnel, as most did. Building a tunnel this close to the surface once they had houses and infrastructure to protect, however... They'd had to build around every boulder they came across.

"Do you think we really need Marco?" I asked, out of breath. "I want you to answer honestly as the strategic contractor you were, not the concerned uncle of Blake."

'Cause...as much as it pained me to admit, I'd acted like a fucking idiot in Mexico. Elliott had been right. I'd risked my life for nothing—because I'd acted on emotion.



“I don’t,” he panted. “I firmly believe Gajero’s on his way to meet up with Carillo, and we have eyes on that fucker twenty-four seven.”

That’s what I needed to hear. “Then we have no reason to spare Marco and Enzo, do we?”

He threw me a sideways frown. “You’re usually on the other side of this argument.”

“I don’t wanna kill Marco if he’s the only one who can lead us to Blake,” I confirmed. “But if you believe we’ll find Gajero where Carillo is, I’m willing to trust you.” And killing these cartel motherfuckers would save us a lot of time. Because regardless if they were old and couldn’t run very well, they’d been around long enough to withstand a quick interrogation. They weren’t going to sing like canaries right off the bat.

Hell, Luca was over ninety years old. He’d probably rather die than jeopardize the cartel.

Elliott didn’t respond right away; he was too worn out, breathing too heavily. But then he pointed ahead. “Go. You’re faster. End this.”

*End this.*

I nodded once, then picked up the pace, and I was flooded with determination.

We had to get the fuck out of here. We had to put Colombia and the Blancos behind us. We were already leaving one hell of a mess for someone to find, be it Colombian law enforcement or whoever was next in line for the throne. And I didn’t want that man to be the son of Luca. A higher-up would get the cartel reorganized too swiftly. They undoubtedly already had a protocol in place for that, and then all this would’ve been for nothing.

I ran for all I was worth, every muscle and joint protesting, my lungs burning for air, my head pounding, letting me know I hadn’t had nearly enough water. But the pain was nothing compared to hearing Blake’s pleas echoing in my skull. I had to get to her. I was wasting my fucking time in this country. If

Luiz Gajero was on his way to Europe, I had to get back there, preferably yesterday.

The tunnel straightened out far enough for me to see the flashes of light from the Finlays' lamps, and I pressed the button on my earpiece to get in touch with the unit again.

"Finlays, do you read me?" I panted. "It's Joel—I'm some hundred yards behind you."

"We read you," Crew responded. "We have a visual up ahead—or we did. There's a slight bend of the tunnel, but we're not too far away from our targets."

"About a klick," Greer grunted. "Fucking hell—"

"Yeah," Cullen panted. "You go ahead—I fucking can't. I'm only slowin' youse down."

I pushed past my own limits, reaching an insane high where I tasted blood and flew forward on a headrush that numbed every ache. I ran past Cullen, then Greer, and before long, Mercier too.

"Comin' up behind you, Crew," I said.

Twenty yards...fifteen...

He slowed down a little and looked at me over his shoulder. "Finally, someone who can keep up. Let's go."

We didn't need to go much farther, though. When the tunnel straightened out again, I saw our moving targets ahead of us. Breathing heavily, I put a hand on Crew's shoulder and halted him, and I slowed to a stop and lifted my rifle. Fuck. I was breathing too hard.

"Use my shoulder." Crew positioned himself in front of me.

"Perfect." I widened my stance to lose a few inches in height and rested my rifle on his shoulder, and I hurriedly removed my helmet, just so I could take off my protective beanie and press it to Crew's ear. "Hold here. Cover your ears as much as you can."

He looped an arm around the barrel of the rifle and complied.

I adjusted my sights and found four sources of light. I estimated they were seven hundred yards away from us. “Luca Blanco’s in a wheelchair, right?”

“Yeah.” He tried to remain as still as he could.

Luca was the easiest target, but a guard was blocking my view—or whoever it was pushing Luca’s chair.

*Exhale.*

*End this.*

“Breathe out,” I murmured.

He breathed out.

I squeezed the trigger, and the shot tore through the tunnel, causing my heart to jump and my eardrums to put me on a hit list.

“One down.” I waited till Crew stopped wincing, and I zeroed in on the man in the wheelchair.

I fired again, to the sound of my ringing ears, and I immediately aimed at the remaining two but shot them in their backs. Or maybe the ass for one of them.

“Let’s go.” It was possible I had to shout. I didn’t know. I couldn’t fucking hear anything, and I doubted Crew was in a better state. But we took off once more, and when I threw my rifle aside and grabbed a handgun, Crew grabbed his too.

I was actually glad to be rid of the damn rifle for a moment. I’d grab it later. It was an extra thirteen pounds unloaded—

Crew grabbed at me abruptly and fired his gun, and I could see his mouth moving.

“I can’t hear you!” I yelled.

Jesus Christ, I needed my ears to stop ringing.

I read from Crew’s lips that he uttered “What?” with a frustrated look on his face, so verbal communication was

clearly out. We exchanged a glance, acknowledging we were fucked in that department, and then we picked up the pace. Maybe he'd stopped me because he'd seen movement—since he'd fired right after. It didn't matter anymore. We ran over to the men, where Crew made quick work of kicking aside a couple handguns before he started digging through pockets and holsters for more weapons.

I wiped sweat off my face and squatted down in front of the man in the wheelchair. Still seated, with his chin touching his chest.

So this was the guy. This was the man who'd terrorized the world with his drug trafficking for decades. He didn't look like much now. Blood was oozing from his headshot wound, staining his tan-colored linen suit, along with sweat and jungle grime.

His eyes were still open.

Fingers knotted with arthritis, white hair combed over a bald spot, wrinkly face.

Crew waved to get my attention, and he gestured at one of the men on the concrete ground. The man was alive; I'd shot him in his lower back, so it was possible he didn't feel anything. Was that Marco, then? Because... I grabbed a fistful of hair on the third linen suit, and I lifted his head off the ground. Yeah, that was the man we suspected was named Enzo. He might be alive too, actually. Eyes closed, blood welling up from his back, painting his suit dark red, but I detected some minor movement.

Crew rose to his feet, and I followed his gaze. The others had caught up. Greer, Cullen, Mercier, and Elliott.

I looked away from Elliott.

Mercier joined Crew in inspecting the bodies, and I still couldn't hear a fucking thing over the ringing sound in my ears. Neither could Crew, judging by the way he cupped his ear and said "What?" again.

Mercier smiled slightly, pressed a kiss to Crew's temple, then squatted down between Marco and Enzo.

Was it over? Had we done it? Could we get out of here?

I looked up and caught an exchange between Mercier and Elliott, with Greer throwing in a few words too. Fuck if I knew what was said, though. I pulled out my earpiece and rubbed my ear vigorously, not that it changed anything. I'd been through this before. It might be a couple hours before my hearing returned.

Cullen ushered Crew in the direction we'd arrived, and Greer gave my shoulder a brief squeeze and nodded the same way.

All right.

I followed and swallowed dryly, thirsty and beyond exhausted.

When I looked back toward Mercier, it was just in time to see him put two bullets in Marco's and Enzo's heads.

That had to be a mindfuck and a half for the agent. He'd been working this case for four years.

I blew out a breath and hoped we were fucking done here. Our ride out should be here soon anyway. Emerson had given us one hour. I checked my watch and—someone grabbed my arm, halting my step.

Fuck. Elliott.

He showed me the screen of his phone, where he'd typed something.

***We have ten minutes to raid Marco's office. The Finlays and Mercier will run over to Enzo's villa. Then we're out of here.***

I nodded once.

Couldn't hurt to see if there was any information we could use.

---

Elliott handed back my helmet when we returned to Marco's villa. With our headlights leading the way, we found his office on the second floor, and we both aimed at the big desk by the window overlooking the grand estate in the distance.

We put on gloves to play it safe.

If I'd thought Vincente Blanco was extreme in how he displayed his wealth, Marco knocked that man out of the park. Stacks of money, primarily US dollars, and gold bars all over the place.

I lifted a brow when I noticed Elliott pocketing several ten-ounce gold bars.

He caught my expression and straightened to write something on his phone, and he showed it to me.

***You think my upgraded security system at the ranch will be cheap after this?***

My mouth twitched.

So this was what it was like living in the gray zone between good and evil.

One of those bars was worth approximately twenty grand. That was one hell of an upgrade.

He handed me a bar and gestured at the drawers, as if telling me to knock myself out. A moment later, he'd written another message for me.

***Take Blake and Piper on a vacation when all this is over.***

I...I could pocket a few findings, sure, no problem, but I had no plans on going away with my ex-wife. What the fuck? Spoiling Blake rotten for a while, however...

God, I had to see her again. My eyes smarted at the desperate desire to hear her giggles, to be part of her mischief...

I cleared my throat and opened the rest of the drawers, gathering all the documents I could carry. I didn't have the time or energy to go through any of it now, but we had a long flight to look forward to soon. And yeah, maybe I grabbed a

few gold bars and some cash too. Being in the Coast Guard didn't make anyone rich.

I suddenly understood how Elliott had afforded that nice ranch of his. Granted, the private sector paid better, but a ranch with an ocean view just north of Carlsbad? Come on. He'd bought my fucking dream home.

Having zero plans to ever go through something like this again, I grabbed a few more bars and declared myself done. Maybe I could give my mom a better headstone. I'd felt guilty as fuck for having to go with a cheaper option.

I swallowed and walked out, grabbing my handgun just in case.

---

Elliott and I met up with the others outside the main estate, and we weren't the only ones who'd gathered files and documents. Mercier had his arms full, and Crew arrived with four backpacks he'd found somewhere. We filled them with the evidence while River, Reese, Danny, and Elliott talked... about something. Crew seemed to be recovering faster; he picked up sound if the others raised their voices. A funny sight.

To me, it was an underwater rushing sound, the same ringing from before, and...like, Greer and Cullen had deeper voices, and so did Elliott and Mercier to a degree, and I heard *something* when they spoke.

I was fine being left out, to be honest. We'd done our job. Luca Blanco was dead, as were his four sons, approximately fifteen other higher-ups, and most of their guards. I was sure a few of them were hiding somewhere.

Shay was safe and back with River and Reese, who didn't let the guy out of their sight. He was currently smashed in Reese's arms while Coach patched up River's leg.

Danny had taken a bullet to his arm, though it'd gone straight through, and he didn't seem shaken. Everyone was

going home with bruises and aches, but that was about it. We hadn't lost anyone. Mathis had returned from his one-man operation at the main entrance with a single cut over his eyebrow. A nice turnout after having blown up the whole fucking gate with its ten-man security crew.

If only it were actually over.

Elliott nudged me and pointed up, and I followed his gaze. Finally, our ride was here.

I made sure I had my rifle, my handguns—in short, no evidence left behind—and then I just followed the herd while keeping an eye out for stragglers. The enemy was always ready to strike when you weren't, and all that.

Noticing that the group seemed to split up, with Crew and Mercier heading one way with Mathis and the Finlay brothers, I furrowed my brow at Elliott.

He typed on his phone for me.

*They're escorting the civilian woman to Mercier's contact in Pasto. We'll see them tomorrow.*

Oh. All right.

I needed to get my goddamn hearing back.

Whatever. Let's just go. We had another war to fight in Europe.

I didn't even know our rendezvous point, and I didn't fucking care at this rate. I followed Elliott and the others to the back of the estate, where a suspension rope was soon lowered from the helicopter above. Hot damn, that was an AW101—a beautiful bird I'd flown in a few times in Canada—once in Norway too. Great for SAR missions, and it was big. The nearby trees whipped from side to side, and I could imagine the intense thumping sound of the blades.

Having done this a million times before, at least I didn't need a how-to for this bit—but upon seeing Shay's nervousness, I couldn't help myself. As soon as the harnesses were dropped from the helicopter, I grabbed one for myself



and one for Shay. Then I walked over to him and cocked a brow at Reese, a silent question to take over.

He nodded and said something to Shay.

I removed my combat vest. “Put your feet through here!” I held out the vest for him. It’d look weird, like a diaper, but he didn’t wanna wear a harness with just sweatpants on. He’d never get to use his dick again.

He gave me a confused look but complied, and I squatted down and pulled out a roll of paracord from one of my side pockets. Then I tied the rope, trapping the sides of the vest to his midsection, before I tugged down the pant legs of his sweats. The whipping winds could be brutal to your skin.

The twins had already given him one vest before, so I strapped the harness to it and tightened every ending. His chest, front and back, then between his legs and around his waist.

“You’ll go first!” I told the kid. He flinched, and I lowered my voice. “Sorry. You’ll go first, and they’ll haul you up, okay? We’ll all be on the same rope, and they’ll ascend before reeling us in, so don’t be afraid. Don’t look down if heights bother you.”

He nodded once. “Thank you,” he mouthed. He turned to Reese and said something, and the man scratched the side of his head, then pulled out his phone.

He showed it to me soon after.

***Can you be there when I strap him to the line? It’s been a while for me.***

I nodded. “Of course.”

By the time I was done with Shay, everyone else had geared up, and I ushered Shay to the rope, with Reese following right behind.

This was the easy part, so I didn’t have to do much. Reese secured Shay to the suspension rope—I mean, there was an actual hook, so it was possible he was used to something else from back in the day when we used knots for everything.

I gestured for everyone to line up, figuring it was best I went last.

The roar from above was clearly loud for all the others, and I kinda wished I heard it too. Helicopters were my second home. But at least I felt the winds whipping, and I saw the grass flattening.

One by one, I made sure everyone was secured to the line. Shay, Reese, River, Coach, Danny...Elliott.

Elliott showed me the screen of his phone.

*I can say anything to you right now, and you won't hear it.*

I frowned at him. What the fuck?

He said something, and he tightened the strap to my helmet. What was he saying? In the corner of my eye, I caught Danny signaling to the pilots, and Shay was the first to get his feet off the ground. I shifted my gaze back to Elliott and secured myself to the line too, and I repositioned my rifle to my front instead, wanting easy access. For fuck's sake, could he stop talking? I didn't hear a fucking word!

He actually grinned for a second, then shook his head and—I went rigid when he cupped my face in his hands and leaned closer. The intensity in his eyes—in those familiar silvery-blue eyes... *Don't fucking do anything. You'll break me again.* He couldn't know how badly I wanted—

He was done. He finished talking and backed off, and I immediately missed his muddy fingers on my muddy fucking face.

I clenched my jaw. This was what he did to me. Even now, years later.

Goddamn bastard.

I hated him with every fiber of my being.

A beat later, he was airborne, and I was next. I grabbed on to the rope and unfastened my gun from its holster on my hip, and I fixed my stare on our surroundings. A decent shot could

have a field day with us right now, pick us off one by one on the line.

Right before my feet left the ground, I lowered my monocular and switched to thermal vision.

What the hell had he said to me? He'd never had any issues giving me shit to my face before. Although, the silent treatment had been his favorite up until this mission—not counting the few times we'd been forced into the same room for Blake's birthday party. He saved his digs for when she couldn't hear.



### *Reese Tenley*

“Sleep, baby. I'm not letting you go.” I tucked the blanket under Shay's seat belt and made sure he was wrapped up tightly.

He nodded and rested his cheek on my shoulder, but that wasn't good enough for me. I had to put my arm around him, and then I grabbed the other blanket and gave him a better pillow than my vest.

“There we go. Just relax now.” I kissed the top of his head.

Even with the constant helicopter noises, this had to be a hell of a lot more peaceful than being held captive. The danger had passed. He was safe. He was back with me and River. Where he belonged.

I'd snatched three seats for us closer to the back of the helicopter, so that River could take the edge seat and lean back against whatever cargo they had there. Then he could rest his injured leg across Shay's lap and my own. And get some shut-eye.

The seats lined the sides, 'cause this type of helicopter could take a fairly big payload and even had a back ramp. Hell, a few four-wheelers would easily fit in here. But for now, just Danny. He was lying flat on his back on a gurney on the floor, eyes closed, his uninjured arm folded under his head, not

a care in the world—though, I knew he missed Emerson. He wouldn't relax properly until they were reunited tomorrow morning. But I bet the painkillers helped with both missing his hubby and the gunshot wound in his bicep.

Shay burrowed himself closer to me and glanced up. “What happens now?”

I combed my fingers through his hair. “We're probably heading to Hillcroft's training center outside Quito. It's just across the border in Ecuador. We'll regroup, shower, eat, get some rest... We'll probably say goodbye to Greer and Cullen.” They'd done what they came for, and they'd been the best backup we could've asked for. “River and I would like to send you with them.”

Shay lifted his brows. “Do you see that happening?”

I exhaled a laugh and shook my head. “Not for a second—but it would be ideal. We'd know you were safe and surrounded by people we know and trust.”

I'd already asked Greer if Shay could stay with him and his family while River and I assisted the others in Europe.

“Your aunt and brothers miss you like crazy too,” I said.

He bit his lip and dropped his gaze, thinking about it. “I can call them, can't I? And I'll see them soon, regardless?”

I half nodded. “It depends on how quickly we can find Marisa and Blake, but it shouldn't be more than a few days. We think we know where they're headed.”

“Then I'm going with you,” he said firmly.

I was too weak to argue. I didn't wanna look away from him for a second. His mere presence was stitching up my ticker as we spoke.

“Fair enough—but you'll be with Darius and Gray for the extraction,” I answered. I wasn't budging on that. “You'll be close by, just not smack-dab in the middle of it.”

“I can live with close by.” He kissed my jaw. “Can you fill me in on everything? Crew went to Europe or something,

right? And who's Carillo? I've heard his name tonight—and before. And did we lose anyone at the ranch?"

Oh hell.

"First, you rest," I bargained.

---

*Elliott Jones*

Jesus Christ, I hadn't been here in...over fifteen years.

I jumped out of the helicopter and glanced around me.

The place looked the same.

It was still dark, but my memories filled in the bits and pieces cast in shadows. Hillcroft's training facility was a one-story red-brick building that formed a square around the courtyard, which was big enough for a helicopter to land in. Gravel crunched underneath my boots as I jogged toward the main entrance.

Aside from the mountains as a backdrop, you wouldn't be able to guess you were just north of Ecuador's capital. If anything, it looked like a training center from wartime England.

Except for the air. The air was thinner up here, and it became pretty cold at night.

For almost twenty-five years, Hillcroft had sent recruits here for bush training on the other side of the border. This was the big finale. Some theoretical testing, a couple language exams, and then bam, they dropped you in the jungle in Colombia, where you had to survive for two weeks with minimal supplies. We'd been given a daypack, a map, and two orders. Get to the location marked on your map—and don't die.

James and Griffin took off right away, presumably to pick up the others first thing in the morning. They'd probably refuel on the way too.

The courtyard was suddenly blanketed in silence, and Coach strode toward the doors with a set of keys.

“Fond memories comin’ back, buddy?” He smirked tiredly.

I huffed a chuckle and shook my head.

He grinned a little and jogged up the steps before he turned around and faced our group. “All right, welcome to Ecuador—welcome *back* to some of you. When all this is over, I’ll tell you about the time Reese mistook a factory fire for a volcanic eruption—”

“The smoke was black and rose high enough to finger-fuck a deity!” Reese widened his arms.

Danny and I cracked up.

Coach chuckled and unlocked the doors. “Or I’ll tell you about the time he got lost fifty yards from the facility.”

“That was altitude sickness,” Reese argued abruptly.

“On that note,” Coach said, “drink plenty of water.” He jerked his chin at the inside. “Let’s go. There’s food, room for everyone, and hot water in the showers...after a minute or so.”

“I have stories about Coach too,” Reese stated. “Y’all wanna hear how he broke his ankle? Or the time he almost shot Emerson?”

“Oh fuck, I remember that,” Danny laughed.

I shook my head in amusement and flicked a glance at Joel. Before we’d landed, he’d exchanged words with the pilots, so his hearing must’ve improved. In other words, I wasn’t gonna be stupid and say anything to him that made me too vulnerable. But man, his words continued to cut through me. How many days had passed since he’d told me he never wanted to see me again when this was over?

We’d turned a port into a crime scene in Europe, we’d shared a hotel room every night, we’d had each other’s backs whenever we took heat, we’d patched each other up in tense silence, and we’d bitched and fought... I was keeping track of every bruise on his body. I couldn’t stand the sight of him, and I couldn’t look away.

“Old-timers, show the newcomers where everything is!” Coach hollered from somewhere in the building.

I cleared my throat, and when Joel glanced my way, I nodded for him to follow me.

I had no real reason to. He could easily go with Danny or Coach or...

I suppressed a sigh and trailed into the building, where the familiar smell of soil, spices, coffee, and strong detergent never really left the walls. I dumped my heavier gear in the big entryway—helmet, vest, boots, weapons.

We’d gotten drunk in the common room—usually only took a couple drinks at this altitude—we’d eaten in the mess hall across the courtyard, often exhausted and banged up from brutal exercises. We’d listened to music, and we’d skidded across the linoleum floors in the hallways to get to our sleeping quarters before Emerson’s booming voice went *Lights out!*

Even at...twenty-three, twenty-four...we’d been kids. Hungry for a higher purpose while the world burned. I’d been here with seven guys and two women. Each one with a story similar to my own. Quite a few hadn’t felt safe in the military because of their sexual orientation, the women had faced sexism and harassment, and everyone wanted to contribute. The US Armed Forces were the best in many ways—but had a lot to work on in other areas. Sometimes, it was the perfect place. Sometimes, the worst.

I’d loved the Navy—and I knew Danny had thrived in the Army for years too, not to mention all the Finlays in the Marines—but Hillcroft had given me the piece I’d felt was missing.

Coach was already in the supply closet I’d been aiming for, and he was ready to sling clothes to us.

“XL for Jones these days...?” He handed over a stack of sweats, skivvies, tees, socks, and hoodies, and I snatched up two toiletry kits from the wall, plus two towels.

“I don’t like the way you said that,” I muttered.

He grinned. “Large for Hayward. Tenleys...?”

Reese cleared his throat. “XL. Medium for Shay. XS for Danny.”

“Fuck off. I’m a large,” Danny scoffed.

Joel and I made room for the others, and I continued down the hallway, rounded the corner, and reached the big shower room.

“How’s your hearing?” I asked, flicking on the lights.

He squinted and shrugged. “Getting there, I guess. It’s still that incessant ringing...” He rubbed his ear, visibly annoyed.

I knew the feeling. It was a miracle I didn’t have tinnitus.

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### *Reese Tenley*

“Oh my God, this feels so good,” Shay mumbled.

“Mm.” I couldn’t watch him at the moment. I’d done that...and then I’d gotten soap in my fucking eyes, so I was busy rinsing my face in the hot spray.

“So I know it’s like four or five in the morning,” Danny said somewhere behind me, “but is there any chance we can get a Reese and Elliott special for chow?”

“Oh, I fuckin’ insist,” River responded around a yawn.

I chuckled and scrubbed a hand over my face, then glanced across the shower room to where Elliott was brushing his teeth. Our gazes met in his mirror, and I shrugged. We needed to eat, and our options at this place were limited. They kept dry goods and one freezer stocked for whenever contractors needed a place to crash; fresh food was only brought with new classes of recruits.

“What’s a Reese and Elliott special?” Shay asked curiously.



“It’s a borin’ pizza. Nothing worth writing home about,” I said.

“Hey.” Danny gave me a look. “It’s fuckin’ divine, is what it is.”

Elliott tightened the towel around his hips and tossed his toothbrush into his toiletry kit. “I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be there in five,” I answered.

“Fuck yeah.” Danny was easy to please.

I sidestepped into Shay’s shower and smooched his cheek a few times. “Get our room ready with River. Food in the common room in half an hour. And miss me while I’m gone.”

He smiled up at me and pressed his body to mine, which wasn’t a good idea. “I always miss you.”

“You say the right words,” I murmured. I cupped his cheek and just stared at him for a second, unable to describe how good it felt to have him back with us. Our amazing little fighter. Boy, did we have some therapy to look forward to. “I love you. Don’t let River walk around too much.”

“I won’t. Love you more.”

“Impossible.”

After toweling off and gearing up in Hillcroft’s finest sweatpants and T-shirt, I trailed barefoot around the whole building till I reached the kitchen next to the mess hall. Man, had we experienced a lot here. River and I had graduated the year before Elliott, but we’d flown down once or twice together too, always with new recruits. Established contractors functioned as aggressors during training ops, more or less. And it was fucking fun.

I tightened my drawstrings, finding Elliott with his head in the freezer.

It was a big kitchen—probably too big, actually. It looked like a typical school kitchen with its metal counters and walk-in fridge, but I doubted they’d ever had to utilize the whole place. Most classes of recruits consisted of a dozen men and women, sometimes fewer.

I didn't know why we called them recruits, though. The majority of that dozen people came from government agencies that hired Hillcroft to improve their employees' skillsets. So for each class that showed up in Ecuador for further training, only two or three were future operators at Hillcroft.

"You findin' the cheese?" I yawned.

"And ham." Elliott tossed two big plastic bags with shredded cheese and diced ham onto one of the counters.

I went into one of the pantries and grabbed four boxes of ready-to-bake bread mix. Each box contained enough to make two loaves, though we used them for pizza dough instead.

I snatched one jar of dried oregano too.

On my way back, I turned on all four ovens.

"So are you ready to talk about you and Joel, buddy?" I asked. "Now that I have my boy back, I can give a fuck again."

He furrowed his brow and filled a pitcher with water. "It's too soon for jokes about Shay getting kidnapped again, innit?"

I let out a laugh. "Uh, yeah."

He sighed and shook his head. He didn't speak right away, which he rarely did. Elliott was a thinker, at least by my standards. It was why he and River got along so well. And Darius, I should add. Those three could sit on a porch and drink beer in total silence and call it a great night.

While they did that, Danny, Coach, and I set something on fire or gathered soda cans for target practice.

Coach was funny that way. He could be grumpier than Darius but still wanna be part of constant action.

Elliott and I divided the bread mixes into two bowls and added the water.

"If you want, I can fill the silence," I offered. "Here's what I know. Joel is your sister's ex-husband and the dad to your niece—and we're bringing her home real fuckin' soon."

“Stepdad,” he muttered. “That’s what I’ve loved to remind him of, anyway. Because I’m a fucking asshole.”

And we had lift-off.

“We grew up together.” He dumped the dough from the bowl onto the counter and continued kneading it. “Joel and Piper were best friends. Same classes and whatnot. When I got my license, Pop handed over the keys to his old truck and said it was mine—on the condition that I drove my sister places when she needed a ride. And more often than not, Joel was right next to her.”

All right. If I remembered correctly, Elliott was about four years older than his sister.

“And when did things turn into a love triangle?” I asked.

He snorted softly. “Christ.” Then he cleared his throat. “I guess after they graduated high school. I was home on leave from the Navy after a minor injury, and...Joel...” He exhaled a little laugh. “He put himself out there, I guess you can say. My sister’s always been in love with him, but he didn’t see it.”

“He saw you instead.”

He nodded once, focusing too intently on the dough. “We hooked up for a couple weeks before I went back in, and he was off to college. Didn’t see him again until fifteen years later.”

I let out a low whistle. A lot had happened in those fifteen years. I mean, I remembered Elliott when he’d been married to...I wanted to say Lizzie...?

“By then, he and Piper had drifted apart,” he went on. “Blake was a year old—her sperm donor of a father had split. I was on the brink of divorce. Joel was married to the Coast Guard, stationed in Jacksonville—but he was deployed outta San Diego a few months of the year. That’s how we ran into each other. No, wait.” He paused, stuck in a memory. “I was down visiting Piper—it was Blake’s first birthday. And Joel was in town helping his ma move.”

“Got it.” I went to get a few oven trays and parchment paper.

“It doesn’t matter,” he sighed. “We hooked up again. I thought—I don’t know. We wanted more, but the timing was shit. We kinda agreed to reconnect in a year, when I was done with my contracts and I’d divorced Lizzie. He was gonna transfer to a helicopter unit in San Diego too.”

Something told me that never happened.

“Do you remember the clusterfuck in Uzbekistan?” he asked.

I frowned, thinking back. “Was that the arms deal back in 2015?”

“We *thought* it was an arms deal,” he replied. “Mathis uncovered three goddamn factories and a whole network of operations—they were supplying weapons to every side of the war in Syria. My two months there turned into almost five.”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “River and I were in Bangladesh then, I think.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Okay, so what happened when you rotated back home?”  
’Cause I was invested now, goddammit. I wanted my buddy to get his happy ending.

“I divorced Lizzie.” He shrugged. “I was getting ready to call Joel and, you know...”

I smiled. Check him out, all awkward and cute. It was a new side to the gruff, rough-around-the-edges Elliott Jones I knew.

“I didn’t call right away, because I still had one more contract with Tariq,” he said. Fuck, it hurt to hear Tariq’s name. “But I talked to Piper, and she was happy to let me know she and Joel had reconnected. They were friends again, and he was in the middle of his transfer—or he was about to transfer.”

“And she was still into him, I take it?”

He lifted a shoulder and began dividing the dough between the oven trays. “She didn’t say anything at the time, but... I

can only assume. Because when I came home again, she told me they were dating.”

Fucking ouch.

“One year and three months,” he said. “He told me to call him up in about a year—and I guess those three extra months made all the difference. He’d moved on. He was suddenly Blake’s dad and Piper’s future husband.”

This wasn’t my brand of romance at all. What the fuck?

“You tell a horrible love story,” I told him.

He smirked wryly. “What part of us bein’ unable to stand each other made you think this was gonna be a rom-com?”

“Because you can’t quit starin’ at his ass.” I shrugged. “And you get all fussy and worried and shit.”

I’d fucking been there tonight, hadn’t I? I’d heard him through the comms. Emerson had picked up on it earlier too. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have put Elliott and Joel on the same team.

“Tell me you at least talked to him at some point,” I said. “Maybe there was a misunderstanding.”

“I *tried*.” He widened his eyes. “He did a complete 180 on me. I went down to visit—and to ask him what the fuck was going on—and he avoided me like the plague. The fuck was I supposed to do, beg him to explain why he’d chosen my sister over me? Christ, like I wasn’t already humiliated enough.”

Hmm. Yeah, no, that had to hurt. I wouldn’t be able to stick around for that sunshine story.

Something wasn’t adding up, though.

“What was with the 180?” I wondered. “Did he have a reason to avoid you?”

He shrugged and flattened the dough some more on one of the trays. “I don’t know. I guess he felt bad about changing his mind and didn’t have the balls to say it to my face.”

I reckoned that made sense—though, it didn’t fit my profile of Joel Hayward. On the other hand, I didn’t know the

man. It was just... These past few weeks, he'd struck me as a man of integrity, someone who was honest and didn't mind taking the back seat—until he felt the need to step in. He'd definitely eased Shay's nerves tonight before we'd gone up into the helicopter.

When someone needed him to do something, no matter how dangerous, he said, "Sure."

He and Crew had single-handedly taken down Luca, Marco, and Enzo Blanco tonight. One grunt and one sniper.

And with Joel's everyday job...? For chrissakes, HITRON was one of our most elite military units. Could he be anything but fearless? But as I thought of it, I knew it didn't compare. Riv and I had thrown ourselves into all kinds of shit, knowing full well we might not make it out alive. Hadn't stopped us from being insanely nervous when we were introduced to Shay's family for the first time.

"He made shit clear once when he was drunk anyway," Elliott muttered. "He came up to me—at their fucking wedding reception, mind you—and rambled drunkenly about how Piper was his whole world."

I winced.

"You make me wanna drink, Elliott."

He laughed.

## CHAPTER 3

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“Uncle Ellie says I have his eyes, but I have my own, see!”  
She blinked hard at me.*

*My mouth twitched. She was too fucking cute.*

*“Get in the car and I’ll explain,” I chuckled. “How was  
school?”*

*“Meh. Trey called my dress ugly, so I called him a turd. He  
was wrong, and I was right.”*

*That’s my girl. “Your dress is beautiful.” I got in behind the  
wheel and buckled in. “You wanna get tacos?”*

*“Do you even have to ask?”*

*I smiled and pulled away from the curb. Maybe I could  
distract her from bringing up Elliott again.*

*“So, about Uncle Ellie,” she started.*

*Fuck.*

---

**F**ourteen messages from Piper.

I turned off my phone again and pocketed it, then leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees.

I'd call her when we got to Europe. We didn't want anyone to trace our activity to South America.

I shouldn't have turned it on in the first place, but I'd just needed to see my lock screen photo of Blake and me for a second.

*A few more days, baby. Daddy's coming for you. I promise.*

River and Shay were next to trail into the common room, with River supporting himself on a crutch. I guessed they were used to handling injuries in this place. They collapsed down onto the couch next to mine, and Danny soon followed.

I rubbed my right ear, the one where the ringing sound bothered me the most.

The room was divided into three seating areas with mismatched couches and one corner with a pool table and dart board. No pictures on the walls. No Hillcroft logo anywhere. No training stats or records listed on a fancy wooden board. Nothing that could identify anyone.

"I wanna sleep for a week," Shay mumbled, cuddling up against River.

I swallowed hard and cracked my knuckles absently. I'd had this pressure building up in my chest since we'd stepped out of the helicopter. I knew why too. Because we were standing still. We weren't doing anything. We weren't on the next flight to Europe.

Coach returned, wheeling in a whiteboard.

That was good, right? We'd get to work and do *something*. I couldn't handle another bonfire nostalgia trip.

Danny yawned and kicked up his feet on a coffee table. "Are we gonna compare whose gold loot is the biggest?"

River grinned sleepily.

Coach chuckled. "I don't think anyone can beat River in that arena."

"Wait." Shay sat up straighter. "That's actually a thing you all do? Because River and Reese freaking emptied Luca's



desk. Mostly River.”

“Good to hear they listen to me sometimes,” Danny chuckled. “And fuck yeah, defund the cartels.”

“Amen,” River murmured.

I mustered a faint smirk. “Elliott did his part too. So did I, I guess.”

“Attaboy.” Danny smiled lazily. “We take what we can when we can, and we split it with those who helped out but couldn’t be there.”

I liked that. Most of the time, front-liners had teams of people helping in the background.

“Who wants pizza?” Reese’s booming voice echoed down the hall, and Danny sat up straighter and rubbed his hands together.

“My body is ready—bring it!” he hollered.

Reese and Elliott soon appeared, and the former was pushing an industrial serving cart with several homemade pizzas. The square kind, seemingly thick crust, and dripping in melted cheese.

My stomach snarled and tightened, happy to remind me I hadn’t eaten since Danny, Reese, and I had been stuck in the back of that delivery truck.

Elliott tossed us bottled water, and I caught one with a nod of thanks.

Within seconds, the room smelled of oregano and cheese, and everyone’s spirits lifted.

Before I could even get off the couch, Elliott grabbed one of the oven trays and sat down next to me, and he told me to dig in.

He always stayed so fucking close to me, and he always wanted me to go to hell. He loved to tell me I didn’t know what I was doing, that I should crawl before I walked, that I was in the fucking way and whatever. So why was he here?

Why wasn't he sharing Danny's couch? Or Coach's? Why did he hate me so goddamn much?

Granted, I hadn't made it easy for him at first. When Piper had told me he'd given his ex-wife a second chance, it'd fucking broken me. I'd been walking around for almost a year, thinking he was gonna call soon. Thinking we'd finally get our shot. Fucking hell, I'd been happy. Then everything had gone to shit. My future had disappeared with a by-the-way type of comment from Piper when she and I had been on our way out. We were gonna take Blake to the zoo.

*"Oh, I talked to Elliott, by the way. He's trying to patch things up with Lizzie. Isn't that great?"*

I still remembered how I'd felt all the blood drain from my face. How my stomach had dropped. My chest had squeezed and tightened.

*"Yeah, that's...yeah. Great. Good for them."*

It was almost poetic in a way that Blake squeezing my finger, itching to go to the zoo—even though she'd been too young to understand what it was—showed me the path to what eventually became my future. Just her. Her squeezing my finger, her stumbling forward, me holding her up, me... needing her more than air.

The other guys around me couldn't help themselves. They walked down another memory lane and swapped anecdotes from the field while we ate. I could barely pretend to stomach the food, much less their stories.

I clenched my jaw and forced another mouthful of pizza to slide down my throat.

All I wanted was to see Blake again.

Some men met women and got a kid as a side order. I'd met my future daughter and gotten a mom attached to the kid. Piper and I had joked about it, how I'd fallen for Blake long before I'd... Well. I'd loved Piper; we just hadn't been *in* love. Or so she'd assured me. But considering she wanted me back, I wasn't so sure about her true feelings. Maybe she felt more for me.

I hoped that wasn't the case, because unrequited love fucking sucked, and she and I were meant to be buddies. And co-parents. Blake may have dragged me out of my misery when I'd learned Elliott was back with his ex-wife, but Piper had played a big part too. We'd started spending more time together. She'd made my transfer to San Diego a lot easier, and I'd never had to regret my move.

I couldn't even regret hooking up with Piper since it'd given me a much more important role with Blake.

It'd been comfortable.

I wouldn't call it *easy* because there was no forgetting the first year when Piper and I had been very on-and-off. I'd been reluctant to commit to someone I viewed mostly as my friend, and she had a temper that produced ultimatums when she was pissed. I didn't deal well with those.

Then one day, she'd sat me down.

*"I wanna go for it, Joel. I want us to be all in. You and me—and Blake. I want you to be her dad."*

The last sentence had sealed the deal for me. I'd stopped searching for something else. I'd stopped thinking about what-ifs. I'd committed right then and there.

Not long after, I'd learned from Piper's folks that Elliott had gotten divorced after all, and yeah, that'd stung too, considering he hadn't called me, but it didn't matter. I'd channeled my hurt into determination to just avoid the motherfucker, and I'd been the luckiest dad alive.

Being Blake's father was my purpose.

I couldn't lose her.

I just couldn't. She was all I had left.

Regardless, I could've forgiven Elliott. I *would* have...if he hadn't insisted on hating me instead. All these years. Now, I was running out of energy to pretend. I couldn't hate him back just because he saw me as his mortal enemy. I could be *angry*—anger was easy. But I couldn't hate him.

I didn't wanna be exposed to his hatred either, so if we couldn't reach a truce of any kind when this was over, what I'd told him in Toronto was legit. I didn't wanna see him again.

"All right, all right." Coach's laughter rang above the din and stole my attention. "Maybe we should get some work done before we hit the sack."

We couldn't sleep on the damn plane?

"Elliott, this next part is your show." Coach tossed him something—a marker. "Tell us what you need and—"

"Sorry," Shay said quickly. "Can I just say something before you begin?"

"Of course, kid." Danny nodded.

Shay cleared his throat and left a half-eaten piece of pizza on the tray. "I only wanna say thank you. All of you—you saved my life. You flew all the way down here to bring me home and hopefully uncover another clue about where we can find Marisa and Blake, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate you. For a while, I didn't think I'd ever come home at all. And..." He swallowed hard and was soon enveloped in River's arms, followed by Reese's. "Just, thank you," Shay continued, taking an unsteady breath. "I owe you everything—and I wanna help. Whatever I can do in Europe to help you save Marisa and Blake like you saved me."

I swallowed hard and nodded with a dip of my chin. Flying over to South America hadn't really been a question with more than one answer. Of course we'd offered to go. We'd just been chasing guesses in Spain.

As furious as I had been initially about Crew's choice to put Mercier's mission before ours, he'd made the right call. Thanks to Mercier, we knew Luiz Gajero was traveling to Europe with Marisa and Blake.

"You don't owe us a damn thing, Shay," Elliott replied and stood up. "We're just glad you're okay. And we'll gladly accept your help in Europe—from a safe distance."

"I love you, Elliott," Reese said.

The others chuckled.

The ringing in my ears had faded a bit more, thankfully.

Hopefully, I could concentrate.

“Okay, everyone.” Elliott took his spot in front of the whiteboard. “I suppose I can thank some of you by sending you home. Coach, Danny—Em when he gets here—we appreciate you joining us for this op, but we won’t need a big crew on the ground for Europe.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Danny said. “Go on.”

Elliott huffed, amusement flashing in his eyes, and he began scribbling on the board. “We know Carillo travels with seven guards and a Russian named Dimitri Petrov. We can speculate about how many men Luiz Gajero travels with, but we won’t come near the numbers we saw tonight.” After listing the names we knew and the number of men, he began jotting down locations. “The Quinns, Ortega, and Ramirez have been tracking Carillo day and night this week, and we know he’s stayed at safehouses in these locations. Judging by his route, we can start making guesses on where he’ll end up. And he’s heading north of Barcelona at this point, which...”

“Andorra,” River concluded quietly.

Elliott pointed his marker at the man. “And it makes sense in a way—they don’t have a formal extradition treaty with the US. But last I checked, they’ve signed every human-rights agreement the EU has thrown at them, including Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.”

“I can confirm,” Coach said with a nod. “Chances are they’d extradite Carillo to Mexico, but since he’s supposed to serve his sentence in Texas...”

“Exactly, and Mexico and the US are already in agreement that we get him,” Elliott finished. “Even so, Andorra’s a good place to hide. Whether he’s planning on setting up his operations there—I have no idea, and it doesn’t matter. Our team in Europe is staying on him until we get there.”

“Andorra’s terrain will rule out a larger crew anyway.” Danny stretched out his legs and folded an arm under his head.

“He’s really jumped all over the map, hasn’t he? France, Spain... When do you think he’ll hear about Colombia?”

Elliott eyed the board and scratched the side of his head with the marker. “No idea. Mercier’s cover is still intact, and as far as I know, he’s Carillo’s only contact. Let’s not forget that Carillo betrayed the Blancos, so he must’ve burned most, if not all, bridges. We do, however, know that Luiz Gajero has a direct line of communication with Marco Blanco.”

“Well, he did.” Coach smiled.

“Right.” Elliott inclined his head. “Gajero’s exact location is more difficult to pin down. We know from Mercier’s intel that Gajero is heading to Europe—and Mercier might know more. We’ll talk to him when he gets here. But Barcelona is a logical move. It’s a big port—”

“Can we be sure he’s on a freighter somewhere?” Danny asked.

“It’s the safest bet,” Elliott replied. “Do they have the money to fly private and enter a country without detection? Most likely—even though Willow’s frozen their assets. But it’s still riskier, and they don’t have infrastructure set up in Europe like they do over here.”

“They’d already be in Europe if they traveled by plane,” I added quietly.

Elliott nodded. “That too. But like I said, we’ll talk to Mercier when he gets here.” He turned to Coach. “What we need your help with is transport. You think Hillcroft can secure our ride?”

“No problem,” Coach responded. “We still have some strings left to pull here.”

I furrowed my brow. “Do you? The last surveillance aircraft left in 2009.” It’d been a huge deal for my buddies stationed in Key West who’d been on the task force that’d received intel from Ecuador. A joint op with the Navy.

Coach cocked his head at me. “Just when I relax around you, you pop up with some obscure trivia. I didn’t say our strings were military.”

Oh. All right.

I noticed Reese observing me.

I cleared my throat and turned back to Elliott, who was looking at me too.

Why were they constantly surprised I knew some shit? I'd worked in drug interdiction for almost twenty years.

Elliott checked his watch before getting back on track. "Mercier, Mathis, and the Finlays should be here in three or so hours, so I propose we get some sleep till then. The Tenleys, we appreciate you comin' with us."

"Of course," Reese said.

"Danny, Coach—we can probably use you better behind screens," Elliott went on. "Go back to DC, rest up, count your gold, debrief Willow."

"If you insist," Coach yawned. "I'll go make some calls."

"I'll see if I can reach Em," Danny said.

Elliott wrapped things up. "Once we've talked to Mercier, we'll know if we're heading to Barcelona to stick around to wait for Gajero or if we're going there to pursue Carillo in that area. It's roughly two hours between Barcelona and Andorra la Vella, and speaking from experience, we wanna enter after dark when the border patrol agents don't wanna bother with travelers."

Bless European border security.

Three hours—I could work with that. If we were catching a ride through Coach and Hillcroft, chances were we could bring our weapons, and I needed to clean my rifle, both handguns, and—

"Joel, I need a word." Elliott nodded toward the hallway.

"But I'm not done with him," Coach protested. "I need popcorn and a live reenactment of how he and Crew killed three Blancos in a tunnel. And set the scene properly—what did it smell like down there, how dark was it, did they beg for mercy, *und so weiter*."

I lifted my brows, kinda stuck. I just couldn't sink into some comedy mind-set like they could. If we met up when life was good again, they wouldn't recognize me.

"I'm sure Crew's a more vivid storyteller," I answered and rose to my feet. "Elliott could probably tell you, but...he's slow as fuck these days. He got there when it was over."

"Oh-ho!" Coach laughed and clapped his hands. Danny was highly entertained too.

"What the fresh fuck." Elliott wasn't laughing, though he wasn't pissed either. For once. "You got a comfy ride in a truck to the estate—some of us had to crawl through the goddamn jungle."

I shrugged and scratched my nose. "So even a crawl exerts you. Got it."

Goddamn, I missed our banter. We hadn't gotten to experience enough of it, just a few weeks, really. But we'd been naturals.

"Oh, go to hell." Elliott waved me off and headed over to River with an outstretched hand. "Lemme steal your smokes for a minute. Coach finished mine."

River chuckled and tossed him the pack. "Lighter's inside. You can keep 'em. I don't want Shay to get any ideas."

"Aw, man." Shay frowned.

"Emerson will be so proud," Danny said.

"I think we should quit when we get home," Shay said firmly. He turned his puppy-dog eyes on Reese. "Are you going to deny me this simple pleasure after being held hostage for weeks?"

Oof.

Reese's jaw ticked with tension, and he pointed at the door for Elliott. "Get the fuck outta here with those cigarettes before I cave because I have zero willpower at the moment."

"Maybe save a few." River threw that out there, so he clearly had no willpower either.



Elliott chuckled and headed for the door. “I’ll do my best not to smoke all...fourteen of them.”

“Emerson is no longer proud,” Danny grumbled.

I left before another round of bantering could begin, and I followed Elliott out into the hallway, where we stuck our feet in our boots and stepped out on the stoop.

The sky was a little lighter, though it would be a while before the sun rose.

I let out a breath and sat down on the first step.

The air really was thinner up here.

Elliott sat down next to me and lit up a smoke for me too.

“Thanks.” I took a drag and exhaled skyward.

What were the odds of him admitting what he’d told me when I’d been fucking deaf?

“You gonna lay into me?” I had to ask.

He blew out some smoke and shook his head, then rested his arms on his knees. “No. To be honest, I don’t have a plan here. You’re a grown man, and maybe you don’t care what I think.”

I didn’t.

I mean, I did. I absolutely did, but fuck him. Fuck me. Fuck him for getting us to this point. Fuck everything. Fuck, I was tired. Just fuck.

*There’s an idea.*

I suppressed a sigh.

“But considering how I’ve behaved...” He swallowed and kept his gaze fixed on something on the ground. “You’re not some sidekick in this fight, Joel. You’re hands down the best marksman I’ve ever laid eyes on, and when you silence the worried dad in you—like you did tonight—you’re an incredible soldier.”

Well, shit. Was that really Elliott talking? Was he sick? Dying?

“Are you dying?” I asked.

He exhaled a silent chuckle through his nose and took another drag from his smoke.

I guessed he wasn't going to answer.

“Thank you.” I cleared my throat and scratched my jaw.

I wasn't sure I felt anything at his praise, but I knew myself well enough. It'd come later. I'd never been good at hiding my feelings or reactions, so maybe I'd get sucked back in and grieve losing him—even though I'd never really had him—when this was over. When we went back to seeing each other once a year for Blake's birthday. Maybe not even then, depending on what I could handle. Because suppressing hurt didn't mean erasing it. Masking it with anger didn't mean shit either. I still felt the hold he had on me every goddamn day.

“I, uh...I talked to Reese earlier.” He furrowed his brow to himself, evidently not planning on making eye contact during this...whatever the hell it was. He was definitely uncomfortable. “It got me thinkin', and I guess there's one thing I never understood.”

I blew out some smoke and waited.

“For as long as I've known you, you've been the first to lay your cards on the table,” he continued. “You've never hesitated to be vulnerable and take the initiative. Ma loves telling the story of when my sister came home from kindergarten one day with stars in her eyes. She completely bullshitted, by the way. She told you she loved football and watching Navy ships, and you declared her your best friend.”

I huffed a laugh, having figured that out. It'd taken me forever, but yeah. Piper hated that shit.

“You made a move on me damn quick that summer I was on leave,” he added.

Well, yeah. He'd already been my biggest fantasy for a few years at that point.

Once I was out of high school, I'd hoped he'd stop seeing me as his sister's annoying friend.

“You were just always so fucking honest,” he said. “Except for when I came down to visit after you and Piper got together.” He finally turned to me, and he didn’t hide the bitterness and anger and hurt and... He didn’t hide anything, but it wasn’t extreme. It was just Elliott. *He* was great at concealing his emotions, so when he let a fraction of them show, I noticed. “You couldn’t look me in the eye and admit you’d changed your mind. That you’d chosen her.”

I frowned. That was where he dove into our story? Like there wasn’t a precursor? I’d avoided him for a fucking *reason*.

For the record, I’d chosen Piper because Elliott had made his choice already. And it hadn’t been me.

“You’re right,” I said. “I have always been honest. I have always gone after what I wanted. But when that person decided to stay married to his wife... Elliott, I have fucking limits. Why would I put myself out there *again*—”

“I did divorce her!” he whispered angrily. “So I was a little late—”

“A little late.” I laughed with zero humor in my voice. “Yeah, you were a little late. And also, fuck you—I did try to explain to you. *Maybe I was a little late*, but I was so fucked in the head for you that I got drunk at my own wedding because I couldn’t let you go.” Sweet Jesus, I guessed all the embarrassing truths were coming out now. Someone stop me. “I told you at the reception, didn’t I? I tried to make you understand.”

“Oh yeah, no, I definitely got the message,” he chuckled darkly. “I remember vividly how you stood there and admitted that you once thought you were gonna spend the rest of your life with me, but then you changed your mind because Piper’s the love of your life. Felt *amazing* to hear.”

Whoa, what the fuck, *what*?

I reeled back, or sideways, then jumped to my feet and dropped my smoke. “Piper’s the love of—*excuse* me?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Seriously, the shock that

slammed into me was almost a physically painful blow. I ended up on the last step and stared right back at him. “I thought I was the one who got drunk! I was talking about Blake, you stupid fuck. I fucking explained to you—I couldn’t go any other route. I couldn’t picture my life without Blake anymore. I was watching her goof off on the goddamn dance floor when I talked to you!” I threw out my arms, frustrated beyond belief—and wishing I didn’t remember that so well. It’d been fucking painful. And to be frank, Piper hadn’t deserved it. Not that she knew her husband had made a complete idiot of himself at our wedding reception.

Elliott knitted his brows, thinking, hopefully remembering. I sure as fuck hadn’t been talking about *Piper*.

My God, had Elliott spent these past few years thinking I’d laid my heart out for Piper? I couldn’t recall the exact words, but I’d been drunkenly open. How Blake had been the light of my life and stuff like that.

“Piper made it clear that if we got married, I’d get to adopt Blake,” I admitted.

I’d waited three months before dropping to one knee.

Elliott stubbed out his smoke, then scrubbed his hands over his face. Next, his fingers disappeared into his hair, and he stared down, keeping his face mostly hidden from me.

I’d tried to be a good husband, despite entering the marriage for all the wrong reasons, but we’d been doomed from the start. We’d lasted four years, and then I couldn’t take it anymore. Piper had wanted me to quit the Coast Guard so I could be around more, and I’d already cut down on work as much as I was willing. I didn’t go on any long-term deployments anymore. I was on call and living on base for two thirty-day stints out of the year, something I didn’t wanna give up. During that time, I was still free to see my family for meals and school pickups and whatnot; I just had to get back to base at the end of the night, and I had to drop everything if we got a call.

For the remaining ten months, I was practically like any other nine-to-five worker. With slightly more uncomfortable

hours occasionally.

Elliott stood up with a grunt and made a move to get back inside. “I’ve barely slept the past forty-eight hours. My brain’s shit. I gotta get some sleep.”

Was he serious?

“That’s it, then?”

He glanced back at me. “What’s the point, Joel? We can’t change anything—and you wouldn’t want to, which I totally understand. You got Blake.”

I swallowed hard, struck by the utter defeat in his expression, and before I could say anything, he left.

Motherfucker, did it have to be either-or?

He couldn’t let go any more than I could. This talk had made that clear—for *once*. For once, he’d been open enough to reveal he still felt something.

I released a frustrated breath and ran a hand through my hair.

No, we couldn’t change the past, but we could rewrite our future.

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### *Crew Finlay*

“After all these years, you don’t think it’s weird my wife’s name in your phone is still The Vegan?” Dad asked.

“Why’s it weird?” Uncle Greer retorted. “If she starts eatin’ meat, I’ll change it.”

“To be fair, she eats my—”

“What the fuck!” I yelled. “That’s my *mom*.”

Dad turned to me and furrowed his brow. “You think I don’t remember seein’ you comin’ outta her vagina? I was almost offended on her behalf with how much you screamed.”

Oh my God.

I palmed my face and groaned.

Adrien trying to contain his laughter next to me—and failing miserably—wasn't fucking helping.

“Two minutes!” one of the pilots yelled.

Thank fuck. I had to get out of this bird.

I wished I could sleep through the flight like Mathis and Emerson were doing closer to the back.

“Don't be embarrassed, son,” Dad told me. “It was a beautiful birth. I loved you almost instantly.”

“Gee, thanks,” I scoffed.

He faced Uncle Greer. “Once they cleaned off the bloody goo and shit.”

“I fucking swear.” I glared at him.

Uncle Greer couldn't stop laughing.

Neither could Adrien.

Dad just grinned. I knew he was fucking with me, and it was working, goddammit.

He'd been trolling me the whole flight—since I'd stupidly admitted I was nervous to face the others. I didn't know if they were pissed at me. Or worse, disappointed.

The truths came out in the debrief. The danger had passed, and now the superiors laid into the poor grunts, all the shit they'd done wrong. Such as disobeying orders and going AWOL. Maybe I'd lose my job. Shit.

I swallowed my nerves and started bouncing my knee.

Adrien put a hand on my leg, and I blew out a breath.

He dipped down and spoke into my ear. “Everything's going to work out, sweetheart. I'd like to think the way you shook me down in front of my partner sweetens the deal for your unit.”

I bit my thumbnail, hoping he was right. I'd done my best—and Adrien had delivered instantly. The man had power. And cooperating with someone from a government agency

clearly worked in our favor sometimes. I'd asked him to "work his magic" and get law enforcement off our backs when we got home. Since, like, they wanted to know where we'd been.

Even so, having a lightbulb moment didn't mean I'd actually done anything. That was all Adrien.

"At least they're fans of you," I replied.

"They're fans of you as well, Crew."

We'd see.

Adrien hugged me to him, and I forced myself to breathe out and relax. I closed my eyes and buried my face against his neck. How he managed to smell delicious after the forty-eight hours we'd had here was a mystery.

"I guess they're kinda cute together." Dad's words were almost lost over the noise of the engine. "I can't wait to tell Peyton our boy is datin' someone her age."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Please tell me that's not true," Adrien said quietly.

I chuckled, because I couldn't help it, and I peered up at him. "Mom totally locked him down right outta high school." Not that Dad had been that much older. "It's a funny story. I'll tell you one day. I was born a year later."

Adrien closed his eyes and rested his forehead to mine. "It's going to be a lifetime of age jokes, isn't it?"

I smiled. "So we're on the same page—that's good. We're aiming for a lifetime."

Yeah, I was too fucking adorable for him to stay grumpy at. He opened his eyes again, and he smiled too. All sexy and crap.

---

*Elliott Jones*

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

With how little sleep we'd gotten, I should be fucking dead to the world right now. Instead, I was listening to Joel's quiet sniffles—and the squeaky pipes that always protested in this corner of the building when someone was in the shower room.

I'd heard the return of Emerson, Mathis, Crew, the Finlays, and Mercier.

Danny had been there, waiting for his man.

The sun was about to rise.

My heart hurt.

I rubbed at the spot and screwed my eyes shut.

*"I was talking about Blake, you stupid fuck."*

*"Piper made it clear that if we got married, I'd get to adopt Blake."*

*"That's it, then?"*

It was a blessing and a curse, wasn't it? There would never be a "that's it" where Joel was concerned. Which had given me years of heartache and countless bursts of rage. I'd felt too much and nothing at all. I'd lost memories at the bottom of one too many bottles, I'd closed myself off, I'd let myself turn into a bitter old bastard, and...then another year had gone by, and I'd had to see him at Blake's birthday party. Once again, over and over, opening up the wounds.

Rinse and repeat.

"Yeah, just take whatever rooms you find empty," I heard Danny say outside. "Come to bed, Em. We need an hour."

I scrubbed a hand over my face and glanced over at Joel's bed across the room.

*"I was talking about Blake, you stupid fuck."*

Piper wasn't the girl he couldn't live without. It was Blake.

How tragically poetic—my wildest dreams coming true mere hours after I'd stood before him underneath a helicopter, cursing him out, grinning without humor, confessing I hated him because he should've fucking chosen me.



I was a coward. Verbally honest when he couldn't hear me.

He sniffled again, followed by an unsteady breath.

I couldn't take it any longer. Nothing between us was healed or fixed or...whatever. But I desperately needed a break from it all. I didn't even envy the perfect love stories we were surrounded by, whether it was a brand-new one like Crew and Mercier, or one dating back twenty-five years like Emerson and Danny. I was just drowning in sorrow. Grief had a tight, painful grip on my chest, because that should've been Joel and me.

On the other hand...his love for Blake transcended our tragedy. She was my universe too, and she couldn't have landed a better father than Joel. I only had to man the fuck up and tell him that.

Nerves and anxiousness wreaked havoc in my stomach for a few seconds, before I found the balls and sat up. *I have to. I can't take this anymore.* My feet landed on the linoleum floor, and I got up from the creaky twin bed I'd slept in every time I'd been here.

A simple nightstand separated our beds, and I had just enough time to debate whether I should put on my sweats or if only boxer briefs were—oh, fuck it.

“Scoot.” I lifted his covers and got in next to him. “We can go back to hating each other when the sun is up.”

He cleared his throat and rolled over, visibly frazzled, and he pressed his back against the wall. Gaze disoriented and glassy.

“What're you doing?” he croaked.

Wasn't it obvious?

My heart beat a little faster as I got comfortable on my side and pulled him to me, and maybe he didn't need an answer beyond that. He fused himself to my body, sending ripples of shivers through both of us. He was finally in my arms. He burrowed his face against my sternum, slipping an arm around my middle, and I held him tightly and kissed the top of his head.

“Don’t call me weak.”

“I’m not. I’m calling you a parent.” I took a deep breath and felt him relax against me. Fuck, I couldn’t describe how good it felt to hold him this close. To feel his skin on mine. “Get some sleep.”

He nodded minutely and exhaled.

The heaviest calm washed over me, unlike anything I’d felt in years. It silenced the chaos in my head and eased every ache in my body.

I had to be more open with him. It was becoming abundantly clear that he’d been hurting as much as I had, and that couldn’t go on.

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his hair again.

“The reason I couldn’t be near Piper after Blake was taken was because it hurt too much,” I murmured. “I was angry I couldn’t protect my niece.”

Joel took a breath and hitched a leg over my hip. “I know.”

“But it’s worse when it’s you,” I admitted. “I hate seeing you upset—especially when I can’t do anything about it.”

He eased back and propped himself up on an elbow on the pillow, so I did the same.

I guessed we weren’t sleeping now either.

He definitely needed it, though. More than I did. He was carrying so much pain—and it wasn’t only Blake. He’d just buried his mom, his last living relative.

“We’ve hated too much.” His voice came out almost as low as a whisper, and he had to clear his throat. “I can’t do it anymore, El. I was just...” He exhaled and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “I converted everything into anger. The hurt of missing you, of not being the one you chose \_\_\_”

“I did choose you.” I had to make that clear. “Be angry about whatever you want, but not that. I did choose you, Joel.”

He frowned and glanced at me tiredly. “You didn’t, though. I waited for you—and then to hear you’d decided to give your wife a second chance... I—”

“What?” It was my turn to frown. “I didn’t—I was late to come back home, but I didn’t give her a second chance. I don’t know where you got that from. There was no second chance to give anyway. Lizzie had moved out when I returned from Uzbekistan.”

I couldn’t blame her. We’d turned each other into our worst nightmares. She’d tried to change me, always bitching and complaining, and I’d grown heartless.

Joel looked like he was trying to solve a math problem beyond his comprehension. “I’m too exhausted to sift through hazy memories. Can you give me the timeline of what happened when you came home?”

Thanks to my talk with Reese earlier, I’d dusted off a few of those memories already.

“My contract in Uzbekistan took longer to carry out, so I came home after roughly five months instead of two,” I said. “At that point, you still had a couple months till you could transfer from Florida, and I didn’t wanna call you until I was done. Lizzie and I started our divorce proceedings, and I worked my ass off with Tariq. I didn’t even have time to visit my folks. They had to come up and see me in LA—and Piper drove up too, so I could see Blake. Piper told me you’d reconnected.”

“Okay... Yeah, I reached out to her on Facebook,” he murmured pensively. “I couldn’t find you on there, and I knew it was useless to try your phone.”

When I was in the field, yeah. I usually didn’t bring it with me, which I’d told him.

“I remember that,” he said. “When they headed up to LA to see you. I was on pins and fuckin’ needles, hoping for an update about you. It’s possible I asked Piper more than once about what was going on in your life. I’d just transferred—they let me go a couple months early.”

“All right—well, that’s it. Work and divorce. That was all that was going on in my life for the months I was stateside,” I replied. “Ma was a little bummed and said she hoped we could work things out, Lizzie and me, and I told her I’d already met someone else in San Diego. She changed her tune right away, ’cause suddenly she knew I’d be able to visit more often.”

“And Piper was present for that conversation too?” he pressed.

“Yeah...? We were at dinner.”

He sighed and fell back against the mattress, and he rubbed his hands over his face.

“Tariq and I were off to Mali after that,” I went on. “Hillcroft had a semi-permanent operation there for a few years, and we rotated our security presence every ninety days. By the time I came home, Piper told me you were dating.”

He lifted his head and stared at me. “She actually said that?”

“*Yeah*. What’s going on? Was she wrong?” I didn’t understand the new edge in his tone.

“No, she was fucking *lying*,” he said. “After she went to see you in LA, she came home and said you’d decided to give your marriage another shot.”

What the *fuck*?

“And we sure as hell didn’t start dating that year,” he continued, ticked off. “We slept together once when we were shit-faced, but it was probably another six months before we began an on-and-off kind of relationship.”

Hearing about them together pissed me off, no matter the nature of our discussion, and I had to put some distance between us. I rolled out of his bed and went for my sweats.

It wasn’t possible. My sister could be a little sneaky at times, but not like this. This was a level of deception that hurt people and burned bridges.

If Joel had gotten together with anybody else, it was highly likely I would’ve lost my composure and confronted him,

maybe even publicly, drunk off my ass... Who knew. But it'd been my baby sister. I'd pulled back instead. I'd avoided the situation altogether, and I'd swallowed my hurt every time I had to see them. Like at their wedding. Whenever Blake had a birthday. And once at our folks' anniversary dinner.

"I need a smoke," I muttered.

I still had River's pack in my sweats—

"So you never got back with your wife," Joel stated.

"Fuck no," I snapped. Shit. I blew out a harsh breath and ran a hand through my hair. "You comin' or not?"

Thankfully, he was already leaving the bed, so I headed for the door and opened it, only to come to a stop as two backpacks blocked my path. Our packs from Emerson—he'd brought them back.

I hauled them into our room while frustration built up rapidly within me, combined with a steady current of disbelief and the sting of betrayal. She couldn't fucking have done that to me. To *us*.

I swallowed hard and ended up coughing as emotions rushed up my throat.

*Goddammit.*

"We're not leaving the room, Elliott."

Yeah, we fucking were. Or I was. I needed to breathe. Once I'd dumped our packs by the closet in the corner, I stalked out—

Until I was hauled right back in.

I balled my hands into fists and almost took a swing at him out of pure reflex, but the space between us disappeared too fast. Before I knew it, my body was flush against his, and he kissed me hard and cupped my jaw, the back of my neck, and I fucking imploded. Years of pent-up longing and heartbreak unfurled within me, setting off silent explosions that I didn't know how to release.

There was no hesitation or tensing up. I kissed him back hungrily and got my arms around his middle. We deepened the kiss at the same time as I let my hands roam his back, his shoulder blades, the length of his spine, and down to the top of his ass.

Piper had robbed me of so many years with this man, and I couldn't even wish we'd take it all back because that meant Joel wouldn't have Blake in his life. But I was so fucking livid with Piper—and relieved and hopeful and...beyond motherfucking tired. We had chosen each other, after all.

I pushed my tongue against his, and he melted against me like he used to. Like he'd done during those two brief fairy-tale moments we'd shared in the past.

He locked his arms around my neck, pressing himself impossibly closer to me, and I shuddered and slowed down the kiss. If only a little.

He sucked in a shallow breath and kissed his way down to my neck, where he buried his face. I exhaled unsteadily and pressed my lips to the side of his head.

The bastard made my vision blur, and I had to swallow repeatedly to prevent the most pathetic sounds.

I squeezed him to me as tightly as I could.

He did the same.

I sniffled and screwed my eyes shut.

*You're supposed to be mine, baby.*

*I missed you so fucking much.*

Say it, god-fucking-dammit.

I almost choked on the words, but I had to. I fucking had to.

“You belong to *me*,” I said hoarsely. “You got that?” I withdrew his arms from my neck so I could cup his face in my hands. “I don't wanna miss you another day for as long as I live.”

He nodded jerkily, and I brushed away the tears that rolled down his cheeks with my thumbs. “I missed you so much.”

“Me too.” I kissed him swiftly, then again and again. “No talk about changing the past—but the future has to be ours.”

“You finally say the right things,” he chuckled thickly.

I grinned faintly and rested our foreheads together. “I think the right words were...hey, sweetheart, it’s Elliott. Can I take you to dinner? Something about bachelor pads and...let’s make this work together.”

He sighed contentedly and closed his eyes. “Once we have Blake back, I’ll keep my schedule wide open for you.” He nipped at my bottom lip. “You better do the same for me. I’m a needy motherfucker.”

I chuckled and tightened my hold on him. “I think I can handle your neediness.”

“Good.” He ducked his head, nuzzling my neck. “You’re so fucking mine. You have to be.”

I hummed and combed my fingers through his hair to tug his head back, ’cause I was sensing something else in his tone. An edge.

He faced me reluctantly and let out a breath.

I waited him out.

He clenched his jaw. “I can’t believe she did this.”

Piper.

“You know, she never told me you got divorced...?” He cleared his throat and inched back a little. “I heard it from your folks, and now that I think about it...the way your mom mentioned it, it must’ve happened a while back. Like, it wasn’t new when she said it.”

Christ.

I wanted to believe there was a big misunderstanding, but it was just too much. Too many details, too many things that didn’t add up.

“Piper must’ve suspected something was going on between us,” I said. I eased up too, and I went over to the window between our beds and cracked it open all the way. “If she didn’t view me as a threat somehow, she’d have no reason to sabotage us.”

It was insane to think in those terms about my own flesh and blood. Piper and I had always had a good relationship. Growing up, we’d been ordinary siblings. She’d been an annoying-as-fuck little sister, and I’d been an obnoxious big brother—but we’d been there for each other. Our parents had raised us to be protective of each other.

“I wasn’t exactly subtle in the beginning,” Joel admitted. “I didn’t say anything outright, but I asked about you quite a bit. And I told her I was bi before we drifted apart after college.”

Combined with my divorce and letting my family know I’d met someone in San Diego...and Joel’s transfer...

I lit up a smoke and leaned back against the windowpane.

We could deal with my sister later. Right now, I just wanted to revel in the relief—and stare at Joel.

Something softened in his gaze, and he walked over to me.

Fuck me, but he was stunning. Even more so when he was wearing nothing but boxer briefs.

He lifted my hand and took a drag from the smoke, then exhaled out the window.

I leaned in and kissed his jaw.

“It’s supposed to be us,” he murmured. “You and me.”

“And now it is.” I looped an arm around his neck and kissed the corner of his mouth. “You’re all mine.”

He smiled and blinked sleepily. “All yours.”

---

*Crew Finlay*



Dad and I walked into the common room where we were supposed to meet up with Emerson and the others in a few minutes, and we had a yawning Greer and Adrien following behind us.

It'd felt so fucking good to shower and slip into sweats and a hoodie.

“And he was like, that pasta's called *farfalle*,” I continued, mimicking Adrien's voice. “So I said, oh yeah? You wanna see what I can do with my farfalle knife later?”

Dad rumbled a laugh, and Greer cracked up too.

I grinned and threw myself onto one of the couches.

Adrien shook his head at me, but he couldn't hide his amusement. That was all that mattered. “You were an insufferable abductor.”

“You weren't too good yourself, buddy.” I grinned and waited till he'd sat down next to me before I turned him into my pillow. “In the beginning, at least. Once you let me roam free on the yacht, I got the royal treatment.”

And excellent dickings.

He fanned a blanket out over me, and I got comfortable against his chest.

“You thought I had a personal chef on board.” He was still smug about that.

I would love to respond with something incredibly witty, but I had zero comeback material in my exhausted brain, so I jumped at the opportunity to crash Dad and Uncle Greer's conversation about this place.

“You wanna become a PMC, Dad?” I asked.

He chuckled and shook his head. “No, but I was thinking I wouldn't have minded going this route back in the day. Fewer Skype Christmases and less missing the wife.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Uncle Greer nodded pensively. “It's a miracle you didn't miss any of the boys' births.”

“I’m mostly glad I didn’t miss the creation of them, to be honest.”

I coughed around a laugh. That was my dad.

I remembered missing him when he’d been deployed, but he’d made up for it in spades whenever he was home. Those had been interesting days, since almost all my uncles had been gone a lot. Mom and Aunt Gen had banded together when Dad and Uncle Angus shipped out.

“Your homecomings were better than Christmas,” I admitted.

Dad smiled. “Don’t make me mushy, boy.”

I shrugged, and Adrien kissed the top of my head.

Uncle Greer twirled his finger, gesturing at our surroundings. “You never came down here when you wanted to become a contractor?”

I made a face. “No. I never made it that far.” My ego was still bruised about that. “I aced all the tests they threw at me in DC—until I failed some dumbass talk with their counselors. They were concerned I wouldn’t thrive without a unit.”

Unfortunately, they’d been correct in their assessment.

“Shit. I’d fail that too.” Dad glanced around him and threaded his fingers together across his stomach. “We got lucky.” He nodded at Greer. “We served together most of the time—with Angus.”

I remembered.

Uncle Kyle and Uncle Ben had ended up deployed together as well. Kyle as a badass helicopter pilot, and Ben as a mechanic.

“Sure made the holidays easier,” Uncle Greer murmured. “Fuck, now I miss my kids.”

I grinned. “You’ll be home soon. Give li’l Dylan a smooch from me. And tell Emma-Jo and Kyla I’m still waiting for their FaceTime dance.”

That got him going, and he launched into a story of when his girls got into trouble, which, let's face it, happened all the time.

Adrien squeezed me to him and spoke quietly in my ear. "I'm picturing holidays and introducing my son to your family."

I shivered and looked up at him.

Fuck me, that was almost as hot as dirty talk. Shit like this was gonna make me fall for him insanely quick—I could feel it. For the first time ever. It was overwhelming, not to mention a bit of a mindfuck, to be so certain about something I'd never experienced in the past. I guessed those who said "sometimes you just know" were right.

"I'm ready to bribe his ass off to get him to like me," I murmured. "Elliott has Lakers tickets through work. If he doesn't shitcan me, maybe we can go."

Adrien's eyes lit up with amusement, and he pressed his lips to my forehead. "Remember, I'm raising a little geek. I think he'll be starstruck by your charisma, but you don't need any Lakers tickets. Bring a science magazine, and you're good." He paused. "His father wouldn't mind going to a Lakers game, however."

I grinned. We could make that work. "How about I bring something signed by Roe and Jake? Better yet, we can visit them when they're filming in LA." They were always up to something.

"Mornin'," I heard someone say.

Danny. Followed by Emerson. They trailed into the common room, and I sat up straighter.

## CHAPTER 4

***Joel Hayward***

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“Can we go to the beach tomorrow?”*

*“Absolutely. Right after I pick you up from school.” I pulled her covers up to her chin and dropped a kiss on her forehead.*

*She blinked sleepily and grinned. “I hope you fall off your surfboard again. I’ve never laughed so hard!”*

*I huffed a laugh and sat down on the edge of her bed.*

*“Sometimes, you remind me a little too much of your uncle.”*

*I shouldn’t have brought him up, but I couldn’t help myself sometimes. She’d just spent the weekend with him, and that always left a mark.*

*“He’s awesome,” she said frankly. “After we had McDonald’s in his office, he and Javier showed me where they fight and work out, and I whooped Uncle Ellie’s butt!” She had to be talking about the studio in the basement. I knew they sparred there.*

*“That sounds fun,” I murmured. “You ready to get some sleep?”*

*“No, but I flippin’ have to, don’t I? Parents never listen to their kids.”*

*Lord, she was laying it on thick, my little smartass.*

---

I woke up with a groggy start when someone banged on the door and yelled we had a briefing in the common room in two minutes.

“Fuck.” What was that, half an hour?

Elliott groaned and untangled himself from me, and he almost rolled right off the narrow bed. “Fuck me in the ass, that was barely a power nap.”

I chuckled and yawned. “Let’s revisit my fucking you in the ass soon.”

He smirked and pulled on a pair of jeans from his backpack. “The relief I’m ridin’ is strong enough that I might actually agree.”

Fucking score.

I was mostly teasing him. I did wanna top him at some point, but I preferred to bottom.

That was no joke about the relief, though. Fucking hell, it felt as if my lungs had grown in a matter of hours, allowing me to breathe easier.

Now we just needed Blake, and I’d be the happiest bastard on this earth.

I dumped my backpack on the bed and dug through it. We’d shopped on the go in Spain when we’d needed something. I stepped into a pair of jeans and unpacked one of the beaters still left in its packaging, then grabbed the black flannel shirt.

“Jesus.” Elliott snuck in and kissed me hard. “I’m gonna have to get back in shape. You’re too sexy.”

I smiled and kissed him too. This was fucking ridiculous. How the anger and hurt and betrayal had just vanished into thin air. Well—I’d redirected mine to Piper. But I couldn’t think about her now. I didn’t *want* to.

“Don’t change a damn thing.” I loved every inch of his body. He’d always been a little stockier than me, and that was how I wanted him. All strength and masculinity, scruff, silver mixing with the brown, those sexy eyes...

*Focus.*

We’d get to the fun shit later.

It wasn’t easy. Years of mourning and fuming, of missing him, suddenly replaced by relief and fucking giddiness, combined with the crippling pain of knowing my daughter was scared out of her mind somewhere. My head couldn’t be more fucked.

We finished getting ready, and we ducked into the bathrooms to take a quick leak before we made our way to the common room.

I folded up the sleeves of my shirt.

Everyone was accounted for.

Coach and Danny had made coffee.

I didn’t say no to that. I poured a mug for Elliott as well. He took his spot next to Coach by the whiteboard, so I sat down next to Crew and Mercier.

“Hey, man. How’s your hearing?” Crew asked.

“Good as new, almost. Just some minor ringing left. You?”

“All better.” He smiled, and it looked...awkward. Forced. Was he nervous?

“Let’s get started, everyone,” Coach said. “Before Elliott takes over, I just wanna say we have one Gulfstream headed for DC in two hours, and a Bombardier headed for Barcelona in about three. Danny, Em, and I will be on our way home. Greer and Cullen...?”

“Yeah, count us in,” Cullen said, glancing over at Crew. “Looks like my boy didn’t need to be rescued after all.”

“Heh.” Crew bit at a cuticle and cleared his throat. “I’m still hella humbled youse came. Annoyed as fuck, sure, but

humbled. We needed your assistance with what the operation turned into.”

“Absolutely.” Mercier inclined his head. “My own method might’ve worked, but the cartel would’ve been back on its feet much quicker than it will now—if it ever sees the light of day again. I’m incredibly grateful.”

“It was a successful operation,” Elliott stated. “We got Shay back too, and he was obviously our priority. It’s good to see you in high spirits, kid.”

Shay smiled sleepily from where he was wedged between River and Reese on their couch.

“Now, Crew...” Elliott returned his attention to this couch, and Crew stiffened next to me. “I think we can all agree that you fucked up royally but did the right thing. Those of us who’ve been in the service know that doing the right thing isn’t always synonymous with following orders. Do I ever wanna see that behavior from you again? Abso-fucking-lutely not, but if it happens, I trust you to make the right call.”

Well put.

Cullen had something to say to his son too. “I think most of us have been in this situation before. Now’s when you get reprimanded by your superior—you take your punishment with a smile—and you also get the pat on your back for a job well done that won’t appear in any of the reports.”

“Because protocol must be followed,” Greer added with a slight smirk.

Elliott smiled a little and took a sip of his coffee. “You can help me rebuild my patio when we get home. That’s your punishment. But it’s mostly because I wanna see more of you. Ryan’s been lettin’ me know your confidence isn’t what it should be, so I don’t want you to get shit confused here, Crew. Making the right decision in the situation you were in would’ve set us back.”

“Our op in Colombia could’ve ended in disaster too,” Reese added. “But instead we had you bridging a gap between us and Mercier.”

Crew pinched his lips together and nodded once, and judging by the glassiness in his eyes, he was struggling to speak. The relief was clear, though. He'd needed to hear this, and he hadn't been certain he would. He'd probably feared worse ramifications.

Sensing he was overwhelmed, I didn't add anything to what the others had said, but I'd say my bit when everything was over. He'd made the call I wouldn't have been able to make. Same with Ortega, who was desperate to see his wife again. We looked at things from another perspective, and emotional attachment kept us from doing what was strategically better sometimes.

"Shall we move on to the Fed?" Elliott drawled.

I glanced over at Mercier, who smiled wryly. He wasn't precisely worried, unless he was hiding it well. To me, it was a done deal. He'd had his mission, and we had ours. He'd put his work first, as he should've, but he'd also assisted us to the best of his capability.

"There can't be any beef," Crew blurted out, then cleared his throat. "He's done a lot for us, and as of a few hours ago, he ordered his partner to make sure we won't have to face law enforcement when we go home. This applies to everyone who was at Elliott's ranch, plus Dad and Uncle Greer. As far as anyone in the US is concerned, the Hillcroft guys weren't involved at all. And also—he's coming with us to Europe. He was supposed to go bring his son home from space camp, but he talked to his old man, who's gonna surprise Jack with a museum tour in Texas, and—"

"Crew." Elliott put a stop to Crew's rant. "That's..." He lifted his brows, presumably processing everything, and he let out a chuckle. "We definitely appreciate what he's done. There's no beef, so you can chill. It ain't the first time field operatives have crossed paths out there, and it won't be the last. Mercier knows this." He paused and tipped his coffee mug at Mercier. "I'm only on the fence about Mercier till I know he's good for you. Federal agents are...well..."



“Legit,” Coach said with a grin. “Fuckin’ government people.”

I leaned back and took a swig of my own coffee.

Mercier sighed. “You know who I’m *not* going to listen to? Unruly little private contractors who can’t spell structure.”

“I’m not sure you can either.” River spoke into his coffee mug. “The Feds’ alphabet stops at B for bureaucracy.”

Everyone cracked up at that, including me, including Crew, who finally appeared to relax.

“To be fair, that’s impossible to spell without autocorrect,” he laughed.

“You don’t even use yours,” Cullen chuckled and shook his head.

“Cause I wanna learn!” Crew exclaimed.

“It’s fine—we wanna make the Fed feel right at home with us,” Elliott went on. “From now on, if you wanna speak, Mercier, you gotta fill out a form.”

“And we’ll get back to you in six to eight weeks,” Danny finished.

“To let you know that you filled it out wrong,” I added.

“Oh-ho!” Danny laughed. “*That.*”

“There’s still hope for you, though,” Coach told Mercier. “If you wanna join Hillcroft, come talk to me.”

“Fuck that. He’s staying with me on the West Coast.” Crew got territorial.

“Think about it.” Cullen shrugged. “So can Shay.”

Oh boy.

“Excuse me?” Reese sat forward and raised his brows.

“You stay the fuck away from him,” River said.

I withheld my smirk and exchanged a look with Elliott.

*Get us back on track.*

“All right—Christ, shut up.” He took over. “This isn’t a job interview. Coach, Danny, Em, Cullen, Greer, we can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done. If you didn’t collect any valuables at the Blanco estate, let me know and—”

“Yeah, no, we’re good.” Cullen scratched his nose. “We, uh...we took care of that.”

“We’re set,” Greer confirmed.

“Excellent. In that case, safe journey home—and we hope to see you at the barbecue when this is over,” Elliott said.

“I feel so dismissed,” Danny muttered.

Emerson yawned. “I feel so ready to go home. You got this, mates. Best of luck in Europe, and give Ryan a hug from me.”

Danny sucked his teeth. “We still on this, huh? He didn’t fucking win that bet.”

Emerson grinned sleepily and dragged his husband down the hall with him.

What followed was a couple minutes of goodbyes between the elder Finlays and the younger, with Crew swearing he’d be safe, and Coach promising Elliott to stay in touch for transport home in a few days.

*A few days.*

The thought of having Blake in my arms in a few days was almost more than I could bear. A few days was entirely too much, all while I’d already suffered for weeks. And if I had suffered, how was she faring? She was a child, for chrissakes.

Her biggest problem in life should be narrowing down her extensive wish list for her ninth birthday in a couple weeks.

Before Coach walked out of the room, he handed Elliott a printout with the details for our flight—and how to get to the airfield—and they exchanged a few words too quiet for me to hear.

Despite how tired we all were, I felt the shift in the air. More energy. A new round of determination to get the job

done.

I finished my coffee and poured another mug, and I refilled Elliott's as well. We needed all the caffeine.

"I reckon we'll continue where we left off earlier," Elliott said. "Mercier, you're the one with intel. Where do you think we'll find Gajero?"

Mercier set down his coffee mug on a side table. "I don't have a location, but I did find out he's meeting up with Carillo. This was confirmed by Marco."

That was still good news, right? Since we knew exactly where Carillo was at all times.

River tilted his head. "Any idea why Marco had a direct line of communication with Gajero?"

"Insurance," Mercier replied. "Marco wasn't exactly fond of Carillo, so he threw out some bait to see who might be next in line if something were to happen to Carillo."

That made sense.

"Okay, then. That's good," Elliott said. "Do you think Gajero will find out about what happened here anytime soon?"

Mercier weighed his response. "I'd say that's unlikely. Marco had his own freelancer in Europe, to whom I can reach out if I need to, but Marco didn't make it a habit to speak to low-ranking men like Gajero. Chances are, once he'd established a connection, which we know they did at some point, Marco would have delegated. In other words, once Gajero arrives in Europe, he'll report back to Marco's freelancer."

Elliott uncapped his marker. "What's his name?"

"Armando Rossi."

"I heard that name, I think," Shay mentioned. "Enzo was talking to someone else and used the name."

Mercier inclined his head. "I'm not surprised. Rossi goes way back with the Blancos. He married into the side of the family that stayed in Italy."

“We’ll deal with him if we have to,” Elliott said. “When we get to Barcelona, we’ll essentially hit the ground running. But when we’ve reconnected with Darius and the others, we can expect a frustrating stakeout until Carillo and Gajero are together in one place.”

“My guess, based on what Marco hinted around, Gajero will arrive in Barcelona in a day or two,” Mercier informed us. “They’re on an MSC container ship.”

“That’s good to know.” Elliott turned pensive and glanced at Reese.

The two seemed to communicate well without actually speaking.

“We don’t want a new Djibouti on our hands,” Reese murmured.

“Which time?” Elliott smirked. “No, you’re right.” He ran a hand through his hair and faced the rest of us. “I was thinking about interceding earlier—grabbing Gajero before he disembarks, but that could turn messy real fast.”

Yeah, no. I understood how his mind went there, but we’d be in the middle of one of Europe’s busiest ports. Unless he thought about boarding the freighter in the middle of the sea, at which point we’d have a massive ship to search through. It was better we waited.

We didn’t even know if Gajero would get off the ship at the port, or if he had someone...hmm.

I turned to Mercier. “You don’t happen to know how big Gajero’s crew is, do you?”

“Unfortunately not,” Mercier answered. “I tried to dig for information, but Marco was tight-lipped about it. We can *guess* that he’s traveling with a minimum of five guards, though that depends on how many hostages they have. Considering he’s supposed to establish their human trafficking operations—and considering Marco’s interest in the matter—we can’t dismiss the possibility of catching him with several innocents aside from Blake and Marisa.”

I rubbed my jaw and looked at Elliott. “Maybe we should appoint a rescue unit just in case.”

“That’s a good idea.” He nodded. “I already know Gray will wanna be part of that. What about you, Shay?”

“Um, yeah—what does it mean?” Shay sat up straighter.

Reese answered. “In short, the others take the heat. You won’t be near combat. You and Gray—and whoever else—will focus on rescuing hostages.”

“I can be their security,” Crew offered. “A second line of defense, if you will.”

“That would make me feel better.” Reese nodded. “I’m sure we can include Darius as well.”

Elliott made notes on the board. “It’s a good unit. Shay, you and Gray will be in charge of the rescue once the coast is clear, and you’ll have Darius and Crew covering you.”

We all remained silent as he drew up the units he had in mind. First line of defense, snipers and hand-to-hand combat. Which meant Ryan Quinn and me, along with Elliott, Reese, Ortega—

“Switch places between Crew and me,” Mercier said. “I’m decent with close combat, but Crew is actually trained for it. You need him on the front line. I can cover Gray and Shay with Darius.”

He wasn’t wrong. Crew was one hell of a soldier. Or jarhead.

“You know how to make me feel special, papi.” Crew popped a kiss to Mercier’s jaw.

“It’s just the truth,” Mercier replied.

Elliott and I looked at each other. *Papi?*

“My God, the apple does not fall far,” Reese muttered, amused. “Let’s get Greer back here, so he can be proud of his nephew.”

I smirked.

“What!” Crew jutted his chin. “It’s not ’cause we’re kinky or anything. It’s because he’s old. We’re dirty on a vanilla level. You feel me?”

I snorted and took a swig of my coffee.

“How about we move on?” Mercier asked stiffly. “And I’ll show you vanilla later, *kid*.”

“What—you don’t wanna discuss your sex life with us?” I drawled.

River and Shay chuckled.

“You’re in a better mood,” Reese noted.

Who was he talk—wait. He was talking to *me*?

“Huh?” I uttered. I was like Mercier in this group—as in, brand-new. I got the feeling he needed to be eased into the PMC banter madness, and maybe I got that sense because I felt the same thing.

“Nothin’.” Reese smiled and gestured at Elliott. “Proceed, buddy.”

Elliott did proceed, and after making the switch from Crew to Mercier in the rescue team, he added Ramirez as our intel.

We had no idea when and where we would strike; it could be a warehouse, a cabin up in the Andorran mountains, a garage bay in a Barcelona suburb... In short, we’d need the intel in our ears to be vocal, and I’d heard Willow was nonverbal around strangers. She was better running her genius mind in the background.

I hoped I got to meet her one day.

“Before we move out, we gotta gear up,” Elliott went on. “Coach gave me the combination to another supply closet where we’ll find combat gear, weapons, and ammo. There’s a room filled with clothes too, some new, some used. It’s part of undercover training, so we’ll ship it all back when we get home. Pack for a week—and we’ll meet up in the garage out back in half an hour. Any questions?”

“I’m hungry,” Crew said. “Will there be food on the plane?”

“No, and I’m glad you mentioned it,” Elliott said. “We’ll buy that on the way to the airfield. The flight is long, and we need it to sleep and eat.”

Roger that.

“So it’s a private plane?” Crew pressed.

“Yes,” Elliott confirmed. “This model seats twelve passengers in two sections, and I’m gonna pull rank to reserve two of the four chairs in the back section, because they convert to beds. You’re obviously last on the waitlist since you love to remind us how old the rest of us are.” He smiled at Crew.

“Crap,” Crew whispered.

“We can take turns with the other two,” Reese said. “I wanna eat my body weight in sandwiches and study the terrain between Andorra and Barcelona.”

I’d do that too, after I got some sleep. For the first time in days, I actually wanted to sleep. We’d be on a plane moving closer to my girl, so it felt all right. We’d accomplish things in our sleep, literally.

---

At 6:49 AM, the seven of us walked into a shop outside the city, and most of us grabbed baskets. It was part convenience store, part pharmacy, part gas station. And we were hungry as hell.

Upon seeing a sign in the back reading “*panadería y pastelería*,” I let the scents of baked goods lead the way. So add “part bakery” to this slice of heaven.

On the way, I was throwing random shit into my basket. Chocolate bars, candy marketed for children—knowing full well I’d probably have an opportunity to pick stuff up in Spain. But it made me feel closer to Blake. We were officially on our way to her.

Elliott grabbed a bag of chips and threw it into my basket too. Or, our basket?

“Fuck yeah, get a few of those,” I heard Reese say closer to the back. He and Shay had reached the baked goods already, while River was inspecting something nearby. “Riv, you want your orejas with cinnamon sugar, right?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I turned around when I felt Elliott pressing a kiss to my neck.

I smiled and got his mouth with mine.

“It’d been too long,” he murmured.

Christ, I was finally gonna get to know this version of Elliott, the one I’d only caught glimpses of so far. The one who was so fucking sweet and affectionate.

“We can’t have that.” I teased the tip of his tongue with mine and locked an arm around his neck.

He squeezed me to him, sending ripples of pleasure through me. His hugs were the fucking best. Tight, encompassing, warm. Being *held* by Elliott Jones was unlike anything else.

“I don’t know how, but I’m gonna take credit! One way or another, I played a part!” That was Reese. Maybe he was high.

Elliott chuckled and broke from the kiss, only to glance at someone behind me, presumably that loud Tenley twin.

I looked over my shoulder, finding Reese there with a bag of sweets, and he was chewing on half a...something.

“Whoa. *Boss*.” And now we had Crew’s attention on the other end of the aisle too.

“Oh, shut up and mind your own business,” Elliott said. With zero annoyance in his tone. “Joel’s mine, end of bedtime story time.”

I grinned at him while the others dispersed. “Let’s get some pastries for the flight. I’m in the mood for tres leches.”



“Damn—that sounds good.”

---

The Hillcroft people might know a thing or two about roughing it in everything from the rainforest to the desert, but they were familiar with luxury too. We boarded the private Bombardier jet with all our backpacks to the sight of the sun rising over the mountains, and Elliott was quick to usher me past the kitchenette slash bar and serving area, past the first seating section with eight incredibly cushy-looking chairs, past the bathroom, and back to where we were gonna catch some Zs.

He was clearly on a mission, so I let him do his thing. One chair on each side of the aisle could be slid sideways before reclining fully. It made for a narrower aisle, but those beds he'd been talking about were double. We were gonna be able to sleep next to each other.

Next, he pulled out plastic-wrapped sheets from a side compartment.

“You've done this before,” I deduced.

“Once or twice.” He sent me a brief smirk before fanning out the sheet.

Then he was shoving our bags underneath the seats.

I raked my teeth across my bottom lip and glanced back into the other section where the guys were inspecting the bar and the movie selection.

Jealousy burned in my gut at the thought of Elliott sharing a bed with others. Sleeping with others, holding others, kissing them, fucking them. I didn't care if they were men or women, a one-night stand or that fucking idiot he'd actually gotten engaged to a few years ago.

He was mine, goddammit.

“You ready to get some slee—hey, what's with the scowl?”

I composed my face and tried to shake it off. “Nothing. Just don’t like thinkin’ about you with others.” I shrugged out of my shirt and draped it over the thin pillow closest to me. That would be my bed.

“Uh, and why were you doing that in the first place?” he asked.

“Because you said you’ve done this before, asshole. You’re supposed to lie.” Fuck, I had to get a grip. I was being ridiculous.

The dick actually smirked at me.

“And you know what we never talked about?” I pressed. “You getting engaged to that damn security guard.”

He coughed around a laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “When were we supposed to talk about it? The years we didn’t acknowledge each other, or the twenty minutes since we kissed and made up?”

I shot him a glare—*motherfucker*—and sat down on the bed to remove my boots.

Elliott sat down next to me and settled our bags of convenience store goodies between his feet. “First of all, me saying I’ve done this before only means I’ve done *this*—I’ve combined two chairs into a nice bed on a private jet. I distinctly remember boarding the jet after two months in Nicaragua, looking like I’d entered a mud-wrestling contest. For the record, the shower in the bathroom is fucking tiny. And then I crashed.” He nudged my elbow with his. “*Alone, Joel.*”

Was he just saying that?

I side-eyed him.

“Secondly,” he went on, leaning in. He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “You know why I split up with my ex? Apparently, I talked in my sleep and said the wrong name one time too many, and that’s how he justified cheating on me.”

Fuck.

I was a moron.

“Tell me it was my name you said in your sleep,” I muttered.

His mouth twitched with amusement. “You know it was.”

Okay. Good. Now I could refocus. “That asshole cheated on you?”

“Out of *hurt*, he said. Can you believe that?” he chuckled.

No. I really couldn't.

Well. I could believe the hurt, but to retaliate by cheating was just a shitty excuse for being a shitty person.

I released a breath and relaxed a little. “I may be a possessive dick, but I hate betrayal. I'm sorry you had to go through that.” Then I grabbed his hand. “I'm also sorry for this freak-out. I wish I could say it won't happen again, but we've missed out on so much time together that it's gonna be a while before I feel we're really in this together.”

He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “We'll remind each other as often as it takes. How's that?”

I nodded once and kissed his cheek.

“My ego's been bruised enough that I won't mind the outbursts of jealousy,” he admitted with a little smirk. “You'll probably be on the receiving end of similar moments of insecurity from me.”

I smiled, despite it was fucked up. I'd only ever felt possessive and jealous when it came to Elliott, because...I didn't know. He was different, and he hadn't truly been mine before. He'd been that dream guy I'd been low-key in love with for twenty-five years who kept slipping through my fingers.

He was mine now, though. And he was going to stay that way.

---

*Shay Tenley*

“Baby, wake up. *Shay.*”

I gasped and coughed as I was wrenched away from the cell, from the smell of rust and soil, from the constant humidity, from the darkness—and I sat up and scrubbed at my face, suddenly surrounded by luxury cloaked in darkness.

*Fuck.*

“Come here.” River lifted his arm, and I was quick to cuddle up against his side. He tucked me in with my blanket. “You sure you don’t want us to take the other bed in the back?”

I nodded and pressed my face against his chest, mildly annoyed he wasn’t smelling of his usual body wash.

I needed movement, sound, and familiar scents to ground me when I fell asleep. At least, that’s what instinct told me. I could anchor myself to River and Reese. Even to Crew and Mercier, who’d fallen asleep to a movie behind us.

Crew’s snores and the movie running were reassuring.

I took a deep breath and tilted my head against River’s chest, and I yawned and reached for my soda on the table.

The jet had two seats on one side and a single chair across the aisle, so we’d taken the first in the two-by-two section, where I could keep both River and Reese in my view. The latter was watching me over the screen of his laptop.

“I’m okay,” I said.

The nightmare I’d had at Hillcroft’s training facility had been much worse. It’d been so quiet there, so I’d been completely consumed by the nightmare. Until Reese had woken me up, and I’d felt like I’d just run a marathon, complete with pounding heart, labored breaths, and cold sweat.

Reese didn’t have to say anything. I knew I was gonna meet with a counselor when we got home. River had spoken about one at Hillcroft who specialized in trauma and PTSD.

I wasn’t looking forward to it.

I took a swig of my Coke before returning it to the table.

“Get something more to eat, sweetheart.” Reese dug through our bag from that gas station and handed over a wrapped sandwich.

He must’ve made it earlier. He’d bought bread and fixings.

I sat up and accepted the food, and I removed the plastic. “Did you make this?”

“Yeah. Unless I wanna see you and River pick apart a loaf of bread like two animals, I gotta prepare your sandwiches beforehand.”

I grinned and bit into the bread, and it was so fucking good. Cheese, ham, tomatoes, and the tastiest bread I’d had in a while.

“You’re the best,” I said with my mouth full.

He winked at me and returned his attention to the laptop.

I held up the sandwich to River, and he growled playfully when he took a big bite.

A shiver of contentment rolled through me.

I was gonna be okay. I had these two with me, every step of the way.

---

### *Elliott Jones*

I yawned, adjusting the waistband on my boxer briefs, and left the bathroom, then peered into the front cabin, where everyone but Reese was asleep. Or maybe River and Shay were up too—I could only see the backs of their heads.

Crew was...a funny sight. Head resting on Mercier’s shoulder, mouth open. It was a wonder Mercier could sleep through those snores.

I scratched my chest and returned to the back, and I closed the curtain before slipping under the blankets with Joel again.

It was late afternoon outside, but in here, it might as well be the middle of the night. All window screens had been dimmed; all lights that could be turned off had.

He hummed sleepily as I pressed my lips to his shoulder.

Fuck, I couldn't keep my hands off him. Close wasn't close enough. Another yawn slipped out, and I buried my face against his neck.

This was how I wanted to sleep every night for the rest of my life, with his perfect body pressed against mine, his ass against my cock, my hand roaming his front... Okay, in the future, I wanted to ban underwear in bed, but the rest was fantastic.

"How long have we slept?" he mumbled drowsily.

"Just a couple hours." I drew a deep breath as sleep grabbed me in its clutches again. We had a solid five or six hours before we landed.

I drifted off to the intoxicating feeling of brushing my fingers along his abs.

"You can't do that," he grumbled, wriggling against me.

"Do what?"

"Be all seductive."

What? "I'm *cuddling* with you."

"Well, your cuddling is pornographic."

I let out a groggy chuckle and stopped moving my hand. My head felt too heavy, my eyes wouldn't open, and we needed more rest. I was *not* gonna let my cock lead the way here. I was a forty-five-year-old man. I could control myself.

It wasn't the time or the place.

So I'd *really* appreciate it if he'd stop shifting his ass against my hardening cock.

"Joel..."

"*What?*" he whispered defensively. "You started this."

Goddammit.

In a swift move, I dropped an openmouthed kiss along his neck and slipped my hand down his underwear, finding him rock hard.

“Fuck,” he exhaled.

I gripped his cock tightly and pressed my own against his delectable little ass. “We’re supposed to sleep.”

He groaned, the sound just barely reaching above the hum of the engine. “I just need to feel you, baby.”

Christ, I was screwed around this man. When he said shit like that, how could I resist? I’d been powerless before—and now I’d gone years missing him. Yeah, there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell I’d even try.

I twisted my body to dig out my backpack from under the seats, and I managed to find my toiletry kit.

Joel knew what the rustling meant, so he scrambled out of his boxer briefs. “You better be safe. I wanna feel all of you.”

“You got nothing to worry about.”

We’d have to make do with Vaseline for now.

I coated two fingers before leaving the jar on the armrest on Joel’s side, and he pushed away the blankets. *Good boy*. The indicator lights and the spotlight strip in the floor provided just enough illumination for me to drown in the sight. And I had to see him. He was all shadows and contrasts, soft flesh and firm muscles, a smooth, rounded ass with the finest little hairs, sexy thighs, and ass dimples.

He pulled up one leg, lying halfway on his stomach, and I eased my fingers between his ass cheeks and rubbed his opening.

“Finally...” He made a sensual motion, pushing against my fingers, only to press his cock against the mattress a second later.

I leaned over him a little and kissed the spot between his shoulder blades.

I finger-fucked him slowly, stroking his inner walls, and just watched him move. He had a hand wedged between himself and the mattress, and I could stare at the muscles shifting under his skin for hours. And how his ass clenched and unclenched.

“Fucking beautiful.” I withdrew from him after a while and coated my fingers in the Vaseline some more, but this time, I slicked up my cock instead. “You remember what you told me once when I asked if you wanted my cock?”

He laughed breathily. “Definitely.”

Yeah. I liked that. Definitely infinitely.

“I’ll take that as a vow.” I kissed his shoulder and pressed my cock between his cheeks, and he shuddered and pushed back.

*Jesus fuck.*

I closed my eyes, my forehead landing between his shoulder blades, as I sank my cock into his tight ass. He felt too damn good.

“I missed you.” I gripped his hip when I was all in, and I pressed myself as close as I could so I felt his every tremor. “How do you feel?”

“Chock-full,” he chuckled, his voice strained. “Christ, Elliott.”

I grinned and pulled out a little, only to push in again, and he groaned and clenched down on me.

I cursed and shuddered.

“You said you wanted to feel me.”

“I forgot you were a monster.”

I laughed and set a slow pace so he could adjust. His cock wasn’t smaller than mine, and though I could admit I’d started wondering what it would be like to be fucked by him, it would be a while.

When Joel began moving again, I knew he was ready.



In a way, it was the perfect fuck. A fuck full of lazy kisses and hard grabs, a fuck that just screamed *I missed you*. No finesse or any positions that made our joints protest. We held each other. He reached back for me, and I met every movement with one of my own.

Over and over, I pushed my cock in and out of his ass, and I fed off his hungry little noises. And the sight of him. His delectable body, how he twisted his torso, how he arched his back, how he pressed his ass against my cock, how the soft flesh of said ass jiggled every time I slammed in.

I cursed at the buildup. It happened too quickly for my liking. But we'd save that for the next time. When we got home or when we had more time to really savor every second.

I'd lick every inch of him. We'd choke on each other.

"I can't say it enough—I missed you so much." I pressed my face against his neck and picked up the pace.

He gasped and reached down to squeeze my buttock, his blunt fingernails digging into my flesh. "Harder, baby. I need it."

"Only from me." I removed his hand and placed it on his cock so he could get himself off, and then I gripped his hip tightly and began fucking him harder. "Say it, Joel."

He had to press his face against the pillow to muffle his groan. "Only you—God, right there."

He had to be close. I eye-fucked him as he stroked himself, and he was holding his cock too loosely, as if he was staving off his orgasm. Then *that* little movement...when he swiped his thumb over the wet slit—it drove me fucking crazy.

"I'm gonna come." I bit back a groan against his neck and screwed my eyes shut, the pleasure washing over me and triggering a full-body shiver.

The quietest whimper escaped from Joel's lips, the only indication that he'd lost his fight. A beat later, I watched come erupt from his cock, and I was fucking gone. I sank my teeth into his shoulder and started coming, and I pumped my release deep into his ass.

*All mine. Consider yourself marked for life.*

---

***Shay Tenley***

I yawned and stretched my arms over my head, and I looked out the window, seeing absolutely nothing. It was pitch-black. What time was it?

I'd never been to Spain before, but given the nature of the trip, it probably wasn't appropriate to feel a little excited. On the other hand, I was still pinching myself to believe I was free. Reveling in that feeling, enjoying myself a little, couldn't be wrong. Could it?

"What time is it in Barcelona?" I asked. I only knew we were landing in an hour.

Reese was busy preparing our breakfast, so River answered.

"About one in the morning, I reckon."

"Whoa. What?" I peered outside again, then at Reese and the spread of bread and toppings on the table. Coffee, cocoa, juice... It wasn't breakfast. It was...a fucking midnight snack...?

Reese chuckled. "There's a kink we should explore. Mindfucking by time zones."

"But it's *morning*—we just woke up," I protested.

Did I come off as a complete novice here? River and Reese had taken me to Europe before. We'd even brought my brothers to London. But we hadn't been running on too little sleep after a cartel war and weeks of being held hostage. We hadn't evaded airport security then either. We'd stood in line like all the others, and we'd flashed our passports like we were supposed to.

Crew groaned behind me. "Good mornin'."

“No, you mean good evening,” I corrected and peered over the top of my seat.

He squinted at me, then out the window, then his watch. “Oh right. Adrien, wake up.” He stood up and stretched. “I gotta piss.”

“It smells like sex back there,” I informed him.

River and Reese laughed at that.

Crew chuckled and raised his brows. “Good for the boss. He’s been needin’ to get laid for months.” He paused, turning thoughtful. “You think he’s a top or a bottom? Or vers?”

“Total top,” I replied frankly. “He’s got that top aura.”

“Top aura,” Reese chuckled. “What the fuck is top aura?”

“Mercier has it too,” I said and shrugged.

“I’m gonna go ask him,” Crew said. “Elliott! Time to wake up!”

“For the love of...” That was a grumbling Mercier.

I liked Crew.

“Turn around and eat your breakfast, little one,” Reese said.

I did as told and got comfortable with my blanket across my lap, and I accepted a cup of hot chocolate and a plate with a new sandwich. “Thank you—but I think you mean midnight snack.”

He just shook his head in amusement.

I took a big bite of my sandwich and peered out the window again. I could see faint patches of city lights far below.

We were almost there.

## CHAPTER 5

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*She yawned. “I love you.”*

*“I love you too. More than all the s’mores and cookies in the world.”*

*She gasped. “Even Nana’s dulce de leche bars?”*

*“Even those.” I booped her on the nose before I reached over her to close the tent properly. Back to civilization tomorrow. But we’d had a good camping trip, just Blake and me and all the Redwoods California had to offer. We’d seen sea otters, we’d collected some sea glass, and we’d gorged on s’mores and cookie dough.*

*“You’re crazy, man,” Blake told me.*

*I chuckled and got comfortable next to her.*

*She sighed contently and planted her arms over the sleeping bag. “I think I want a sea otter for my birthday.”*

*I grinned. “Where would we keep it?”*

*“Uncle Ellie’s pool,” she snickered.*

*I snorted under my breath.*

*The man had moved in to his new ranch mere days ago, and Blake had managed to mention he had a pool at least a dozen times.*

*“How many things do you have on your wish list at this point?” I asked.*

*“Like, twenty-seven.”*

*I rumbled a laugh. “Narrow it down to five, thanks.”*

*“Okay, five sea otters.”*

*I cracked up.*

---

I threw on my backpack on the way out, and I jogged down the steps with Elliott close behind me.

“The Tenleys in the first SUV, Joel and I are with Mercier and Crew,” he instructed.

It felt like a scene from a movie to see two SUVs waiting for us on the tarmac of the private airfield north of Barcelona. But in a shitty Hollywood movie, they’d be black with tinted windows. These didn’t stand out in a crowd—or a parking lot. Elliott tossed me the keys and nodded at the silver SUV; he was on the phone with Darius, and the Tenleys headed for the red vehicle. Except for Reese. He spoke to the only man present, and he didn’t look like a guard employed here. He wore a suit and spoke English. Either he was a Hillcroft operative or someone they knew.

Crew jogged up alongside me. “Hi. I drive.”

“There’s no use in arguing with him.” Mercier sounded like he spoke from experience.

Crew made a gimme-motion at the keys.

All right. I handed them over. I couldn’t say I cared about who drove.

After we’d tossed our bags in the back, Crew got in behind the wheel, and I ducked into the back seat with Elliott. Once Mercier was seated next to Crew, we were off.

“We wanna get on the E-15 going south, then follow the signs for Terrassa and Manresa,” Elliott ordered. “The E-9 will

take us to Andorra.”

“Got it,” Crew replied.

He tore out of the spot and seemed to know exactly where we were going. Where to turn, which signs to follow to get us out of the private airfield, then onto the road heading toward Barcelona. Logistics weren't my forte. I was always transported by others to get where they needed me.

I scratched my ear.

“Yeah, we're on our way now,” Elliott was saying. “ETA two hours. Did you manage to put a tracker on their cars?”

Crew sped up as soon as we reached the highway, and speed limits seemed to be more of a suggestion in his world.

I didn't mind. The sooner we got there...

“Remember what we said about speeding, sweetheart?” Mercier gripped the bar above the door on his side.

I smirked to myself.

“Yeah, it gets us places quicker,” Crew replied. He checked the rearview. “Step on it, Tenley. My grandma drives faster than that.”

“I just had to get hooked on a New Yorker,” Mercier sighed.

I met Crew's grin in the rearview, and it was possible Elliott had called me a lunatic in traffic once or twice before too. Only, I'd been eighteen at the time.

Elliott covered his phone with his hand. “Crew, I think the limit's 120 or 130 kilometers an hour here. Not...for fuck's sake, not 180.”

“Listen to your boss,” Mercier advised.

Crew didn't listen to anyone. If anything, he sped up further.

I looked behind me.

“Reese will catch up with us next week,” Crew said.

“At this rate, we’ll see you in twenty minutes,” Elliott told Darius. “Get back to me if you hear anything.” He ended the call soon after, and he gave us a rundown. “We have trackers on three of Carillo’s five vehicles, the man himself hasn’t left since they arrived, there’s nothing ostentatious about the cars, the house they’re in is fairly modest, and two guards take turns running errands. In other words, we think this is another safehouse. They probably won’t stay there long.”

“Is that good or bad?” Crew asked the question I wanted to ask too.

“I’d say it’s good,” Elliott responded. Mercier nodded once, agreeing. “Andorra’s great for those who need a hiding spot, less great for those who wanna plan an ambush.”

“Are they in Andorra la Vella?” Mercier wondered.

“No, which makes it worse,” Elliott said. “They’re up in the mountains looking out over the city. One narrow road, zero options for attacking at another angle.”

All I knew about Andorra came from Wikipedia. The tiny country’s capital sat at the bottom of a mountain range, with sharp slopes and peaks surrounding it on all sides. There was one way coming in, one way going out, pretty much. Popular ski resort in the winter, popular shopping destination for spring and fall, ideal vacation spot in the summer.

Oh, and they had no formal extradition treaty with the US.

“Do we have a lot of criminals hiding out here?” I asked curiously.

“Mercier will know that better than me,” Elliott answered. “My *guess* is it’s popular for safehouses, but...”

“You’re not wrong,” Mercier filled in. “A colleague of mine in DC used to work on mapping out US citizens’ illegal operations overseas, and he ended up here fairly often. It’s a great place to hide out and regroup, but they keep their operations in Spain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, and so on.” He paused. “Once you get deeper into the world of organized crime in Europe, you start seeing the patterns. Meetings in Monaco, hideouts in microstates like Andorra and

Luxembourg, distribution centers around major ports, and warehouses along all the drug routes. That's where you connect all the shell corporations to small shipping companies and massage parlors. Germany's a hotbed for human trafficking—it's like the big waiting room for young girls from Eastern Europe before they're shipped off to the UK, Scandinavia, France, et cetera.”

Elliott shook his head. “I reckon that's the reason most of us quit in the end. It's fucking exhausting—you bring home one girl, only to hear on the news how four more got kidnapped. You blow up a trafficking ring, and three new ones appear. You order a drug interdiction at sea and seize four tons of coke, and twenty slip right by.”

“Mm.” Mercier nodded and dropped his gaze to his lap.

Crew sought him out and squeezed his hand.

I glanced over at Elliott, who was staring out the window, lost in thought.

He may have quit that field, but he still did a whole lot. I wasn't talking about the protection rich bankers and politicians paid for either; we all needed a moneymaker. It was the rest. Elliott and Tariq had made a name for themselves in local communities over the years, offering free assistance, rides, and security for small business owners, single parents with children in rough neighborhoods, and protection for vulnerable populations outside their places of worship. You didn't see any of that on their website, but if you happened to know Elliott's parents, they were happy to tell you.

Unless anything had changed recently, most security guards at their agency worked for free one shift every month—well, not free. They didn't get paid for those hours, but they did get extra benefits like cheaper medical insurance, paid maternity leave, stuff like that. So for that one shift, guards like Crew and the guy who'd been murdered at Elliott's place—Toby?—they helped people who couldn't afford security.

Elliott had dedicated his whole life to helping others, and he'd received no credit for it. PMCs didn't get recognition. No medals, no status, no praise.



How many Blakes had he returned to their parents over the years?

Knowing him, he didn't give two shits about recognition, but I hated that he'd been knocked down. It fueled my anger toward Piper too, because I should've been there for him all these years. I should've been the man he came home to after a mission; we should've sat there on *our* porch and nursed each other's work headaches. And yet...because of this unfortunate twist of fate, because my supposed best friend was a wretched fucking bitch...I had my daughter.

I had Elliott now too, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life making him happy. He'd never experience loneliness again. He'd never be betrayed again.

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The border crossing was completely deserted at this hour, so we just drove into a whole other country with nobody giving a fuck, something Crew ranted about while he drove like a sweet maniac.

"Like, you shoulda seen me and Gramps rollin' into Monaco," he said. "I asked him when we'd get to the border, and he was all, we already passed it."

I unbuckled Elliott's seat belt and nodded for him to scoot closer to me. He wasn't out of his funk yet, and it was time to intervene. Crew had plugged an address into the GPS, so he didn't need Elliott's orders for another...sixteen minutes.

"Plenty of speed cameras in Andorra, just so you're aware, dear," Mercier drawled.

"Oh. Good to know," Crew replied, slowing down.

Elliott slid into the middle seat, and I sat up straighter and lifted my arm.

He managed to smile a little and furrow his brow at the same time. I bet he wasn't used to being taken care of. That ended now.

He didn't protest, though. He leaned against me and sighed contentedly, and I kissed the side of his head.

"When we get home," I murmured for only him to hear, "I think it's important I stay at your place for a while. Crew can help us restore your porch, we'll upgrade your security together, we'll put together a memorial for Tariq..."

*We'll let Blake run around like a goofball, we'll throw steaks on the grill, we'll heal.*

I'd already started researching psychologists specializing in PTSD in children. It was going to be a painful journey up ahead, and we should walk it together, the three of us. Then Elliott could comfort my broody ass when it was Piper's week with Blake.

I had no doubt my superiors would let me take a leave of absence. I couldn't imagine returning to work right away. In a few months, when I didn't panic every time Blake left the room, which I knew was going to happen.

Elliott didn't respond. He just wrapped an arm around my middle and squeezed me tightly.

I was certain. I was going to see my little girl again, and I was going to build my life with Elliott. At long fucking last.

I spent the next fifteen minutes scratching his scalp and taking in the night scene of Andorra la Vella. The city was by no means large. The mountainsides were lit up by chalets and hotel complexes, some apartment buildings too. We drove along a creek, construction sites, gas stations that promised cheap gas, booze, and cigarettes, and outlet stores. I got the message—this was a tax haven.

On a well-paved road dotted with little roundabouts, we drove through the city in almost no time, and then we were on the other side, heading upward.

Elliott sat up a little and wanted to rest his chin on my shoulder, so I gathered our hands between us instead.

"I can't lose you again," he said quietly.

I tilted my head at him and kissed him. “You won’t. You’re it for me, Jones.”

He exhaled, and happiness finally seeped back into his eyes. “Ditto, Hayward.”

“You’re so fucking cute back there.” Crew was evidently watching us in the rearview.

Elliott grinned faintly and rested his forehead on my shoulder for a moment. “That kid, I swear...”

He loved “that kid.”

“Boss, we’re here.”

I looked out the window, between the front seats, as Crew slowed down and veered into a driveway. The two-story house sat on a steep mountainside, with the second story at entrance level and the first farther down the slope. If they used this place to keep an eye on Carillo, he must be fairly close too, though I couldn’t see any neighbors nearby.

We left the car at the same time as a few men came out from the house, and I remembered Darius and Gray from Elliott’s barbecue. Javier Ortega too, of course. I’d met him before. The next man had to be Ryan Quinn; he shared a lot of features with his brother.

“Gramps!” Crew grinned.

Ryan shook his head in amusement and hauled the kid in for a hug. “You had us worried there for a moment, you brat.”

“Turned out, I was just meeting the man of my dreams,” Crew chuckled. “Adrien, you remember Ryan.”

“Vividly.” Mercier smiled wryly and shook Ryan’s hand.

Elliott was busy catching up with Darius and Gray, so I zeroed in on Ortega as he lit up a smoke.

“How you holdin’ up, man?”

“’Bout the same as you, I figure,” he replied. “The confidence comes and goes.”

I knew that feeling. “Mine’s back in full force at the moment.” I lit up a cigarette, too, and took a drag. “It won’t be long now.”

He blew out a breath. “Man, I hope you’re right. I check in with the kids every day, and they keep askin’...”

Yeah. That, I couldn’t imagine. I hadn’t actually spoken to Piper on the phone since we’d left Europe last time, and even before then, it’d been once or twice. I couldn’t deal with her being upset at the same time as I was dealing with my own shit.

I’d text her quick in the morning. First and foremost, she was Blake’s mom.

“Where’s Ramirez?” I heard Elliott ask.

“He’s stayin’ in Barcelona,” Darius answered. “He has a safehouse there with better tech.”

We were hit with the headlights from another car, and I watched Reese pull in between ours and the minivan that was already here.

“Took you long enough!” Crew hollered.

I glanced around us quickly and—

“Is Carillo close by?” Mercier asked.

“No, it’s safe here,” Darius said. Oh good. Or else someone might have to tell Crew to pipe down. “We have surveillance runnin’, so it’s all good. They’re about ten minutes up the mountain, and they have to pass us if they’re goin’ anywhere. Unless they’re heading into France, but that route takes forever.”

“Been there, done that,” Elliott said. “You look at the GPS and wonder how the fuck they estimate it’s gonna take two hours to drive twenty klicks.”

“The *view*, though...” Gray smiled before shifting his focus and walking over to Shay. “It’s so good to see you, man.”

More greetings and hugs followed.

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“...so Darius rented the place from a cycling club—apparently that’s huge in Andorra,” Gray was saying. “Kitchen, bathroom, and living room up here, but as you can see, we’ve put all our gear and stuff in the living room. The downstairs area is just a wide-open space with bunk beds—and another bathroom. Head down and grab a bed, make yourselves at home, and I’ll reheat dinner.”

“Thanks, kid. Good lookin’ out.” Reese clapped Gray on the back before taking the lead down the stairs.

“No problem, oldster,” Gray replied, not missing a beat.

“I knew I liked Gray for a reason,” Crew laughed.

The banter just never stopped in this crowd.

As soon as I had Blake back in my arms, I wanted nothing more than to take part—and to join their level of camaraderie, which I’d envied for years. Between work, deployments, raising my girl, and the shitshow that was Piper, friends were a foreign concept to me. Sure, I had work buddies I met up with for a beer or two every now and then, but that was really it. We went to the same bar, the one where I’d once reconnected with Elliott, and we had a few beers, we played pool, and then I went home, reminiscing about the time Elliott and I were there.

I wanted to make so many changes in my life.

Gray had been right in his description of the downstairs area. Past the entryway and bathroom, the room really was wide open, each wall lined with bunk beds. The center of the floor had nothing but a rug and a small table littered with cycling magazines.

Elliott and I dumped our backpacks on the bottom bunk he claimed as his, and I smacked a kiss to his cheek.

“It’s okay. I can climb.”

“*Hey*. I expect to get that shit from Crew.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“What shit?” Crew asked.

“*Nothing*,” Elliott insisted.

This waiting game before we could get to Carillo was going to be interesting and probably frustrating as hell.

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### *River Tenley*

I leaned back against the car and took another drag from my smoke. Breaking news. All over. I scrolled and scrolled on my phone, headline after headline...

The world knew that something had happened to the Blancos. The world knew the cartel was as good as wiped out.

I exhaled some smoke and counted back... Almost forty-eight hours had passed since we'd left Ecuador. If the sun didn't tell me a new day had begun, I wouldn't have known. We slept a couple hours here and there, whether it was day or night, and we ate, we worked out, we went through surveillance footage, we twiddled our damn thumbs, we hashed and rehashed strategies.

Luiz Gajero was probably arriving in Spain today, and he'd find out about Colombia as soon as he came ashore—if he didn't already know. No need to include any Italian freelancers.

I scratched my forehead.

Their plans might very well change. It was a good thing we had eyes on Carillo at all times, because otherwise, we'd be screwed. I mean, the news about the Blancos was bound to send most affiliates into hiding.

The door opened, and Shay stepped out with Reese.

“There you are.” Shay smiled. “We're headed out for a run. You wanna join?”

“Maybe next time. I’m waiting for Mercier to wake up.” I really liked that guy. We’d talked for hours yesterday, from breakfast to way past lunch, about strategy and the scenarios we might face. His experience was giving me great insight.

“We’ll bring breakfast with us,” Reese said. “Everything okay?”

I nodded with a dip of my chin. “I just wanna be ready. I think we’ll see movement today.”

“Yeah, that’s what the guys are talking about in the kitchen too,” he replied. “Anyway. We have that errand later too.”

I hadn’t forgotten.

“What errand?” Shay wondered.

I smiled. He’d find out soon enough.

Those worthless pieces of shit who’d kidnapped him had stolen his ring, and Reese and I wanted to see a new one on our boy’s finger.

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### *Elliott Jones*

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw and clicked to the next screen. How Ortega and Darius had managed to install four surveillance cameras with direct view of Carillo’s safehouse was nothing short of impressive. The one with the best footage was only some twenty feet away from the house. Every time someone left, we knew about it. Clear view of the driveway as well, and that one was grand. Five cars.

Like our safehouse, theirs sat on the side of a steep mountainside with few entry points besides the driveway.

“You want me to get Ortega?” Darius asked, sitting down next to me on the couch. He handed me a cup of coffee.

“Thanks. Nah, let him sleep.” I’d heard him last night. He slept as restlessly as Joel did. “This is great work, Mr. I’m-sticking-to-low-risk-work-now.”

Darius chuckled into his mug. “No gunfire, no problems. We had Ryan in the trees too.”

That would be Joel soon as well. He and Ryan had been scouting the terrain surrounding Carillo’s place all day yesterday, even though we weren’t sure we’d actually attack here. Chances were we wouldn’t, to be honest. But each plan required several backups.

Joel and Ryan had headed out at first light today too. Recon combined with an early morning workout. Reese and Shay had left shortly thereafter, and River and Mercier were talking Blanco history in the kitchen while Gray prepared breakfast—

“That’s Ramirez.” Darius was checking his phone and answered a call. “Shoot, buddy.”

I flipped to another camera angle and took a sip of my coffee.

Today should be the day. The cargo ship was scheduled to arrive in Barcelona around noon; we just didn’t know if Gajero had disembarked earlier. Ports had increased their security heavily since the early nineties, and if he was coming through with hostages...

If my criminal network was big enough, if I had the right connections, I would’ve made sure a smaller boat met up with the freighter out at sea. But that required a higher degree of corruption; as in, the captain of the freighter would be aware of what was going on.

“That’s incredible,” Darius said. “When is she— Okay.” He listened a while longer before speaking again. “Perfect. Talk soon.” He ended the call and turned to me. “Ramirez and Willow managed to gain access to the Russian’s cell phone. They’ll let us know as soon as they hear anything.”

Hot damn. Willow was really knee-deep in the spyware field with Hillcroft, wasn’t she?

“Incredible’s right—Christ.”

“Ramirez knows better than to explain shit to me, so when he calls, I’ll hand the phone over to you.”



I chuckled. “Sounds good. We should send a text to everyone to be geared up and ready to split, regardless if they’re running errands or out making me feel bad for not doing cardio.”

“Don’t get me started.” He shook his head. “Every time Gray walks around shirtless, I feel the need to go for a run, but then he feeds me cinnamon roll bites instead.”

I laughed. That’d been me yesterday, sans cinnamon roll bites. Joel had returned with Ryan, shirtless and drenched in sweat. Joel had abs that went on for days. Although we didn’t have the age gap Darius and Gray had, Joel was so fucking fit that my doctor telling me “you’re perfectly healthy” felt like a “well, maybe you should drop fifteen pounds and join a gym.”

But Joel insisted he liked the way I looked, so maybe he could learn how to bake cinnamon roll bites instead.



### *River Tenley*

“Cigars, huh?”

“Yup.” I jumped back into the SUV, and Reese pulled away from the curb to take us back to the house.

I’d felt inspired by Mercier earlier, who’d said he was looking forward to his celebratory cigar when he came home. He’d painted quite the picture of his son, his old man, good food, Crew in his arms, a glass of red, a whiskey or two, and a cigar.

Just when we returned to the house, Darius and Ryan stepped out onto the driveway with binoculars.

“Now what?” Reese killed the engine, and we climbed out. “Any updates?”

“Petrov was on the phone with someone we think is traveling with Gajero,” Darius responded. He was peering through the binoculars, aiming them up the mountain, though I

didn't understand what he'd see. Carillo's safehouse was farther away.

"I'll get our bags," Reese told me.

I inclined my head and trailed closer to the brothers. "What're you lookin' for?"

"We can usually see the pillar of smoke comin' from their chimney," Darius answered. "You see anythin', Ry?"

Solid clue of Carillo possibly preparing to move. Andorra was warm in the summer, no doubt, but not overly hot. Evenings were still chilly because of the altitude.

"Nope. We might as well pack the cars," Ryan said.

I'd say so. We already had to be careful when we stepped out in the driveway since everyone who drove past could see us, and if Carillo was, in fact, getting ready to leave, it meant he and his seven closest guards were about to come through. Plus a Russian contractor I couldn't wait to deal with.

Elliott and Darius had already advised us to be ready at all hours, which was essentially our default mode as it was, so it took us five minutes to fill the cars and another ten minutes to make it seem like we'd never been here.

Gray had paper bags filled with snacks for each car, one case of water bottles, power banks, medic bags, and one radio. Ammo was distributed evenly, and we teamed up the way we'd arrived, with one switcheroo. Darius, Gray, Ortega, and Mercier in one SUV, Elliott in another with Joel, Crew, and Ryan, with Reese, Shay, and me in the last. We needed our two snipers to take the lead on this one.

"Yeah, they're leaving." Elliott was on the phone with Ramirez. "Copy that. We're switching to earpieces when we know the destination."

By now, we were all huddled in the entryway, with Joel and Reese keeping watch out the narrow window by the door.

I figured it was a good time... "For afterward, gentlemen." I started handing out the cigars I'd bought.

We needed to throw ourselves into this fight, fully believing we'd succeed without casualties, preferably without injuries too. Blake and Marisa were coming home, end of story.

“I guess we don't believe in jinxing ourselves here...” Joel swallowed, visibly nervous, and accepted a cigar. “Thank you.”

“Jinxing is for hockey,” I said.

He cracked a slight smirk.

“They're comin' 'round the bend,” Reese stated.

This was it, then.

Crew thought it was a great idea to hum “She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain.”

Shay came up to me and spoke quietly in my ear. “Is it wrong to be excited?”

“Yes, absolutely.” I smiled and kissed his cheek to show I was mostly kidding. But yeah, Reese and I had an interesting issue up ahead; that was becoming clear. Shay had always been the one who wanted to be useful and make a difference.

Coach's haphazard offer for Shay to join Hillcroft was his way of testing the waters, and Reese had already texted with Coach to figure out what the fuck he meant by it. And Shay had subtly hinted he was curious.

Luckily, Coach was talking about a noncombat operator. In short, he was interested in talking to Shay about maybe becoming a martial arts instructor for recruits at Hillcroft. A position that wouldn't worry Reese and me to death, all while...Shay would get a taste of the PMC life. And what if he fucking liked it? Huh? What then? He was young. He was the right age for those who left the military behind to join the private sector.

Darius's snort of amusement pulled me from my future headache, and he read something from his phone. “Willow's named our combat units. Renegade Unit 1—Elliott, Joel, Ryan, and Crew. Renegade Unit 2—Reese, Ortega, River.

Renegade Rescue Unit—Gray, Darius, Shay, and Mercier.” He glanced up from his phone. “I guess we’re the renegades.”

I exchanged a wry smirk with Elliott, whereas Crew and Shay fist-bumped and clearly loved the name.

“Okay, that’s cool. I like it.” Gray was on board too. “What a dick magnet.” He sidled up next to Darius and jerked his chin, all flirty. “Hey, big daddy. Did you know I’m a renegade? You wanna come back to my place?”

Darius rumbled a laugh and hugged Gray to him. “My renegade dork.”

“All right, let’s renegade the fuck out of here,” Reese said. “All five cars have passed.”

## CHAPTER 6

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“I don’t wanna say goodbye to her.”*

*Fuck. I cleared my throat and swallowed back my emotions. But when Blake fell apart again, I couldn’t fight the tears to save my life. I picked her up, and we hugged each other tightly.*

*“Why can’t she be an angel later?” she cried.*

*I sniffled and carried her away from the gravesite. My mom had moved back to San Diego, once more, to be closer to Blake and me, and she’d gotten, what, six months?*

*Fuck cancer.*

*It’d happened too fast. My shock had barely settled before I’d had to bury her.*

*“You know what we need now?” I murmured thickly. “Tacos and movies and ice cream and not moving our butts from the couch.”*

*“I think so too,” she croaked. “And maybe new roller skates.”*

*She was totally right. We both needed new roller skates.*

*“We’ll make that happen,” I said, clearing my throat again. Screw this year. I didn’t want any more bad news for at least a decade.*

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**T**his was that moment in every drug interdiction at sea before I had eyes on my target. I knew they were out there somewhere, but I couldn't see them yet. Determination sharpened my focus, and restlessness set my body in motion. I bounced my knee, I drummed my fingers, I bit at my cuticles, and I rechecked my side pockets to remind myself I had everything.

It felt entirely wrong to let Carillo's caravan of criminals drive so far ahead of us. But we couldn't afford to be spotted.

Crew didn't seem to enjoy driving the speed limit.

The road between Andorra and the Spanish flatlands hugged the mountainsides and was never straight for more than a couple hundred feet. At one point, Crew had almost caught up to Carillo, so now Elliott had his laptop up to ensure the distance didn't shrink.

Ryan and I sat quietly in the back seat.

I didn't recognize the software Elliott was using on the laptop. It had to be something advanced that civilians had no access to. There was a live GPS map following the trackers, a constant stream of updates of locations, a message function that he used to communicate with Ramirez and Willow, and walls of code all over.

Elliott shook his head and typed something.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"No—Willow asked if she should give Carillo access to his bank accounts in order to gain more intel, but that would raise suspicion," he replied absently. "He'd know we're trying to set him up."

"Who does he think is behind the freezing of his assets?" Ryan wondered. "He's supposed to believe we're going after Vincente, not him, yeah?"

“Freezing accounts is a standard government action,” Elliott replied. “He knows he’s wanted, he knows the US authorities are actively searching for him, so... But it doesn’t matter at this rate. After the Blanco news spread, it’s possible he thinks it is us, which is why I wanna intervene as soon as Carillo and Gajero are in the same location.”

He didn’t have to tell me why. Blake and Marisa were their leverage. Carillo was undoubtedly not afraid to demonstrate the power he held. It was such a bitch-ass cartel move. I’d seen it so many times. The smugglers we caught in the Caribbean and in the Pacific were sometimes pushing cartel merchandise because someone was holding a gun to a loved one’s head. Mules got extorted and coerced into doing what they did every fucking day. Even more so when it was drivers for narco-sub, something that required more skill.

I released a breath and tried to calm down. My heart was beating too fast for all the *nothing* I was doing.

Eventually, we ran out of mountains. The flatlands took over, and we had to slow down further to prevent detection.

The afternoon sun burned down on the terracotta desertscape, and the heat rested like a liquid blanket on the road.

It felt like an eternity passed before Elliott spoke again.

“They’re not going into Barcelona,” he stated. “We need to get on the C-25 heading north up here.”

“Got it.” Crew checked the rearview and switched to the right lane. “You think they’re going to France?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Elliott frowned and typed rapidly. “If I were them, I’d avoid another border crossing. It depends on—hold on.” Something happened on the screen. A new map appeared in its own window, taking up about a quarter of the screen, and it was tracking dozens of targets along the roads between Barcelona, Girona, and Manresa. “Goddamn, we’re sending Coach a big box of chocolates when this is over. And maybe a nice gun for his collection.”

“What’s going on?” Crew asked.

“He’s using traffic cams to narrow down possible vehicles for Gajero,” Elliott answered. “Those red dots on the map are rentals, cars reported stolen, unregistered vehicles, some he hasn’t found information about yet, and trucks belonging to less-established shipping companies. It’s not foolproof, but it’s a great indicator.”

Coach could have all the chocolate he wanted to, if that was his thing.

By the time we closed in on the city of Girona an hour later, we were down to four targets, all moving in the same direction. Every now and then, a new dot appeared on the map, before Coach dismissed it.

Girona was approximately an hour south of the French border, and we took smaller roads to stay out of sight, all while we monitored Carillo and the Gajero suspect moving closer together. Gajero from Barcelona, Carillo from Manresa and Vic.

“There. They just merged onto the AP-7,” Elliott said. “They’re on the same road now.”

Anticipation buzzed through me.

We passed Girona, and the AP-7 morphed into E-15, where we got on the freeway again. Messages flooded in from their little chat server on the screen at a rapid speed.

“Petrov’s on the phone,” he reported. “Forwarding audio to Mercier unless anyone here speaks German.”

No one said anything.

I’d thought I was all right for being fluent in two languages, and then I’d met these bastards. I already knew Elliott spoke Russian and Farsi along with Spanish, and the Tenleys and Quinns knew their way around several of the languages spoken in the Middle East and Africa. Mercier had worked primarily with Spanish as his main language, though he spoke French, German, and Italian as well.

Did they ever have time to watch TV or were they just crunching dictionaries?



“Jesus Christ, Willow’s fantastic,” Elliott muttered. “Our four targets moving north with Carillo’s entourage are confirmed. Willow infected Petrov’s contact list with spyware, which spread to the person he’s currently on the phone with—whose location is the same as the first dot on the map.”

*Holy fuck.*

*It’s them.*

Blake was there. Right? She had to be. My daughter was currently traveling on the same road I was, a kilometer and a half away from me.

*We’re so close, baby. Almost there. Stay strong a little while longer.*

I glued my eyes to the screen and spotted an incoming message from a new user. The others were Coach, Ramirez, and Willow, but no names were visible, only digits.

“Translation comin’ through from Mercier,” Elliott went on.

“That’s my man.” Crew seemed to struggle to sit still. “How’s this for a corny pickup line—I may have shot you with my Glock, baby, but you got me with Cupid’s arrow.”

I snorted softly.

“That shit needs to be on a card,” Ryan laughed.

“Right?!” Crew bobbed his head to music that wasn’t there.

Elliott shifted in his seat. “Okay, we’re closing in. They’re heading toward the N-260, which puts us right on the French border.” We were going straight up into the mountains again, in other words. “They mention El Port, a small town on the way, and Petrov confirms everything is ready to start their operations.”

“So it’s not another safehouse,” Ryan deduced.

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Elliott confirmed. “Last but not least, they have a warehouse.”

I took a deep breath.

*Daddy's almost there, Blake.*

---

The sun had started to set when we passed El Port and continued up another mountain. We knew exactly where Carillo and Gajero were with their people. We had satellite images of a vineyard and an adjacent warehouse in the middle of nowhere, on a slope a few clicks away from us, and much like in Andorra, we couldn't approach on the main road without being seen. But *unlike* in Andorra, the mountains here weren't as sharp. The terrain wasn't as rough.

Crew led the way to a valley, from where we'd hoof it.

"Five minutes," he said, killing the headlights.

Ryan and I started gearing up. We reached for our combat vests in the back and put them on. Then we grabbed our helmets and attached the mounts for thermal vision and night vision.

"I assume we're a go as soon as it's dark," I said.

"Yes." Elliott scrubbed a hand over his jaw, eyes fixed on the screen. "Finally—let's see..." He'd just received a wall of text from someone. "Bad news and good news. Security's pretty fucking tight—they have cameras covering every angle of the property. Good news—Willow's in."

"Can she turn the cameras off?" Ryan asked.

Elliott hummed, still reading. "Unfortunately not. She can, however, cut the power, but she thinks they might have backup generators."

"How many cartel fuckers are we dealing with here?" Crew asked next.

"Well, we know Carillo has eight men, including Petrov," Elliott said. "And Gajero arrived with four vehicles, two of which are vans—Mercedes Sprinter. So a minimum of...let's say...four drivers, Gajero himself, possibly four or five guards...? Maybe more. I don't know until we get an estimate

on the cargo. If the vans are filled with hostages, we could be talking twenty-five hostiles altogether.”

“And we have seven men ready for combat, so they’re clearly outnumbered,” I said.

“*Man*, I wish I’d said that,” Crew whispered to himself. “That was so badass. You’re badass, Joel.”

I wasn’t badass. I was a father ready to risk everything for the safe return of his daughter. But realistically speaking, the Carillo numbers didn’t scare me. Ryan and I would take care of most of them before the battle even began.

Combat wasn’t about numbers. A single man could defeat hundreds if he had the right weapon. And we did. We just had to ensure Blake, Marisa, and any other possible hostages didn’t get hurt in the mayhem.

Speaking of weapons...

Ryan hauled one of our hardcases from the back, the one containing grenades.

“Maybe we need to take a page from the cartel book and go with shock-and-awe,” I said.

“It has to be quick.” Elliott nodded in agreement. “From the moment we charge, it’s safe to assume they will try to use hostages for cover.”

Over my dead body were they gonna harm Blake any further.

---

Crew found a good hiding spot for us at the foot of the hill, behind a cliff expansion that protected us in case anyone patrolled the peak and looked down. Carillo’s property was just some twenty yards down the peak on the other side, so we had to be ready for anything.

“More good news from Willow,” Elliott said, jumping out of the car with the laptop in his grasp. “Their security cameras don’t have night vision, which means they’re angled where

they have spotlights. We can assume their property is lit up plenty, but we can get close before we have to worry about getting caught on camera.”

That was great.

The other two cars rolled in and parked next to ours, and we all looked to Mercier. Coach had reported that Petrov had been on the phone once more, and the Russian really loved to speak German.

“It was about security.” Mercier answered our unasked question. “I believe Carillo has appointed Petrov to be the chief of security, and he was on the phone talking to someone about upgrading the security around the property.”

Even better. I glanced at Elliott. “That’s gotta mean they don’t expect an immediate attack, right?”

“It’s not a bad sign, anyway,” he replied.

Good.

I grabbed a pair of binoculars from the back of the SUV and trailed over to where I could peer up the mountainside. I adjusted the focus and estimated we had roughly fifty-five... maybe fifty-six yards to the top, and the surface level was all grass and smaller rocks. Some parts had steps built into the soil, from when the slope had been used to grow grapes. Approximately twenty-five-degree angle... I checked my watch and measured the humidity at 76%, wind speed at—

“Joel.”

I glanced back at the others. Those who were part of the combat units had gathered at the hood of one of the SUVs, where Elliott was ready to, presumably, talk entry strategy.

I walked over there, grabbing a marker from one of my pockets, and jotted down the digits on my hand. Humidity, elevation, wind speed.

“Bless Google Street View—it ain’t much, but it’s better than nothing.” Elliott pushed back the screen on the laptop so everyone could get a look. Then he placed a second laptop next to the first and pulled up the satellite images we had to

work with. “As you can see, the main house of the vineyard forms an L with the warehouse, so our best way to get in is to walk around and approach from the front. I suggest Ryan and Joel each take a side. Joel, you’ll round the corner at the warehouse, and Ryan, you get the corner of the main house.”

I nodded pensively and studied the images. The front of the property was an open courtyard-type of area, and unless anything had changed since the images were taken, not much would obstruct our view. Some benches, a well, an old tractor to the side, and we could assume all the cars they’d arrived in. Cars that were good to take cover behind.

The main house was a one-story ranch, hacienda-style. The warehouse had more height to it. It wasn’t built to house hostages unless they had cages—and I fucking hated thinking about that word—secured inside. The outer walls of the warehouse needed to be replaced. The metal sheets were damaged to the point that the rust was visible on crappy images off the internet.

“The rescue unit—you’ll wait down the slope for our signal,” Elliott continued. “And before then, keep talking to a minimum because we’ll all be on the same frequency.”

“Mercier and I spoke in the car,” Darius said. “We wanna do more. Let us cover the back of the property—we’ll shoot first and ask questions later, and we’ll be the barrier between the house and Gray and Shay.”

“That’s up to you,” Elliott replied. “You both have children to go home to.”

“And we will,” Darius answered firmly.

Mercier inclined his head, agreeing.

“Fair enough. Darius and Mercier will cover the back.” Elliott zoomed in on the satellite image that showed the property from above. “Crew, you can team up with Ryan. No advancing past the corner until I say so, at which point Ryan will cover Crew. I’ll do the same with Joel.” He lifted his stare to me. “You cover me when I advance.”

“Roger. But I’ll join you when I can do more good in combat than with my rifle.” I wasn’t being left behind for a fucking minute.

“Naturally, and that will be River and Reese’s cue as well,” he said. “River, you’re with Ryan and Crew. Reese, you’re with Joel and me. Javier—” He turned to Ortega. “The main house has a terrace facing east from the front. I want you to stay there and basically kill anyone who tries to make a run for it.”

“My pleasure,” Ortega answered quietly.

“I’ll take that flank so I can be close if he needs backup,” Mercier added.

It was a plan.

---

### *Gray Quinn*

While the others did a final run-through of our plans and began strapping on weapons, I nodded for Shay to follow me.

Let this be our last night in Europe. I couldn’t wait to go home. After more than three weeks, FaceTiming with the kids just didn’t cut it anymore, no matter how much fun I knew they were having with Darius’s parents and my own. Not to mention aunts, uncles, and cousins.

I opened the back of our car and grabbed the two backpacks I’d prepared earlier.

“You’re good with a handgun, right?” I placed the backpacks at my feet and reached for the case with sidearms.

“I’m decent,” Shay said. “I’ve gone to the range quite a bit with Reese.”

That was great. “Hopefully, we won’t have to use them, but you never know.” I opened the case and handed him a gun and a holster he could strap to his belt—or his vest, like I preferred. “It’s already loaded. You just aim and shoot.”

“Thanks. I guess you’re used to this by now.”

I wouldn’t go that far, but I had a few operations behind me at this point. “Aside from the rescue op to get Crew out of Belize last year, Dare and I stick to SAR missions these days.” I grinned faintly and tucked my own gun into the holster at the front of my chest. “But we stay prepared, ’cause you never know.”

He nodded slowly and looked down at the gun in his hands.

His mind had to be racing. I’d been where he was now. It was a painful fucking hell.

A few years ago when I’d been kidnapped by a human trafficking organization, it hadn’t taken long for me to decide I’d never get out alive. For three months, they’d held me in cages, abused me, waterboarded me, given me one meal a day, and...I’d stopped feeling like a person. And that’d happened fairly quickly. A few weeks in, when they’d stopped talking to me, when my name no longer existed, when I was shoved into another windowless van...

Shay had been missing long enough for a lot of trauma to set in.

“You know you can talk to me whenever, buddy.”

He nodded once. “That’s the thing, I guess. I wanna be prepared too.” He cleared his throat and attached his gun to his belt. “The nightmares suck, but they’ve got nothing on the anger. I want to—I want revenge. I wanna make sure this never happens again.”

I released a breath, knowing full well. Unfortunately, he was still in survivor mode. The worst of the trauma hadn’t hit him yet, and it wouldn’t until he got home and was suddenly surrounded by familiarity, peace and quiet, and loved ones. That was when panic and anxiety struck, when he began feeling like he didn’t belong anymore, when he couldn’t relate to the carefree behavior of everyone around him.

“You know what?” I said. “I think you should suggest to River and Reese that y’all come with us after this. Stay with us

in Washington for a week or two, and we can talk till our ears bleed, there's plenty of forest to take your anger out on—we have a shooting range too.”

Something seemed to click—he lost tension in his shoulder, and a pinch of relief seeped into his eyes. “I’d actually really like that. As much as I miss my brothers and aunt, I don’t think I can face them right now. I talked to them on the phone yesterday, and my aunt wants to fuss over me and plan a bunch of fun activities. I almost lashed out.”

Yup, been there. I’d felt suffocated when I’d been surrounded by family and everyday issues. My kid brothers had complained about being out of milk, and I’d wanted to scream at them—*there are kids out there who’ve been taken, who are being tortured and sold off as slaves, and you’re angry we’re out of fucking milk?*

I hadn’t screamed at them. I’d run away instead.

“Your reaction is completely normal,” I told him. “The good thing is you have River and Reese. Just like I had Darius—they *know* how to help you rise above this. It’s gonna be painful, and you’ll roller-coaster between anger, despair, grief...all of it. But whatever you do, don’t shut them out.”

He exhaled a laugh, his eyes turning glassy in the dim light from the inside of the car. “I won’t. It’s possible Darius told me about the time you tried to run away from him.”

Yeah... “Thank fuck he chased after me.” I grinned. “I have all the faith you’ll grow even stronger from this hell, Shay. And the bonus? We get to help others who’ve shared our fate.”

“That’s what I really want,” he said. “It blows to stay behind, but I don’t wanna worry River and Reese now.”

“We’re not staying behind. Rescue is an essential part—trust me.” I held up one of the backpacks for him. “Whether it’s only Blake and Marisa or there are others, they’ll need us. You ready for a quick rundown?”

“Yeah—absolutely.”



“Okay, so...” We didn’t have much time, so I opened my bag and got right to it. “Same stuff in your bag. First aid, shock blankets—since we’re rescuing at least one child, I bought a few stuffed animals and Band-Aids for kids. Water, orange juice, energy bars, earplugs—we don’t know how long they’ll be exposed to gunfire, but only use them if it’s safe; it’s hardly a priority—sandwiches for later, some children’s candy, and tools we might need. If you come across someone who’s bleeding heavily, can’t breathe, or is nonverbal, come get me right away.”

“Got it, I will.” He nodded.

“But all this comes in second,” I went on. “Top priority is getting victims to safety, and then we’ll examine them.”

“Understood.”



### *Elliott Jones*

*There goes the last light.*

I turned on my earpiece. “Jones online.”

“RQ online,” Ryan said.

“Gray online,” Gray said.

Everyone else followed. We were ready.

Ramirez confirmed he heard us all.

My stomach tightened with last-minute nerves, and I would’ve chain-smoked on the way if we didn’t have to worry about the smell reaching our targets. Joel was the freaking weatherman now, keeping track of everything between humidity and the direction of the wind.

“Let’s move out, everyone,” I said. “Remember, only speak when necessary—and shoot to kill, except for Carillo. Lights off, and Gray and Shay, you stay a minimum of twenty yards behind Darius and Mercier.”

I signaled to Joel and Reese, with Joel taking the lead, me following, and Reese going third.

Ryan headed first for the other side of the mountain, Crew hot on his tail, with River trailing after.

Ortega, Mercier, and Darius approached straight ahead.

In under ten seconds, the others were out of sight, and I had to let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

*We're coming, darling. Just a few more minutes.*

I lowered my night vision monocular and picked up the pace to keep up with Joel. I was gonna keep an eye on him till everyone was safe. Knowing him, he'd risk his life to bring Blake back, and that wasn't good enough. Those two had to go home together. If anyone was risking their life, it was me.

"Heads up, Petrov's on the phone again," Darius reported. "Mercier will translate and give an update shortly."

"Roger." I jumped up on a boulder and glanced up the slope. We were almost halfway around.

---

### ***Gray Quinn***

Shay and I squatted down when we reached our spot halfway up the mountain. Darius and Adrien continued farther up till we couldn't see them anymore. So far away from city lights and infrastructure, dark meant pitch-black.

"They've concluded a perimeter check," Adrien said, sounding confused. "Either they're just circling the immediate property, or we need to be really fucking careful because we might not be alone if someone's on their way back."

Everyone offered a quick confirmation, and I scanned my surroundings. Not that there was much to see. It was deathly quiet as well. The wind was picking up a bit, but that was all.

Shay grabbed my arm and pointed at something—holy shit. I saw the erratically moving beam from a flashlight a

second later. Whoever it was, they were heading toward our vehicles.

“We have movement at the bottom of the mountain, approximately fifty yards from the cars,” I reported quietly. “Shay and I will approach to see if it’s a hostile.”

We were immediately met by hushed protests from Darius, River, Reese, and a couple others, but that was their overprotectiveness talking. I fucking knew what I was doing.

“You stay in your position, knucklehead,” Darius growled under his breath.

“For fuck’s sake, Shay,” Reese snapped. “Where are you? *Respond.*”

I nodded for Shay, who seemed eager to go my route, and we stayed low as we stealthily headed down.

I unstrapped my combat knife at my calf, and I signaled to Shay that we had to do this silently.

We could not, under any circumstances, raise suspicion at Carillo’s house.

“We’re about twenty yards away,” I whispered. “We can take him down soundlessly. Get ready to advance—don’t change your plans. It’s all good.”

It was just one guy—

“It’s just one guy.” Shay spoke quietly. “Gray and I will deal with him and then resume our positions. Go forward. *Trust us.*”

My pulse skyrocketed, and adrenaline started coursing through me.

“You restrain him—I’ll disarm and silence him,” I ordered.

Shay nodded once, and there was nothing else to say. This was happening *now*.

“Jesus Christ,” Reese whispered. “Be fucking careful—if either of you gets hurt, I’ll fucking—”

“Quiet,” Crew hissed.

We got a clearer view as he approached our vehicles, but I wasn't sure he'd spotted them yet. He kept his flashlight aimed at the ground where he walked. Dumb fucker. He was smoking a cigarette and humming a tune, so he couldn't be alert and expecting danger. Then he dropped something—a radio. He'd dropped a radio. He shone his flashlight on it and bent down to grab it.

Shay and I reached the bottom of the slope and picked up the pace, some ten yards behind him now, and then we were sprinting.

The second our boots crunched on gravel, the man spun around, and that was when we pounced. I slapped the radio out of his hands, Shay got behind him and grabbed him in a tight headlock, I pressed a hand against the old man's mouth—but not before I heard him let out a shout in Spanish.

“Hold him steady.” I used my free hand to unholster the man's handgun and throw it aside, before I grabbed on to his shoulder and slammed my forehead up his nose. He cried out, but I managed to muffle the sound, and then Shay lowered him to the ground. We rolled him over and—

“Report back,” Darius ordered impatiently.

“Proceed with the plan,” I replied, out of breath. “Target incapacitated. *Go*. He had a radio—I don't know if he's supposed to check in.”

“Go, go, go!” I heard someone say. Could be Elliott.

I straddled the man once he was facedown, and I pulled out a pair of zip ties to restrain his wrists. In the meantime, Shay pressed the man's face against the grass—

“Mesa will slit your throats,” the man grunted against the ground.

Mesa? Carillo Mesa. Well, then. No need to ask if he was affiliated or just a Spanish farmer out on a moonlit walk.

Not interested in hearing another word from him yet, I pulled out a roll of self-adherent bandage that I rolled around his head and over his mouth, so he couldn't be heard from farther away. Blood was pouring out from his nose.

“Let’s tie him to one of the wheels on the nearest car,” I said.

That was one down, at least.

I blew out a breath, my heart racing.

## CHAPTER 7

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*I placed the phone between my shoulder and cheek and threw my clothes in the laundry basket.*

*“Can you pleeeeeease come to Uncle Ellie’s later so I can show you what I learned at swim practice yesterday? Please, please, pretty please?”*

*I sighed and scrubbed my hands over my jaw. Me, showing up at Elliott’s fucking housewarming barbecue? That was the last thing I needed. I wanted to throw my ass on the couch with a six-pack of beer and get lost in shitty movies. I’d half contemplated heading into work just to have something that could distract me.*

*“Puh-puh-puh-please, Daddy...?”*

*Goddammit.*

*“Does your mom really think that’s a good idea?” I asked reluctantly.*

*“She thinks it’s the best idea!”*

*Somehow, I doubted that.*

*Elliott would definitely not like my showing up.*

*Blake cranked up the pitiful tone that made me cave. “Don’t you wanna see what I learned?”*

*Real nice, throw in all the guilt.*

*“All right. I’ll be there.” At the very least, I’d get some hugs from her.*

*“Yay! It’s gonna be the best barbecue ever!”*

*Uh-huh.*

---

“Just let us know if someone tries to contact him on the radio,” Darius commanded. “Until then, they have no reason to be suspicious.”

Elliott and I darted up to the back of the warehouse, taking cover in the darkness, and we ran the length of the structure to see if any of the rusty metal sheets was loose.

The extraction had barely started, and my head was already fucked from what the younger guys had just accomplished.

Reese came up behind us. “Cameras angled to cover the spots where Joel and Ryan are supposed to overlook the courtyard, so once you get there, it’s on.”

“Copy that.” I bent down and tugged at a piece of metal protruding from the wall, but it wouldn’t budge. Fuck, I would’ve wanted to at least confirm they were keeping Blake and Marisa in the warehouse. “No way of knowing the precise location of Blake and Marisa yet.” In other words, we couldn’t blow up the main house and be done with it. “Proceeding to the corner—update, Ryan?” I inserted an earplug where I didn’t have an earpiece.

“Coming up behind the terrace now,” he confirmed. “We have eyes on nine targets in the main house. No signs of hostages—or space to keep anyone restrained. Four bedrooms on this side, doors open, lights on, living room and dining area, kitchen, possible office, mood’s relaxed. Some playing cards, some eating. We don’t see Carillo yet, but there should be a few rooms on the front too.”

“Then you stay there with Ortega,” Elliott said, changing the plans. “Joel and I will attack from the courtyard. You, Ortega, and Crew take out anyone you can shoot from where you are.”

“Hold up—unit two doesn’t mean we’re fuckin’ backup, Jones,” Reese replied. “River and I will charge when you charge. We’ll go for the warehouse.”

“Fine,” Elliott bit out. “Let’s go. Ryan?”

“Ready—”

“Wait,” Crew whispered. “Snipers, you have high-caliber rifles, right?”

I furrowed my brow. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said.

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure. Go on,” Crew answered.

What the— Fuck it. We didn’t have time. Blake could be on the other side of the thin wall right behind me.

I snuck up and stopped a few feet before I reached the corner, and I spotted River across the courtyard, hugging the short end of the main house. A couple more steps and we’d step into the outdoor lights mounted in various spots across the yard.

We signaled to each other, both ready.

“Status update from rescue crew,” Elliott requested.

“Covering the back,” Darius replied. “If anyone makes a run for it, we’ll get ’em.”

“Shay and I are in position,” Gray confirmed.

“Ryan?” Elliott double-checked.

“Ready to fire,” Ryan said.

I glanced back at Elliott, who nodded.

I took a deep breath. “Unit one, advance. Unit two, advance.” I lifted my rifle and rounded the corner, and I was



suddenly in plain sight. “Courtyard empty—Tenleys, go, go. I’ll cover you.”

River and Reese ran for it and ducked down between the cars, not stopping until they’d reached the doors to the warehouse. I could see from here it was barred and locked, and when Reese aimed his gun at the—

A shot blasted through the air, catapulting me into action. I sprinted toward the main house, hurriedly scanning the windows. The rooms were well-lit and seemingly empty of people. But then I caught several men running into the hall separating the two halves of the house.

I aimed at one man and shot him through the window. Then I quickly ripped off my monocular—it was just in the way now—and I took aim and fired over and over. Gunfire filled the air, Crew grunted and reported he was inside the house, followed by Ortega, who’d joined him, and I cursed when I saw the former bolting through the living room with his gun raised. Jesus Christ, the kid was reckless!

“Four down,” Ryan said. “Five.”

“Three down here,” Elliott added.

“Handful jumping out the windows this way,” Darius snapped.

“Holy fuck,” I heard Reese curse. “We need backup in the warehouse!”

I growled in frustration and kicked in the front door of the main house, immediately coming across two men. I fired two quick shots, and they dropped dead on the hallway rug.

“Kill them!” someone yelled. In English. Carillo?

For a moment, all I heard were bullets flying and windows shattering, then a handful of seconds of people shouting at once. Darius and Mercier threw themselves into the fight from behind the house, Ryan left his position to assist the twins, and I grabbed my sidearm. Fuck me if we hadn’t underestimated the number of cartel motherfuckers.

“These fuckers didn’t arrive to an empty house.” Elliott came to the same conclusion I did. They’d had people here already. “Crew and Ortega, do a quick sweep of the main house, then we’ll retreat to—” He stopped abruptly as a man stormed out from a room, and I killed him with a shot to the head. “Retreat to secure the warehouse!”

“Way ahead of you,” Crew panted. “No hostages in here!”

That was all I needed to know. “Move out!”

“Joel, wait outside,” he replied quickly. I heard him in my ear as much as I heard him coming down the hall around the corner. “I was hoping I’d get to do this. Ortega?”

“Out back!” Ortega answered.

“Main house clear of our guys.” Crew ran out toward me, and he threw a hand grenade behind him before he pushed me out the door. “Take cover!”

We darted out of the way and dove behind a car, just a second or two before an explosion went off.

“We’re not done!” Crew jumped to his feet, holding another grenade. “High-caliber rifle, baby. I throw, you shoot.”

Fucking hell—he was a genius.

I lifted my rifle once more and nodded to him. He threw the grenade toward the roof of the house, and I squeezed the trigger. Sucking in a sharp breath, I pushed Crew down on the ground again as the roof lit up with fire and got blasted with shrapnel. Shrapnel that blew out the windows of three nearby cars as well.

“*Fuck*, that was cool!” Crew yelled.

Adrenaline pumped through me, sharpening my focus, and I spun around and looked for Elliott. He must’ve joined the others at the warehouse. I knew he’d left the main house before me.

“Estimated twenty hostages, ten hostiles!” Reese shouted. “All focus on the warehouse!”

“Marisa and Blake are here!” River panted. “Fuck picking Carillo out of a lineup—kill every cartel bastard you see!”

*Blake!* My heart jumped up into my throat, and Crew and I sprinted across the courtyard.

“No calls to law enforcement yet, but it won’t be long,” Ramirez reported.

“We need bolt cutters in here!” Elliott growled. “Joel!”

“Gray—”

“On my way! Shay, stay here.”

“Screw that,” Shay snapped.

“Goddammit!” Reese wasn’t happy.

Crew and I tore into the warehouse, each of us aiming and firing at two men darting toward us.

The lights flickered in the vaulted ceiling.

A beat later, it felt like all the air was sucked out of my lungs as I took in the scene. Probably twenty or twenty-five closed metal cages sat on the concrete floor, the confinements large enough to hold a grown man. No bars or grids—the walls were metal sheets, with little holes for breathing.

It took me a moment to realize I was hearing cries and whimpers and pleas for help.

Nausea and rage crawled up my throat. I threw aside my rifle and gripped both my handguns instead. The gunfire didn’t rain nonstop anymore, but we had more men to take down. They were hiding, some of them. I could feel it. The tension could be cut with a knife—

“Elliott!” That was a woman’s voice. It came from the back, where I spotted River as well. Elliott had to be there too, though I couldn’t see him for all the crates and shit.

“We have Marisa!” Elliott yelled. “I’m gonna help you out, honey. Hold on.”

Reese and I exchanged a quick look as we continued searching for other threats. Because there were plenty of

hiding spots. The sides of the warehouse were filled with boxes and shelving units and pallets.

Another shot rang out, and then Ortega came running in, gaze wild.

“Ortega’s here,” I said, knowing Elliott would hear.

Before I knew it, Gray and Darius came running in too, followed by Shay.

Not seeing any immediate threats, I hurried to the back and finally spotted Elliott. He was helping Marisa out of a semi-barred cage. Her hair was greasy and matted, her dress filthy and torn in places. *Oh my God*. My lungs burned as I walked closer to another cage. Elliott handed a sobbing Marisa over to Ortega, then promptly shot open a lock on the cage I couldn’t look away from. Rusty metal, thick walls, tiny holes—

“Javi,” Marisa cried. “Oh, Javi. You came.”

My eyes welled up.

“Adrien and I will do a perimeter check,” Crew reported. “Ryan, what’s your status?”

I tore out the earpiece, left with a ringing sound in my ears, and yet...I heard her cry. She was in there. My sweet, goofy, hell-raisin’ baby girl was trapped inside a rusty fucking cage.

“Almost, darling,” Elliott said thickly. He fired at the second of three locks, and I aimed at the third.

“Start cutting the locks! Crew! River and I will join you,” Reese said. “Ramirez, can you get Coach online? There’s no way we can be ghost here. There are too many hostages. Mercier, you might wanna start makin’ calls. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

I sniffled and quickly wiped at my cheeks, and Elliott opened the door.

“Warehouse clear!” River declared.

Soon as it was open, I peered inside and fucking broke. Blake was huddled in the darkest corner, tears streaming down her dirty cheeks, and she was shaking so hard.

“D-Daddy?” she sobbed.

I choked, unable to sound out her name, and rushed forward. I pulled her out of the cage and wrapped her in my arms.

“Daddy!”

*I'm here, baby. Daddy's here. Oh God, I'm so sorry.*

Within seconds, tears were streaming down my face too, and I had to watch myself so I didn't crush her. My chest seized painfully, my heart shattering and healing at the same time. She was here, she was in my arms, she was alive, but she was so fucking scared, so fucking hurt.

“My sweet, sweet girl,” I whimpered. “Daddy's here, baby. I'm sorry it took so long.”

I sensed Elliott near me—maybe he didn't know what to do, whether to give us space or to approach, and I wanted to make one thing crystal clear. I managed to see through the blur in my vision, and I closed the distance between us.

“Uncle Ellie's here too, baby,” I croaked.

Blake just cried harder, and she latched on to Elliott's neck, hugging us both.

In the distance, I heard two shots cracking like thunder. Definitely the work of Ryan.

“You're safe now, darling.” Elliott sniffled and kissed Blake's hair. Like Marisa's, it was matted against her head, and it was evident they hadn't been allowed to clean off in a long time. Blake was in a tee that was several sizes too big, and I instantly wanted it off her. And I wanted her out of *here*.

Elliott took off my combat helmet, allowing me to get closer to Blake. She buried her face against my neck, and I planted kisses all over her hair.

“I gotta help the others,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

I leaned in and kissed him hard. I couldn't fucking speak, but I needed a kiss.

No words could describe how overwhelmed I was.

Elliott touched my cheek. “I’ll be back soon.”

I nodded and returned my attention to Blake. I tightened my hold on her, I ran my hands along her arms, her legs, and it was impossible not to notice she’d lost weight. She’d been tiny to start with—the shortest and smallest in her class, as she liked to grumble about—and it infuriated me to think... Fucking hell, had they put their hands on her? What had they done? How badly had she suffered? Had they broken her spirit for good? Could I drag those useless piles of shit back from the dead so I could kill them again?

Another shot rang out in the distance, but I couldn’t bring myself to fight anymore. I couldn’t even imagine handing Blake over to someone else. Not for a moment.

“Joel?”

I turned around at the sound of Gray’s voice, and he held up some items for me. A towel, a blanket, water... “I thought you might want this.”

“Thank you.” I sniffled and cleared my throat. “Thank you—that’s...yeah.”

He offered a quick, careful smile and set the stuff down next to...the cage. Then he was off again.

I exhaled unsteadily and forced myself to be useful. “Blake, do you want some water?”

She nodded, down to silent cries and whimpers. Those hurt almost more than the sobbing.

I fanned out the blanket on the floor, not sure the outside was safe yet, and I noticed Gray had put more items in the blanket. A stuffed animal—a purple elephant—an energy bar, and a bag of gummy worms.

It took some work since Blake didn’t wanna let go of me—and frankly, I didn’t wanna release her either—but I managed to get her out of her dirty T-shirt. She guzzled some water while I used another bottle to clean her up a bit, and then I

removed my vest and took off my Henley for her to wear. It was either that or my sweaty undershirt.

“You’re here,” she cried.

“And I’m not going anywhere,” I promised. “We’re going home together—you, me, Uncle Ellie, Marisa...all of us.”

That kick-started her next round of gut-wrenching sobs, and I squeezed her to me again.

I’d do fucking anything to take away all her hurt. Make her forget this had ever happened.

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*I’m not gonna get any closure.*

I stroked Blake’s hair and peered down at the man lying dead on the ground between two cars in the courtyard.

As soon as Elliott had identified him, I’d glued my stare to the man as if he’d come back to life.

Elliott had identified Gajero too, based on a half-melted driver’s license. Gajero had been burned badly, his body littered with puncture wounds from shrapnel.

Blake had passed out in my embrace from sheer exhaustion, so she didn’t see her kidnappers. She didn’t see the man lying two feet away from me with a gunshot wound between his eyes.

I didn’t know who’d shot him. It could’ve been me. It could’ve been Ryan or Crew or...

The man’s eyes were still open. A gun lay next to his body, and his hand was outstretched, like he was trying to reach for it even in death.

Carillo Mesa.

He and his men had kidnapped my daughter; they’d held sixteen innocent people captive, shuffling them from one corner of the world to the next, until they’d ended up right here.

Sixteen people. And I didn't even get the pleasure of watching him die. No final words, no desperate attempt to bargain, no begging for his life, not a *flicker* of pain. He was just gone. I'd never heard the fucker utter a goddamn word.

Crew, Ryan, Reese, and Shay had rounded up all the Carillo affiliates across the courtyard. Twenty-eight men, all dead, aside from one Russian and the low-man Gray and Shay had apprehended earlier. River was currently trying to interrogate them, but what was the point? Nothing they said changed anything.

Well...

I guessed there was one good reason to interrogate Petrov. To see if they had other innocent people hidden somewhere.

I stared down at Carillo's face again, his expression blank. What had been his last thoughts? What had been running through his mind when he'd come face-to-face with the barrel of a gun?

Regardless, he hadn't suffered enough. A quick shot to the forehead had snuffed out his dreams of starting a cartel in Europe. Sick son of a whore.

Blake whimpered softly in her sleep, and I squeezed her a little and kissed the side of her head.

"Daddy's here, Blake," I murmured. "You're safe." With my lips pressed to her hair, I glanced over at the burning inferno that used to be the main house. The flames climbed higher, consuming everything they could grab on to.

As of two minutes ago, firefighters had been dispatched after a single call from a neighbor some ten minutes away from here.

I heard someone walk up behind me, so I turned around and saw Darius.

"Have you seen Elliott?" he asked.

"He's in the warehouse." I didn't envy his task. He and Gray were helping the other fourteen people we'd released.



Nine women, most of them very young, and five children, the youngest just two or three years old.

“Thanks.” He headed in there.

Many of the hostages needed medical assistance.

Blake did too. And that thought pushed me into a new cycle of feeling everything and nothing all at once. I still wanted more details; I had to know everything, but... Thanks to clarification from Marisa, it appeared Blake had been locked up the entire time. They'd used Blake as leverage to interrogate and harass Marisa. Which... I was sure Ortega was going through the same hell I was. We were relieved beyond words they hadn't been raped or touched inappropriately, but suffering wasn't limited to sexual abuse. This slip of a girl in my arms had been lonely, locked inside a fucking cage, for *weeks*.

According to Marisa, they'd been fed once a day, after which they'd been allowed to go to the bathroom for five minutes. A grown person might be able to handle that for a short period of time, but a child?

Deep-seated sorrow flowed through me in powerful currents, muting the anger for the moment. All the shit she'd been through—for what? For this dead stranger's quest for vengeance. Elliott had done his goddamn job. He and Tariq had put criminals behind bars, Carillo included, and he'd thought it was a good idea to kidnap my daughter to punish Elliott—and to get him to kill Vincente.

“Firefighters will be here in ten!” Mercier hollered out. He pocketed his phone and walked across the courtyard. “Can I get everyone's attention?”

Darius came out from the warehouse again, and he said Elliott and Gray were staying inside. The others trailed closer, including River, who left Petrov and the low-man tied to a car dangerously close to the fire from the main house.

“This scene is now a part of my Blanco case,” Mercier announced. “I spoke to Coach at Hillcroft and my boss at the office in LA, and the only way for us to get out of here without

questioning by local authorities—along with making sure the hostages receive the best treatment—is to hand it all over to the FBI.” He paused. “Coach has arranged for us to be airlifted out of here in twenty minutes. They’ll fly us to the joint Navy base at Rota, where US forces will take us home. You’re all temporary employees of Hillcroft—and you’ve been working with the FBI, which won’t be public—to bring down the Blancos and rescue Blake and Marisa. It’s going to be a nice cover-up story that gives the FBI all the credit. But in order to maintain our good relations with Spain, we can’t have a bloodbath created by American freelancers. It has to be part of something bigger.”

I didn’t give a shit. I mean, what he said made sense. We’d entered a country illegally, we’d killed over two dozen men, and a hasty exit had become a pipe dream the second we’d discovered the other fourteen hostages. We could no longer slip out of here—unless we left the hostages, and we weren’t gonna do that.

“Lemme get this straight.” Reese scratched his elbow absently. “It doesn’t look good for a handful of former PMCs to tear up the northeast of Spain, so in order to make that go away, the case is suddenly an FBI file, and we’re contracted through Hillcroft to help the Feds’ task force complete the mission. Moreover, the Feds will never admit publicly that they had outside help.”

“Essentially, yes,” Mercier confirmed. “We could’ve been out of here right now—no one would ever know we were here—but we’d be leaving behind fourteen women and children for the Spanish authorities to deal with. *Or...* we let the FBI—and Hillcroft—take over. It’ll secure our journey home, the hostages will be offered medical assistance by American personnel at Rota, and you won’t have anyone asking questions when we get back stateside.”

It was a no-brainer. When this turned into a jurisdictional shitshow involving three countries’ authorities, I wanted to be as removed from the situation as possible. Spanish territory, one publicized manhunt to bring Carillo Mesa back to prison

in Texas, eight hostages who were Mexican citizens, and the rest Americans.

Everyone scattered to gather our belongings, to prepare the hostages—

“You all right, buddy?” Reese was the only one who lingered. He joined me at my side and looked down at Carillo.

“I don’t know what the fuck I am.”

He nodded with a dip of his chin. “This whole clusterfuck because of that motherfucker.”

I dropped my stare to Carillo too. “And we didn’t get to see him beg for his life or anything.”

Reese hummed. “I’ve heard men beg for their lives before. It’s not as satisfying as one might hope.”

We hadn’t gotten that in Colombia either.

“In the end, it’s another job well done,” he went on. “Whether you get the Hollywood fanfare with torture, putting a criminal through hell, hearing him sob and beg, or they get taken out in a random shooting, maybe even mistaken for a low-man, they’re all the same. No amount of suffering can erase what they did...” He blew out a breath. “This job just happened to be personal.”

Very personal.

“I still would’ve preferred the Hollywood fanfare,” I admitted.

He chuckled quietly. “Yeah, maybe.”

I heard what he was saying, though. My recovery wouldn’t come from torturing a kidnapper. Blake’s pain wouldn’t be eased because Carillo suffered more.

“So how do we get closure?” I asked.

“Oof.” Reese lit up a smoke and took a drag. “River and I used to think we got closure from one case by accepting another. That’s how we dealt with pent-up anger and frustration. Along with Emerson-ordered counseling sessions that we hated.”

Wonderful.

He clasped my shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze. “Just one step at a time, Joel. A new war begins now. Every time Blake falls apart, you’ll feel that Carillo won. You’ll wanna bring him back so you can cut off his limbs one by one and make him feel everything he’s put others through.” Sounded about right. “But Blake will recover. Those meltdowns will eventually become fewer and farther between.” He gently touched Blake’s cheek. “I heard what Marisa said before—how they’d been locked up most of the time.”

I nodded slightly.

Marisa had suffered more. She’d been taunted and shoved around, harassed and interrogated. When Carillo hadn’t been able to locate Elliott, he’d ordered Gajero to press Marisa for details about our crew.

“She’ll be okay,” Reese said confidently. “River and I carried out an extraction in Algeria once—a young girl. She was held in a closet for three months. Motherfuckers were waiting for her to turn eleven so she could marry someone forty years older than her.”

“Jesus Christ.” I swallowed hard and hugged Blake a little tighter.

These were stories we heard over the years. Every now and then, something so heinous rose above the usual headlines of atrocities—and the men I’d worked with this month had been there. They’d lived through those horrors; they’d brought those people back to safety.

“Thing is, the girl’s mother suffered from nightmares far longer than the girl did,” Reese went on. “The mother had all the worst-case scenarios running through her head, months of them, with the fear of never seeing her daughter again. But the girl...?” He shrugged a little. “She had three months of the exact same thing happening every day. Darkness, loneliness, someone giving her food. It blurred together, you know? It became a hazy memory.” He took a drag from his smoke. “We got a card from her at Hillcroft years later. She’d just graduated from high school. She said she still didn’t sleep with

the light off, but...” He cracked a faint grin. “The card was a picture of a desk lamp, and she’d put a Yale sticker on it.”

My vision grew blurry, and I sniffled and buried my face against Blake’s hair.

That had to be Blake one day. It had to. She had to recover.

“That’s closure, Joel. You don’t get it from watching a piece of shit suffer or dragging out the moment he dies. You get it from watching that li’l girl of yours grow up and live life.”

“Christ,” I exhaled. I sniffled and cleared my throat, my chest feeling all fucked up. Tight with worry one second, expanding with relief the next. “Someone ever tell you you have a way with words?”

He grinned and stubbed out his smoke.

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### *Adrien Mercier*

So Marines truly could sleep anywhere, at any time, couldn’t they?

Crew had zonked out with his head on my shoulder five minutes after we were airborne.

Two rescue helicopters had taken us away from Spanish firefighters who’d wanted to detain us until law enforcement arrived. Bless them. Our authorities could work swiftly at times, and now we had clearance to get out of Spain without facing problems from their end.

Having experienced Spanish authorities in the past, I knew they just wanted to be rid of us. They didn’t like it when foreign problems landed in their lap.

I took a deep breath and did my best to release all the tension from tonight. It was *over*. Within thirty-six hours, I’d see my son again. I was done in the field. We’d taken down the entire Blanco cartel, and... Hell. I’d met someone who’d already changed my life.

A reckless Marine. A loud, young, reckless Marine from New York. A loud, young...complete fucking sweetheart.

I was screwed.

I couldn't even shift his head to the side when my gunshot wound started hurting. A gunshot wound *he* had given me. Some romantic trip we'd had in Italy.

I shook my head to myself and glanced at the others. Darius, Gray, Javier, Marisa, and ten released hostages were in the other helicopter—with two criminals. In here, we had Elliott, Joel, Blake, the three Tenleys, Ryan, Crew, and me. And the remaining hostages, primarily the children. A six-year-old boy had passed out in Reese's lap, an eight-year-old had cried herself to sleep in Ryan's arms, Elliott held the youngest of them all—that boy couldn't be more than three years old. The others were in their own seats, and I wasn't looking forward to figuring out their identities when we arrived in southern Spain.

I'd spoken very briefly to the eight people—seven women and one child—who were Mexican citizens. They'd be flying out first, heading straight to Mexico City, where local authorities and two of my colleagues were waiting for them.

It was over, I kept reminding myself—but was it ever? There would always be innocent people who needed rescuing.

What was I supposed to do now?

All I knew was how to be a federal agent.

Well, first and foremost, I was going to be a better dad. Jack was way too forgiving and lenient. Sometimes, I wished he'd scream at me. I deserved it. I'd missed out on so much.

Crew had already tried to reason with me—that I was no different from soldiers who spent months away on deployments, and he had a point. But those soldiers didn't make promises to come home after a few days, only to go back on their words and extend their absence repeatedly. I didn't have twelve months there, twelve months here. I had *guesses*. Tasks that were estimated to take however long. And when

shit went sideways somehow, I'd had to call Jack and let him know I'd be a while longer.

But no more.

I'd worked my last case. I'd never be Rafael Delgado again.

I just had to figure out who the fuck Adrien Mercier was.

I knew who I *wanted* to be. An attentive father who never missed another recital or spelling bee. A loving partner to the young punk next to me. A devoted son who bitched at his old man to take it easy.

Then I looked into the eyes of the terrified children who were desperate to be reunited with their parents.

I still needed a job.

I suppressed a sigh and looked down at my notepad. My work wasn't quite over. I had to get everyone's names and details. Weeks of submitting reports would follow. I didn't have the luxury of a PMC who could walk away and move on to the next contract.

Crew shifted in his sleep—never mind, he was waking up. He blinked drowsily and yawned, and he linked his arm with mine.

“Get some more rest.” I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You've only slept an hour.”

“Mm, in a minute,” was his groggy reply. He yawned again and sat up straighter.

It seemed no matter what he did, yawn or laugh, sleep or yell—I had to marvel at the sight of him. He was so full of life and energy. Criminally gorgeous, endearingly oblivious at times, incredibly skilled and sharp. Eager to learn, eager to push himself, eager to be there for others.

He drove me fucking insane.

And he could have anyone, but he'd chosen me.

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*Elliott Jones*

We landed at Rota at a little past four in the morning, and we were immediately ushered to an urgent care unit on base. Ryan became the guardian of two young children, Reese and Shay stayed with another kid, and I had three glued to me. Two of them needed medical assistance right away. Cage fighting came to mind—someone had forced these boys to fight. Their eyes were swollen, their lips were cut, and they had bruises everywhere.

The little boy clung to me so tightly I didn't need to hold him in place. If my guesses were correct, the two boys walking next to me were biological brothers, and they were related to the little boy in my arms as well. I'd gotten one of their names—Nicolas. He appeared to be the eldest. Maybe thirteen or fourteen. Eleven or twelve for the other.

White-hot anger kept my jaw clenched, and I couldn't even revel in the relief of having my niece back.

It was the most painful part of the job I'd given so many years to. Seeing children get hurt because adults were worthless pieces of shit.

“Elliott!”

I came to a stop and turned around at the sound of Joel's voice. He was standing outside an exam room in the white corridor.

“We're in here—room six,” he said.

“I'll be there as soon as I can,” I promised.

The others were shown into rooms too. Ryan went one way, Reese and Shay another, and then Gray and Darius joined us with other victims. Ortega disappeared down the hall with Marisa and a doctor.

I ended up in room twelve, where a nurse said a doctor would see us very soon.



I released a pent-up breath. The lights were too bright in here.

I cleared my throat and carried the little boy over to one of the two exam tables. If I could just get them to say something—I'd tried in both English and Spanish, and English seemed to work better, but all I'd gotten was one name.

I helped the boys up onto the table, and I looked around, finding a stack of those yellow blankets in a closet. With the youngest boy still clinging to me, I returned to the other two and carefully draped blankets around them.

“Nicolas, can you hear me?” I asked.

I could see him watching me through the slits of his bruised eyes, equal parts wary and despondent. The latter fucking terrified me because it usually meant someone had been held against their will for a longer period of time.

He nodded slightly, and I exhaled.

“Is this your brother?” I made sure to keep my tone gentle and my movements unhurried, not wanting to scare them.

He turned slowly to the boy next to him, then back to me and nodded again.

Progress.

“Is this also your brother?” I pointed to the boy in my arms.

Nicolas coughed. “C-cousin. Our cousin. Julian.”

More progress. “That’s great, Nicolas—thank you for telling me. Can you tell me your brother’s name too?”

I wasn’t sure that boy could actually see me—or hear me. His bruises almost covered his face, and his ears were swollen too.

Nicolas’s eyes welled up. “Mattie.”

Mattie. I released another breath. “Mattie—is that short for Matthew, maybe? Mateo—”

“Mateo,” Nicolas croaked. “Are we really safe?”

“Yes. No one is going to hurt you anymore,” I promised, my heart fucking breaking for them. “My name is Elliott. My friends and I will be here every step of the way till you get home to your families. Are...” I trailed off and hesitated. I didn’t wanna overwhelm him any further, but we had to know where he lived, what his last name was—so that we could find his parents. “Can you tell me your last name, Nicolas?”

He sniffled and glanced at his brother. “Davis.”

Huh, all right. “I only have a few more questions, okay? You’re doing great. What are your parents’ names?”

He squinted and carefully wiped at his face. “Um, Mom’s name was Alejandra.” Fuck, *was*? “Dad’s name is Keith.”

Okay. I gently shifted Julian from one hip to the other, then pulled out my phone. “Alejandra and Keith Davis. Where do you live, Nicolas?”

I started typing down stats for Mercier to forward to his team stateside.

***Boy 1: Nicolas Davis. Approximately 5’5”, malnourished, dark hair, presumably dark eyes, he can’t open them much due to heavy bruising. Mexican?/American heritage***

“Houston,” Nicolas answered hesitantly. “I...”

I stopped typing and glanced at him.

“I don’t remember,” he croaked. “We move a lot. I think we were in Houston last.”

Time to pump the brakes. I pocketed my phone again and switched tactics. They had to rest—and maybe they wanted more water or something to eat.

---

***Adrien Mercier***

*One room to go.*

I swallowed my anger, my exhaustion, all my frustrations, and closed the door to the exam room Ryan was in. That poor

little girl—cigarette burns all over her arms and legs. God, I wanted to kill everyone who'd looked at her wrong.

Crew was waiting for me in the corridor, and he must've seen the look on my face. "What's wrong, papi?"

I shook my head and pocketed my notepad. "I think I need a new hobby. Like alcoholism."

He winced and snuck in for a hug.

I squeezed him to me.

It felt entirely wrong to carry a celebratory cigar in my pocket right now, though I knew we still had sixteen reasons to celebrate. Just not yet.

"I just survived signing four hundred thousand nondisclosure agreements," Crew whispered.

That punk—he dragged a laugh out of me, and my eyes burned with emotions. What would I do without him? Even in the darkest moments, he could light up my existence with a crappy joke or one of his smirks.

He eased back and touched my cheek. "How many do you have left?"

"Only Elliott," I sighed. "He has three children with him."

Crew nodded with a dip of his chin. "The doc's been in there the past hour."

Roughly an hour was what they'd all received. They'd called in six doctors and eleven nurses for our arrival.

Down the hall, Shay stepped out from a room and wiped at his cheeks.

"You okay, man?" Crew asked.

Shay looked up, having not expected anyone, and nodded stiffly. "I just hate people."

I knew the feeling.

"Don't," Crew replied. "That's how you get sucked into a lifeless void and turn into these jaded old bastards we hitch our wagons to."

“Gee. Thank you, sweetheart,” I drawled.

He smiled up at me. “You’re welcome, baby.”

That disarming fucking smile.

“I think I’m gonna accept Coach’s offer and join Hillcroft,” Shay said.

Fuck.

Crew sobered too, and he cleared his throat and scratched his nose. “I can’t relate to what you’ve been through, buddy, but I urge you to talk to your men—and don’t make any decisions based on what you’re feeling right now. That’s gonna change.”

He was right. So very right.

“Crew’s right, Shay,” I said patiently. “Let yourself recover before deciding a new career path.”

Shay furrowed his brow. “It’s not like I’m gonna head out into the field and be a contractor. I wanna become a martial arts instructor and help them train PMCs to not get their asses kicked.”

Oh.

“Ohhhhh.” Crew started nodding, and he snapped his fingers. “Yeah—I like that. That’s awesome. And wasn’t your old man a martial arts instructor back in the day?”

Shay actually smiled a little. “Yeah. He taught me how to fight.”

Well, then. River and Reese probably had nothing to worry about.

Another door opened, this one closer, and a doctor walked out, speaking Spanish. I glimpsed Elliott nearby, though he stayed in the room and had a little boy clutching him for all he was worth.

Once the doctor left, I kissed Crew’s temple and told him I’d be back soon, before I aimed for Elliott.

“I understand the timing is awful.”

He shook his head. “You’re just doin’ your job. Come on in.” He peered out the door. “Crew?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Mind bringing us some water and snacks?”

“No, of course—I’ll be there in a bit,” Crew replied.

I entered the room and thought I’d prepared myself enough. After all, I’d seen the boys in the helicopter earlier. How wrong I was. In the bright lights of an exam room, their cuts and bruises made me murderous all over again.

I cleared my throat and took a deep breath.

“It took a while, but I think I have everything you need,” Elliott said quietly.

I nodded and brought out my notepad again. “Let’s get this over with, then.” Nobody liked the agent who came into hospital rooms to “ask a few questions.” Nobody. “Names?”

“Nicolas Davis, Mateo Davis, and Julian Lopez.”

I jotted them down.

“The former two are brothers, and Julian is their cousin,” he continued. “Nicolas and Mateo’s mom is deceased, and from what I understand, their dad has custody of Julian as well. Nicolas said he lives with them.”

I lifted my gaze and raised a brow. Elliott had been around long enough to know what that usually meant.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he confirmed.

Fair enough. I made a note to make sure the boys didn’t return to their father before he’d been investigated properly. It was a tragic reality that the parents were many times responsible for their children ending up as human trafficking statistics.

Next, we covered ages and birthdates. Nicolas had recently turned fourteen, Mateo was eleven, and little Julian—as per Nicolas—was, “like, three.” Elliott gave me the parents’ names, and Texas—probably Houston—as the last location

they'd lived, so I had no doubts we'd be able to confirm their details. It was enough to go on.

“As for injuries...” I hated this part the most.

“On the container ship, they were forced to fight two other boys,” Elliott said, jaw clenched. “Nicolas and Mateo against them. No casualties, thank fuck, but if they didn't fight, Gajero punished them. Mateo can't hear well—there's swelling in his ears. Eyes too—they can't open their eyes fully.”

I swallowed hard and added more notes. General bruising, and a lot of it.

“No fractures from what the doctor could tell,” he said. “Lab results will be sent to LA. They're underweight but didn't suffer any cramps from the sandwiches they had on the way here. No dehydration, normal temperature, a little slow on reflexes, but that's understandable.”

I nodded along as I wrote.

“And, uh, I asked what they last remember of their dad,” he went on. “They think it was Easter, 'cause, and I quote, Dad came home drunk with a lady who gave them a chocolate bunny to share.”

I gnashed my teeth. “How fucking generous.” I took a steadying breath and pushed forward. “What about this little guy?” I eyed Julian and couldn't see any visible wounds. His little shorts and tee were dirty and ill-fitting; he certainly needed a bath, just like the other women and children. His silence, however—that one worried me. I hadn't heard Julian make a single sound.

“He's nonverbal—hasn't even cried—but the doc says it's not unheard of for trauma victims,” Elliott replied. “He reacts when spoken to. You can see him processing what's going on around him, and he covered his ears when we left the helicopter.”

“He also refuses to let go of you,” I noted. The boy glanced up from his hiding spot in the bend of Elliott's neck, though only briefly. I jotted down he had hazel-brown eyes.

“Uh, yeah, I...I don’t know what that’s about, but, uh—” Elliott looked over to the other two boys before returning his attention to me. “Listen, I’m just gonna come out and say it. Are you in a position to recommend temporary foster care? Because I have a really bad feeling about their old man, and I’d rather they stayed with me for a few weeks than get shuffled around in a system that might separate them.”

Given the circumstances, there would be no “shuffling.” We had protocols in place for trauma victims—but I shared his worry, nonetheless, and I couldn’t help but feel for him. It was a selfless offer.

“Our *system* doesn’t work quickly unless their father is cleared immediately,” I replied. “I can absolutely recommend you, but you might want to adjust a few weeks to a few months. Those investigations take time.”

“So be it.” He’d made up his mind.

“Then, I don’t think there will be any problems,” I answered. Again, given the nature of the situation, these children’s “system” was much smaller. I would be speaking directly to the victim specialist assigned to the case, and my voice mattered. “There’s the matter of security, though. Is your home safe?”

Elliott sighed and scratched his jaw. “I mean—yeah. The short answer is yes. I don’t trust the cartel fuckers for shit, and I’ve heard conflicting statements from all sides—that my identity is secure, my alibi is solid, nobody’s connected my real name to the identity I used with Hillcroft, except Carillo’s used both my names with countless people, so who the fuck knows. But considering the state we left the cartel in...? I’ll have a new security system up and running long before any remaining affiliates have scrambled for a new boss.”

He literally worked with security, so I had no doubts he knew what he was talking about.

“I do trust River and Reese, though,” he added. “They’re confident we got rid of everyone who attacked my ranch.”

I actually already knew that, because I had a colleague working the Tenley-Ortega-Hayward case in San Diego. They'd be happy to hear all three had been rescued—just as they'd get their egos bruised since they'd had absolutely nothing to do with the rescue.

Before I could respond, the door opened, and Crew popped his head in.

“Sorry it took so long,” he said. “It’s like European bases have just started discovering vending machines.”

I smiled. He'd still managed to scrounge up quite the loot. Pre-packaged sandwiches, chips, candy bars, soda, and water filled his arms.

“You enjoy your snack—I’m going to check in on Joel and Blake again,” I said.



## CHAPTER 8

*Joel Hayward*

*“Daddy?”*

*“Yeah, baby?”*

*“I wanna go home.” She sniffled.*

*Fuck, me too. “It won’t be long, I promise.” I squeezed her tightly, carrying her to the exam room Elliott was in. It’d been too long since I’d seen him. “Let’s go see Uncle Ellie.”*

*“I think that’s a good idea,” she croaked.*

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**N**o private jet this time, but a military aircraft that could moonlight as any other commercial airliner. Well, it was a little smaller and didn’t require a long runway.

“Are your arms tired yet, Daddy?”

“Nope.” I kissed the side of her head and climbed up the steps to the plane. “I’m super strong, so I can carry you for a whole year.”

When she giggled, I breathed easier.

It made up for the gut-wrenching sight of watching her wake up. That moment before she realized she wasn’t in the cage—Jesus fucking Christ. She burst into tears after every nap, of which there’d been several the past twenty-four hours.

And when she cried, I fucking cried. I was getting better at controlling myself, but...

She'd bawled her eyes out when she'd talked to Piper on the phone earlier. I hadn't been far behind, because it was beginning to sink in. My girl was back with me. We'd managed to save her.

"Where's Shay?" she asked. "I wanna sit with him and Uncle Ellie."

"We'll sit close to them," I promised.

She'd been so relieved when she'd seen Shay again. They'd shared a hug that'd gotten me all choked up. River and Reese too.

"And Marisa?" Blake pressed.

"We're gonna give her some space so she can rest up properly," I reminded her gently. Marisa was...not doing well. "She'll be in the back with Javier."

Blake bit her bottom lip and nodded.

I picked a random row near the middle of the plane. Both rows had three seats on each side of the aisle, and I was gonna ask the Tenleys to sit nearby. With Elliott, I had no plans on asking. He simply had to. He and the boys could take the row in front of ours or the one behind.

"There's Shay!" Blake pointed. "Shay, over here!" She turned to me. "Did you know he has *two* boyfriends?"

I grinned. "I did. Nuts, huh?"

"Yeah," she laughed. "Freaking cooties all over the place."

God, I loved her so much. I savored every smile, every ounce of her goofball sense of humor, every smartass comment. They filled me with hope and gave me strength to get through her meltdowns.

Reese came up the aisle first, and he held out his fist for Blake, who bumped it with hers. "How you doin', shortcake?"

She grinned shyly. "That's what Uncle Ellie calls me also."

“Well, it fits, doesn’t it?” He winked and waited for River and Shay to slide into the row across the aisle. “I reckon these seats are good, eh?”

“Yup.” Shay sent Blake a smile.

My girl was smitten.

I was more smitten with the tall drink of water coming up the aisle with Nicolas, Mattie, and Julian. The latter still refused to let Elliott go for more than a few seconds. Whenever Elliott had to go to the bathroom, or when he’d showered, Julian had waited right outside the door, visibly restless. I’d been allowed to hold his hand for about a minute, and then he’d knocked on the bathroom door till Elliott had reappeared.

“Can Mattie see, Daddy?” Blake whispered.

“Yeah, a bit more today than yesterday,” I murmured. The boy’s hearing was returning too, as the swelling in his ears went down.

It hurt to look at those boys. To witness what they’d been put through.

But if I didn’t already know I loved Elliott Jones, finding out he’d offered to be the temporary foster parent for all three would’ve done me in. He acted a little awkward around the logistics of caring for a toddler, but he was a natural around older kids.

“Right here, buddy.” Elliott slowed down Mattie, who was holding Nicolas’s hand. The elder brother made sure the younger got seated in front of us. Elliott sent me a tired smile before he sank down into the aisle seat with Julian on his lap.

I shifted to the aisle seat too, and while two nurses from the Navy boarded the plane with the remaining people we’d rescued—who weren’t currently on their way to Mexico—I tucked a blanket under Blake so she could sprawl out across two seats and hopefully get some rest.

“Don’t tell me to sleep, okay?”

“I’m not telling you anything.” I gripped her chin and kissed her nose. “But *when* you fall asleep, I will be right here. You can use my leg as a pillow.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek, struggling with problems that didn’t belong in her sweet head. She wasn’t supposed to fear falling asleep—or the light being off. She wasn’t supposed to want three rounds of bath time in one day either, but here we were. She’d scrubbed at her arms till I’d had to intervene. I fucking hated it.

Elliott reached a hand over the headrest of his seat, and I grabbed it, leaned forward, and kissed his hand. The slightest contact was more than welcome—I craved it. Felt like he did too.

“Are you and Uncle Ellie friends now?” Blake asked.

We’d expected this.

Because she’d grown up with Elliott and me avoiding each other, that had always been status quo, something she’d only started questioning the last couple of years—and not frequently. She just hadn’t understood, and she’d grown bored and impatient with us, separately, trying to explain that we didn’t get along well.

“We’re the best friends you can be,” I replied, brushing my thumb over Elliott’s finger. I wasn’t ready to let go yet. “I guess you can say that finding you brought us together.”

“Huh.” She tilted her head and eyed our hands. “Mom said you and Uncle Ellie are fighting over who gets to spend the most time with me, and I tell her every time I can stop going to school and just be with you two.”

I coughed around a laugh, and Elliott chuckled.

“Your mom says a lot of things,” he drawled.

She sure fucking did.

---

Four hours into the flight, Elliott and I finally got a quick moment of privacy.

Maybe *privacy* was a stretch; we remained seated, me with Blake's head in my lap, him with a sleeping Julian in his arms, and we had Reese dozing on and off across the aisle.

"I hope you're not changing your mind about me staying at your place for a while," I murmured.

"Of course not. I'll need you there." He kissed my cheek and rested our foreheads together. "This one isn't housebroken yet. A nurse gave me a handful of Pull-Ups, but I gotta buy more."

Housebroken—for chrissakes.

I killed my laugh and just shook my head. "It's a person, you clown. Not a dog."

"See? I'm hopeless." He smiled tiredly.

He was anything but. A bit rough around the edges, maybe. Something I happened to find dangerously attractive.

The humor faded, and he just looked at me for a second.

I stared right back. I couldn't wait for things to settle down. To be in one place for longer than a night or two. To be *home*.

"Did you and Piper decide anything?" he murmured.

I shook my head. "We didn't really talk." It'd been her moment with Blake. I'd texted Piper about the extent of Blake's injuries—or what we knew so far—because Piper had obviously feared the worst, just as I had, when it came to sexual abuse. But that was one thing we didn't have to worry about. "We should probably brace ourselves for a confrontation, though. Piper will wanna bring Blake with her for a few days, and I'm not sure I can do that yet. I don't think Blake can either."

He smirked ruefully. "So the solution is that both you and Piper stay at my place in the beginning?"

“Well, we’re sure as fuck not going to my depressing little apartment—or Piper’s place, for that matter.”

He chuckled quietly. “It’s fine. She can stay for as long as she wants. But—”

“We’re not hiding,” I said quickly. I had to. I had to get that out there. “You better not suggest we hide anything.”

Something softened in his gaze. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Good. We’d hidden our feelings long enough. No more of that.

---

We landed in Long Beach at two in the afternoon local time, and I was only mildly dead on my feet.

We were shown to a private hangar, where we’d been told family would be waiting—along with Feds who were taking over the case, with Mercier staying on as a chief consultant. Apparently, he was planning to retire, but the case wasn’t closed until the last report had been submitted.

So in about seventy-two years.

Blake was back to being glued to me, arms and legs wrapped around my body, and she showed no signs of wanting to walk on her own when the shuttle stopped in front of the hangar.

“Fuck me right in the time zone,” Reese groaned and walked off the bus.

Blake scrunched her nose. “What does *that* mean?”

“Shit.” Reese turned around. “I guess you heard that.”

“Blake! Oh my God, Blake!”

All conversation was put on hold as Piper rushed out of the hangar.

I swallowed hard, and now Blake wanted down. She untangled herself from me, and then she was running toward

Piper.

“Mom!”

I ran a hand through my hair, the afternoon sun beaming brightly, and I wished I had my old ball cap. I’d gone without it for weeks now.

“Holy fuck,” Gray blurted out behind me. Before I knew it, more people hurried out of the hangar, three kids leading the way. “Darius?”

Darius smiled and threw an arm around Gray. “I couldn’t help myself—and your mom had airplane vouchers she wanted to use.”

Gray let out a tearful laugh, then jogged toward whom I assumed were their kids.

Then it was evidently Ryan’s turn. He looked surprised as hell to see a woman and a few kids—and another man? Oh right, he was in one of those triads too, like the Tenleys.

“Get the fuck out, is this Christmas or what?” Ryan swooped up his wife or girlfriend and kissed her hard.

“Hi, Daddy! We flew the plane to see you!” One of the boys threw himself against Ryan’s legs. Definitely twin boys. They had another little one too, and an older girl.

Emotions swirled around like a tornado in my chest, and I had to clear my throat. It was reunion mayhem, and throw in a handful of FBI agents and medical personnel, and I wanted to hide somewhere. Christ. And where was Elliott? *There*. He was talking to a woman, and it had to be about the boys. The woman was holding a car seat, presumably for Julian.

I wanted to walk over there, but I’d postponed talking to Piper for too long already.

I shuffled over to where they were hugging, tears streaming down their faces.

Fuck, I hadn’t felt this uncomfortable in ages. So out of place—so itching to get out of here.

Piper had no reason *not* to rush into my arms—with our girl trapped between us—and that’s what she did. Divorced or not, we’d found some middle ground to maintain a good front for Blake’s sake, and us hugging wasn’t weird. What *was* weird were her lingering feelings for me, something she liked to deny, and yet...she hadn’t exactly been subtle with her wish for us to get back together.

It wasn’t going to happen, and it had nothing to do with Elliott.

She cried and thanked me over and over, and I was stuck here, patting her back awkwardly, unable to stop thinking about what she’d done. How she’d fucking lied. She’d *schemed* like some snake.

“You really found her, honey,” she sobbed.

I cleared my throat and did my best to focus on Blake instead. I hugged her from behind, and she squirmed around between us and locked her arms around my neck. I was *very* fine with that.

“Oh, our beautiful girl.” Piper wiped at her cheeks and cupped Blake’s face in her hands. “I missed you so much. So much, so much!”

I looked over to where Elliott was standing some thirty feet away, and he glanced at me at the same time.

*Let’s get out of here, please.*

He smiled slightly, and it wasn’t the right smile at all. He was uncomfortable too.

Could he even go home right away? We had doctor’s appointments for the kids tomorrow—in San Diego, as per our request—but we’d asked for this day without any obligations. Tomorrow, we’d start. Trauma counselors, a more thorough physical exam, more tests, probably talks with a Fed or two as well.

We had one single plan for today—whenever we could set it in motion. We were gonna pick up tacos and comfortable clothes for everyone, and then we’d head to Elliott’s ranch,



where we would, in record time—put together the last pieces in his new living room.

Before the attack, they'd apparently gotten the couches and the TV in order, and he had spare mattresses. The rest...we'd get to that. Step by step, I wanted to be there while he filled his new home with a sense of *us*. I mean, I was going to make sure there'd be a solid air of Joel in his house. So he didn't forget about me and such.

A toothbrush here, my deodorant there, some clothes, maybe a few books...

Then all the rest of my shit.

"Listen—" I kissed Blake's hair, then refocused on Piper. "I understand you don't wanna be away from her right now, so Elliott and I had this idea that we spend the night at his place. Get some tacos and...you know. Just take it easy. He's, uh—" I nodded over to where he was. "He's going to take care of a few kids till the authorities know where they'll end up. They're not sure their dad is a good guy."

"Oh." Piper wiped her nose and glanced toward her brother. "Yeah, of course. I—those are the kids?"

I nodded.

Maybe she didn't know what to do with that information. I could admit, it looked strange to see Elliott with that little boy clinging to him. At the same time...he was the best uncle Blake could ever ask for, and he'd never shied away from dealing with typical kids' messes. Even before she'd been *housebroken*.

Also, strange didn't mean bad. It was hot. It was heartwarming—and those boys would have a place to relax fully. With a guy who really gave crap.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye and noticed Crew and Mercier were taking off together. Did that mean it was okay to leave? The Quinns were still wrapped up in their family reunion, and the Tenleys didn't appear to be in any rush to leave. They were talking to Ortega and Marisa, who I knew were waiting for Ortega's parents to show up with their sons.

“I take it you and Elliott are on better terms?” Piper guessed.

*Like you wouldn't believe.*

I nodded slowly, thinking of how to phrase myself. “You could say that. We, uh...we had the chance to really talk. About everything.”

In retrospect, Piper's behavior concerning the hostility between Elliott and me had been weird as fuck. She'd joked about Elliott being territorial—like there was some kind of chauvinism behind his hatred. How I wasn't a good man to his sister or a good dad to Blake. Utter horseshit, of course. And I guessed I'd been blind. I'd never really thought about why she hadn't encouraged us to solve our problems. She hadn't actually asked what the problem was, to begin with. Not really.

I could tell how guarded she became right now, though. I wasn't blind anymore. She fidgeted with the drawstrings of her hoodie, before she turned all her attention to Blake.

Like I said, weird as fuck. Wasn't she supposed to be happy? The father of her daughter and her brother, finally getting along?

She peppered Blake's face with kisses. “What do you say, sweetie? Tacos at Uncle Ellie's house?”

“Yeah, we already decided that,” Blake giggle-sniffled.

---

It felt like an eternity passed before we drove up the hill to Elliott's ranch.

Memories struck like blows to the gut. Last time I'd been here, I'd almost broken down. My whole world had disappeared.

Blake felt it too. She squeezed my fingers tightly as Piper pulled in next to Elliott's truck.

The man himself was somewhere behind us in a rental that we were returning tomorrow.

“Are we sure there are no bad men here now?” Blake asked uncertainly.

“They’re all gone,” I promised her. “You’ll never see them again.”

I was suddenly extra glad we were here, because I didn’t want her to be scared of Elliott’s home. She’d loved it here the few times she’d visited before the actual moving trucks showed up. Because, swimming pool. Uncle Ellie, pizza, and swimming pool. She’d been set.

“I wanna see what pajamas Uncle Ellie bought.” Blake unbuckled her seat belt and jumped out of the car, having evidently found her courage.

Piper couldn’t look away from her, so I carried all the food to the front door. Since all of us hadn’t fit inside Piper’s little sedan, we’d decided to split up to complete our errands quickly. We’d bought the food, and Elliott had stopped to pick up comfy clothes and some stuff at CVS.

I frowned when I spotted a note on the door.

It just read “Elliott.”

I took it down and turned it over.

*We miss you at work, but this is clearly where you belong. Welcome home. (Don't take too long to invite us for a barbecue.)*

*IE + D*

E and...

Emerson and Danny.

“Elliott!” I called.

“They’re coming, Daddy!” Blake hollered. “Calm yourself!”

I laughed and shifted the bags of food in my arms. “Okay, I’ll calm myself.”

Piper trailed up toward the house, all while sneaking glances at Blake every few seconds.

I knew the feeling. It was like missing a limb when Blake was out of sight.

“I have keys,” she offered.

“Oh. Cool.” I wanted keys to his house too. Just saying.

She dug out her set and seemed hesitant to speak.

Was it about Elliott and—

“This is going to sound bad because I know she’s obviously not all right,” she said. “But *is she all right?* Like, how bad is it? Will she recover? What’s different, aside from nightmares and sleeping poorly?”

I understood what she meant. “I think it’s too soon to tell,” I admitted. “She’s riding a wave of relief from being rescued.”

Piper nodded and unlocked the door.

“I reckon we’ll see more of the trauma manifesting itself in the days to come,” I went on, thinking about the counseling and, down the road, Blake starting school again. Her summer break hadn’t been like anyone else’s, and we had to be ready. “Nightmares and separation anxiety so far—she won’t go to the bathroom on her own. She’s afraid of the dark too.”

“Understandable.” She opened the door, visibly distraught. “I wish I could take it all away from her.”

Yeah, me too.

I walked into the house, noticing something different. It’d been hard to miss the moving trucks last time, and now—maybe that was it. Emerson and Danny had carried in all the moving boxes and furniture? They’d spread out Elliott’s belongings without interfering with how he might wanna arrange everything.

I peered into the home office, and the desk and chair were in place, same with the shelves. Then the rest of the boxes

were stacked against a wall, each one labeled “Study.”

“Daddy, where are you?” Blake demanded, her tone shrill.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m right here.” I stepped into her line of sight in the hallway, and she relaxed and hurried to me. “Let’s leave all the food in the kitchen.”

“Okay.” She stayed close to Piper and me.

The kitchen faced the back of the house and had a spectacular view of the ocean down the hill, and same thing here. Danny and Emerson must’ve put all the boxes labeled “Kitchen” in here. Dining area in order, table, chairs—but I didn’t know how much had been accomplished before the attack. My memories were hazy and obviously centered around Blake.

I saw Elliott through the window as he ushered the boys to the house, and I asked Piper to go help him with the shopping bags. Knowing him, he’d made that the quickest shopping spree. In and out, grab whatever looked comfortable, perhaps check the sizes, then get out.

“Daddy, come look!”

I left all the takeout bags and the drinks on the counters, then turned on the oven before I followed Blake into the living room—

Oh hell.

“There’s no fire,” she said.

No fire, no, but also nothing burned. I had to walk closer. The deck outside—it was brand-new. So were the table and the chairs. This had to be Emerson and Danny’s gift. They’d removed all traces of the fire and built a new deck.

New grill too, it looked like.

I exhaled.

“Uncle Ellie!” Blake darted out into the hallway again. “The patio looks good again!”

“What?” Elliott sounded confused, so I headed back there too. “I texted Madison, just so you all know. She’s been

staying with Toby's folks, and I figured if she wanted to get away for a moment, she could stay here whenever."

I didn't remember her exactly, but I knew she'd lost Toby, husband or boyfriend, but primarily, the father of her unborn child.

Piper carried the shopping bags into the living room.

"Have a look around if you want, boys," Elliott told Nicolas and Mattie. "I want you to be comfortable here. Sorry about the mess, though—we'll get that sorted."

I didn't think the boys cared. Nicolas held his brother's hand and glanced around curiously.

I hoped I could get little Julian to trust me soon, partly so Elliott could get a bit more space. Maybe be able to go to the bathroom without Julian getting upset and anxious.

Over the next ten or so minutes, it was easy to see Elliott was growing overwhelmed by the changes. His focus was on the boys, but I could tell his mind was spinning about Emerson and Danny's gift. He reread the note from them and looked out over the deck.

I decided to intervene.

"Nicolas and Mattie?" I called from the kitchen. "You wanna help me reheat the food?"

"Okay." Nicolas trailed into the kitchen with Mattie in tow.

"We'll get you settled in one of the bedrooms tomorrow," I said, unsure which one Elliott had plans for. He had four bedrooms, though one was his study now. "And you let us know if you're missing anything, okay? We gotta get you more clothes too."

Nicolas squinted and scratched his arm. "We slept on the couch at Dad's place after Mom died."

*I see.*

Each time he said something about their living conditions with their dad, I became all the more convinced they shouldn't

return to him. The man's drinking habits had been mentioned more than once.

"Why isn't Jules talking yet?" I heard Mattie whisper to Nicolas. "Elliott said it's safe now."

"I don't know, it's weird," Nicolas mumbled.

I found an oven tray and set it on the counter. "Do you remember when he stopped speaking?"

Elliott had dug around carefully in an attempt to get a clearer picture of what we were dealing with, but trauma had a way of tampering with memories, and the boys had been missing for so long. We just had to wait for Mercier to fill in the blanks.

"Um." Nicolas struggled to remember. "It kinda happened over time, I think. He talked less and less at Dad's place, and he tried to make himself invisible." Yeah, fuck that fucking asshole of a man. Keith Davis could rot. If Julian's nonverbal period had started before he'd been in captivity, I didn't fucking need any more evidence. "He talked a little with Marisa before we got on the big ship, and then nothing after."

"I understand. I'm sure he'll grow comfortable eventually—we'll just have to give him time." I began unloading all the food onto the tray. Tacos without the greens, 'cause we were adding them later, different kinds of quesadillas, taquitos, enchiladas.

Each item brought the boys a step closer, and Nicolas's bruised eyes widened when I dumped a bag of chips into a bowl.

"That's a lot of food." He seemed mesmerized.

"We love tacos in this family," I replied with a grin. "Here—" I set the bags of soda bottles and cans closer to them. "You can pick the sodas you want and bring them to the patio."

He perked up. "We each get one?"

Jesus Christ, what had they been through?

"Or two or three. I always tell Blake, drink as much as you can because we only allow soda on the weekends and when we

eat tacos,” I answered. “Otherwise, I try to stick to water and milk in the middle of the week.”

“I like milk,” Mattie noted.

“We’ll buy that tomorrow,” I said with a nod.

---

Mattie was coming out of his shell, which felt amazing. He wasn’t relying as much on Nicolas. He ate chicken quesadillas and guzzled his Fanta, while Nicolas wanted to try a little bit of everything on the oven tray.

Mattie kept looking toward the swimming pool, so maybe we could take a swim before it got dark. That was another horse I wanted Blake to get back on. I watched her take everything in while we ate—the pool, the new deck, the lawn, even the avocado grove farther away. But most of all, she looked up the hill, where I knew the attack had begun. That was where they’d come from.

“Can I take more chips?” Nicolas asked.

“You take all the chips you want, buddy,” I told him. “The guac is really fucking good too.”

He smiled carefully and grabbed a handful.

Elliott sat next to me, and he was beyond beat and hiding it poorly. He’d barely eaten anything yet; he was spending his last energy on getting Julian to eat a quesadilla.

Blake was tired too. She’d crawled up on Piper’s lap halfway through dinner.

Elliott yawned, a sight that made Julian sit up straight and stare. The boy was taking it all in, curiosity evident in his eyes.

I gave Elliott’s hand a squeeze on the armrest, and I noticed Piper’s reaction a second too late. But fuck it, right? We’d agreed not to hide. She was going to find out.

She didn’t say anything, though. She just stopped eating and buried her face in Blake’s hair.



“I can’t believe Em and Danny did all this,” Elliott murmured. “I can’t believe...”

That all this had happened.

I had a feeling he was thinking about Tariq too. He hadn’t really been able to process the death of his friend until now.

---

Holy hell, he’d done it?

I rose from my seat, reactivating the motion-sensor lights, and watched Elliott trail out onto the patio *without* Julian.

He grinned tiredly. “He’s asleep.”

Praise Jesus or whatever. “Where?”

“Between Nicolas and Mattie.”

That was good. We’d originally thought the whole living room sleepover was a kid’s dream come true, but to two boys who’d never had their own room before, Elliott’s offer to prepare a bed in one of the guest rooms was too good to resist. He’d placed a flat screen on a chair too, which I was sure had sweetened the deal.

“I’ll have to check in on him often, but for now, he’s out.” Elliott came over to me and stole my cigarette, and he took a couple drags.

We had to quit again. We were just finishing the pack.

“So we’re actually alone right now?” I peered into the living room, where Piper and Blake had fallen asleep on the couch. The TV was still playing a Pixar movie.

“Yeah—can you believe it?”

Barely. I took the smoke from him again, finished with a last drag, then put it out in the ashtray on the table. Now I could finally get my arms around him. I hugged him tightly and pressed my lips to the side of his head.

He hummed and squeezed my middle, and he buried his face against my neck.

“How wrung out are you on a scale from one to ten?” I murmured.

He chuckled drowsily. “If ten is sleeping for a week with you in my arms, I’m a fifteen.”

He said all the right things.

I kissed my way to his lips and cupped his scruffy face in my hands. I just wanted to take care of him. He’d carried the weight of the world on his shoulders for weeks, throughout this operation, and he evidently couldn’t stop taking on more responsibilities. Madison would be here tomorrow, and we had Nicolas, Mattie, and Julian—then a dinner with Tariq’s wife and daughters. The latter didn’t involve me, so I’d make myself useful around the house in the meantime.

“I’m gonna take care of you,” I murmured. “You do what you gotta do, but when you come home, I want you to relax. I’ll deal with the furniture and whatever.”

He made another humming sound into the kiss, and we eased into a slow, sleepy make-out.

I tasted coffee and something sweet on his tongue, and this was all I wanted. Every fucking day for the rest of my life.

He pecked my lips a few more times before we went back to just holding each other.

He sighed contentedly, tension draining from his body. “I love you, Hayward.”

*Fuck me.*

Indescribable happiness washed over me, and I hugged him even harder. “I love you too, Jones.”

We met in another kiss, and I couldn’t shake the stupid grin. But it was okay, ’cause it made him smile.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

“I love you.” I nipped at his bottom lip. “You’re the love of my life, even. But the question is if you’ll still love me when I

move myself in to your home one sock at a time, starting tomorrow.”

He chuckled and squeezed my ass. “Considerin’ you’re the love of my life too, I can’t imagine I’ll put up a fight.”

Wasn’t that just perfect?

I smiled and scratched my fingertips over his sexy scruff, and we got another lazy make-out session. More hugs too. I couldn’t fucking stop. I wanted to hold him forever.

We broke the kiss when we heard something coming from inside, and we looked through the window. No movement. Piper and Blake were still asleep. Maybe the remote had fallen off the couch, or...

“What’re we gonna do about your darling sister?” I asked quietly.

He let out a breath and dropped his forehead to my shoulder. “She already knows, so it’s up to her.”

I had a feeling she knew too, though I was curious about why Elliott was convinced.

“Did something happen?” I wondered.

He shook his head and kissed my neck. “It’s more the lack of somethin’ happenin’. She’s not stupid. She knows something’s up.” He straightened and glanced into the living room too. “I can’t hide what I feel about her fuckin’ lies. When she hugged me earlier, I got all rigid. I patted her back and stepped away, pretty much. Then add how you and I have interacted tonight...”

Plus, she’d seen me squeeze his hand at dinner. She’d obviously known about our feelings toward each other too since she’d gone to all the hassle of sabotaging us.

“She’s my sister, and she’s Blake’s mom,” Elliott said. “I’m not gonna say a word, but she’ll notice a shift in our relationship. Let her stew—her silence is our proof of her deception. And my *not* confronting her is my olive branch to maintain a good front for holidays and around Blake.”

It was the best route to take, I knew that. The last thing we needed was more hostility, because we'd always have Blake in the middle. But like Elliott had said, which applied to Piper and me as well—our relationship was going to change. She wasn't my best friend. She was the mother of my daughter; that was all.

---

### *Crew Finlay*

I ran a hand through my hair and checked my reflection in the car window, then hurried up to the boss's house.

Fuck me, I was nervous to see Madison again.

Almost as nervous as I was to meet Adrien's son for the first time tonight.

I rang the doorbell but didn't expect anyone to open it. Music and laughter rang out from the backyard, and it was fucking amazing to hear. I decided to go around instead.

I jogged past across the grass—and the patch where we'd found Toby's body—and clenched my jaw.

I'd missed his funeral, but we had plans to have a memorial for both him and Tariq soon.

The pool came into view first, and I was happy to see Blake in there. Joel stood on the edge, lookin' fine as fuck in a pair of basketball shorts and a ball cap on backward.

A boy came out of nowhere and sprinted toward the pool, jumping in with a war cry.

It had to be the younger brother—Mattie.

Relief kept flowing through me. These past four days since we'd gotten home had been *tense*. Everyone was closing themselves in with their immediate family, trauma therapy had started for the kids, and we all had so much to process.

I'd crashed at Roe and Jake's last night, not wanting to be alone. Thankfully, I got to see Adrien every day, but I wanted

to give him a bit of space to reconnect with his boy. My uncle and his hubby were a stellar stand-in. Never a dull moment around Roe.

Blake was the first to spot me as she climbed out of the pool. “Hi, Crew!”

I jerked my chin. “How you doin’, hon?”

“Hate the mornings, love the afternoons,” she huffed. “Okay, Daddy—look at this! I’mma do a flip!”

I grinned. I’d heard about their new, temporary routine. She had to see a psychologist specializing in trauma every day—same with the boys—but then they came back here for all the fun. No rules. Just fun. Movies, takeout, music—Joel and Blake had baked cupcakes from scratch, chilling by the pool, stuff like that. Soda on a school night and so on. But I guessed school hadn’t started yet.

I was glad Elliott wasn’t returning to work just yet either. I started on Monday; he was gonna wait another couple of weeks.

“You nervous about dinner tonight?” Joel asked knowingly.

“Yeah, so don’t fucking remind me,” I laughed.

Jack had to like me.

I reached the patio just when Madison rose from her seat, and seeing her baby bump through her dress killed my humor. The boss was there too, with li’l Julian on his lap—and I greeted Piper with a nod. She was reading a magazine.

“There you are.” Elliott smiled and kicked out a chair. “Have a seat, kid.”

In a minute. Madison and I looked at each other, and I just went over to her and pulled her in for a tight hug.

“I’m so fucking sorry, honey,” I said thickly, getting mushy right away. But I hated this so much. I hated that we’d lost him.

She sniffled and squeezed my middle. “Me too. It’s good to see you again, though. When the boss told me you didn’t get hurt in Europe, I felt like, all right, but I gotta see him with my own eyes before I believe it.”

I chuckled and blinked past the burn in my eyes. Then I inched back and got a better look at her. She was showing more now.

“Are you staying here with Elliott and Joel?” I asked.

She nodded. “For now. Toby’s parents’ place is just...” She blew out a breath, and she didn’t have to elaborate. I’d seen Toby’s mom’s Facebook. It’d become a shrine to him. She posted photos and memories every day. Which was totally understandable, but Madison had to keep going. She had the baby to think about, and constant grief was suffocating.

“When you’re ready to decide what you wanna do with your place, lemme know,” I told her. “Whether you wanna sell or stay, or...I don’t know, redecorate. Whatever.”

She managed a small smile and squeezed my hand. “Right now, the only thing I wanna do is lock down the godfather business. Toby and I were gonna ask you after the barbecue, and then...”

Yeah. And then.

I swallowed hard. “I’d be honored.” I gave her another hug and exhaled unsteadily. “I hope you understand I gotta teach that kiddo some shit you’re not gonna like. Toby would’ve insisted.”

She croaked a laugh, and I brushed away her tears.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said.

Perfect.

We made our way to the table, and I reached across it and shook Elliott’s hand. Even though we’d talked on the phone almost every day, it was good to see him.

“New threads?” He smirked.

I glanced down at my shorts and tee, and I shrugged and grinned a little. “Maybe I cashed in some gold.” I’d bought new sneakers too. And approximately a dozen science magazines for Jack. I didn’t freaking know which ones he liked, so I’d grabbed everything Target had to offer.

Two of them had aliens on the cover, so fingers crossed.

“On that note, I have some for you too,” I told Madison and sat down.

She shook her head quickly. “Please don’t. I’m already uncomfortable with what Elliott forced me to accept.”

“I use my boss powers for evil,” Elliott replied.

I smiled. Well, maybe I could save some for the kid. I’d taken plenty.

“You’re crazy, is what you are,” Madison chuckled. “What if someone catches you?”

“Those someones are dead.” I scratched my nose.

Elliott pointed to me in a silent *exactly*.

He changed the topic next and asked if I wanted anything to eat or drink, and I shook my head and declined.

“I had a big protein shake on the way over.”

“Gross.” Madison made a face.

They were not gross. They tasted like chocolate and maintained my abs.

“Elliott?” That other boy, Nicolas, came out from the living room. “Can I have another soda?”

“No need to ask, buddy.” Elliott glanced over at him. “You enjoyin’ the video game?”

Aw, shit. “What game?” I sat up straighter.

“Yeah, it’s cool.” Nicolas grinned. “Um, it’s called *Battlefield*.”

“I love *Battlefield*,” I said. I was a fan. Once they’d fixed most of the bugs, anyway. “Which one is it? Are you playing online or...?”

He smiled sheepishly and looked to Elliott for answers.

“Joel brought over his PS5,” he said. “Because apparently I’m dating a gamer.”

“Fuckin’ A.” I turned back toward the pool and hollered for Joel. “Yo! You wanna get together for a game night soon? Nicky put me in a *Battlefield* mood.”

“You haven’t had enough of battlefields?” Madison retorted.

Woman, this was different. Toby would understand.

“Hell yeah,” Joel replied. “We got Nicolas the *2042: Master of Arms*, but I’ve only played *Zero Hour* before.”

Both were awesome. “It’s a date. Our men can serve us steaks and potato skins while we get our game on with Nicky.”

“I’m loving this plan,” he chuckled.

“How did I become a server in this scenario?” Elliott asked. “And his name is Nicolas.”

Nicky was easier to say!

“You wanna play with us?” I raised my brows.

He sighed. “How do you like your potato skins?”

“Filled with cheese and plated right next to Nicky’s,” I replied smoothly.

Nicky snickered and ran back inside.

---

### *Elliott Jones*

Piper was really not gonna say anything, was she?

She was un-fucking-believable. But so be it. I’d play nice at family get-togethers and when Blake was around.

At least Blake had taken the news of her daddy and uncle being together fairly well. She just found it giggle-worthy and strange that we used to “hate” each other, and now...



It was a slow introduction to what would hopefully be a spectacular future. Blake had enough to deal with right now, so it wasn't like Joel and I were all over each other. We had to take things one day at a time for her sake.

In a way, for Nicolas, Mattie, and Julian too. Our only responsibility and priority at the moment was to keep all four kids relaxed when they came home from the hospital every day wrung out and sensitive.

When Madison excused herself to take a nap, Crew deserted me for Joel and headed over to the pool. I wouldn't see Nicolas till his next soda was gone, and Blake and Mattie weren't leaving the water anytime soon.

Piper flipped the pages in the magazine she'd pretended to read the past couple of hours.

I took a sip of my coffee, and Julian reached for his juice box.

He liked to mimic me... If I drank, he drank. If I had to go to the bathroom, so did he. Best way to get him to eat was if I ate.

"You tired, kiddo?" I combed my fingers through his hair.

He shook his head and leaned back against my chest.

Now was the moment to push, according to the doctor, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. He *was* getting better. The clinginess was easing, however slowly, and he responded using body language, which he hadn't done mere days ago. Couldn't we let him progress at his own pace?

If he stopped, of course I'd make some changes, but he'd just fucking survived several months of captivity, and his life before then had evidently not been great either. So far, we knew both of Julian's parents had died in drug-related cases. That was why Keith had been given custody. Julian's mother had overdosed, and his father had died in prison, where he'd served four years for selling coke.

The more I thought about the boys going back to Keith Davis, the more I hated it.

Mercier and his team were currently trying to find the man.

I hoped he stayed missing. Let the kids be adopted into a nice family instead. Preferably soon, because I was getting attached, and that wasn't good.

Julian climbed higher up on me and rested his head on my shoulder.

Goddammit.

I hugged him to me and rubbed his back.

No need to wonder what Ma would say tomorrow when they came up for dinner. I'd tried to postpone it; I'd even sent Piper and Blake down there so they could catch up. My folks had obviously been worried sick all this time too, but I just knew that if I explained the current situation, Ma would put ideas in my head.

*When* I explained the situation. Not if. Come tomorrow, I'd be screwed.

"Boss!" Crew made his way over again. "I'mma get goin'. Can you give me Emerson and Danny's contact information? I wanna stay in touch—and thank them for building you this wicked deck so I didn't have to."

I laughed softly and nodded. "I'll text you their numbers. Have fun tonight, and don't be nervous. The boy will like you."

"He better." He chuckled nervously and reached over to poke Julian's cheek. "And *you*—you're cute. The boss should totally adopt you and the other two."

"*Crew*," I chastised, instantly on edge. What the fuck?

Then Julian let out a snicker, and my annoyance evaporated. Sweet Jesus, that was an adorable sound.

"What? I'm just sayin'. You're already our daddy at work. Always fussin' and whatnot." Crew was oblivious to Julian's milestone or whatever I was supposed to call it. He merely shrugged and then eyed Piper. "So it was really nice seeing you again, Piper."

Oh, for chrissakes. I coughed, or choked, on shock and amusement and...whatever else. My God, that kid had zero finesse, and he still got more shit done than most others—because he simply laid things out there.

Piper smiled stiffly, awkwardly, and put down her magazine. “You too.”

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### *Crew Finlay*

*Got the magazines, passed the sniff-the-armpit test, minty breath, good hair, let's go.*

I headed into the restaurant, which was Jack's favorite, according to Adrien, and I told the hostess my party was already here. 'Cause I saw them over by the window. *Deep breaths*. It was a casual place, barbecue fusion, mixing Texas barbecue with South America's million flavors. I was here for it.

I walked past the large, circular kitchen at the center of the place, where steaks were being grilled over an open flame.

*Get ready to like me, kid. I'll bribe the fuck out of you. I have gold.*

I took a deep breath as Adrien saw me, and he was that old-fashioned gentleman who rose from his seat to greet his date. Hot as fuck.

His smile told me he totally knew I was nervous.

“Hi,” I said. “Sorry I'm late.”

“I'd expect nothing less from a Marine,” he assured. “Hey, sweetheart.” He dipped down and kissed me briefly, so I guess we were doing that in front of the eleven-year-old. “Jack, I want you to meet Crew.”

I discreetly wiped my hand on my thigh—in my defense, the sweat came from holding the magazines. “It's nice to meet you, Jack. Your old man's talked a lot about you.”

Jack pushed up his glasses, then shook my hand and scrunched his nose. “You too. Dad says you drive too fast, so I think we can get along.”

I beamed like a fucking prince. This li'l geek liked to go fast? We could go fast. No problem.

“It’s my son’s one big flaw,” Adrien sighed and sat down. “He dreams of driving a Ferrari all the way to Area 51.”

“Well, they’re not going to let me fly a Nighthawk, *so...*”

Okay, he was a good kid. I sat down too, and I handed over all the magazines. “These are for you—so that you’ll like me. Now we can talk about renting a Ferrari.”

*Because I have gold.*

## EPILOGUE 1

*A few weeks later*

*Shortly before lunch*

*Outside Dr. Holm's office*

***Elliott Jones***

**C**ome on, already.

I stood up and started pacing the waiting room.

I needed to know if I'd fucked up the kid or not. Goddammit—I rubbed at the spot in my chest that'd given me grief all morning. It hurt like shit, but this was proof. Me as a parent? Laughable. We'd obviously let the boys stay with us until Mercier figured out the next move, and then I was gonna...miss them so fucking much.

“Baby, you gotta relax. You did nothing wrong.”

I shook my head. Joel could say that a hundred times more, and I wouldn't believe him.

If it weren't for me, Nicolas wouldn't have suffered a panic attack so severe he'd almost passed out.

Nicky, I reminded myself. Become Instagram buddies with Crew, and he was suddenly the best thing since sliced bread. Nicolas wanted to be called Nicky.

I looked over at the little kids' corner where Julian was playing with building blocks, and I ran a hand through my hair.

“I should’ve made sure we were alone.” I slumped down next to Joel again and scrubbed my hands over my face.

I’d just been so relieved when Mercier had called to confirm the deaths of so many Blancos, including Carillo and Gajero. I mean, we’d obviously known, but it was official and public now. The whole fucking cartel, just gone. Only Petrov remained, and he had four countries negotiating who’d get him extradited for crimes he’d committed.

Then I’d noticed Nicky entering the kitchen, and he’d asked what was going on.

I was the dumbass who’d actually answered.

*“Those sorry excuses for men who hurt you and your brothers for so long are confirmed dead—their bosses too. That whole network of criminals is gone. They will never hurt anyone again.”*

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I hadn’t been thinking. I’d been high on relief, nothing else. Because in my field...I didn’t know how many times you thought you’d gotten rid of somebody, and then you found out much later that they’d either survived somehow or—if they were really high-ranking motherfuckers—sent guards in their stead to act like them, to speak for them, to *be* them. And in a world of coke-slinging billionaires who avoided getting caught on camera, it happened more often than most might expect.

It wouldn’t have been unheard of if Luca were really alive somewhere, in other words. Or his sons.

The only downside to their deaths was the current state of Colombia. Complete shitshow. Low-men and up-and-comers were fighting for power to fill the vacuum the Blancos had left behind. Hell, Vincente was one of them. He’d made the news last week after a politician had been murdered.

I blew out a breath and rose from my seat once more.

How long was Nicky gonna be in there for? I had to see him. I had to know if I could fix this.

I should've fucking known that such news would leave a mark. I should've known he'd been fearing more bad crap would happen—because he was so used to it. His mom dying, his dad being a piece of shit, getting fucking kidnapped...

I peered down the hall and pinched my lips together. I wasn't gonna be the asshole who knocked on the head doctor's door. I *wasn't*.

I swallowed, folded my arms over my chest, and turned back to Joel. "You reckon we should cancel tonight?"

"Absolutely not," he said firmly. "If anything, he'll need tonight more than ever. You know what he responds well to after sessions and nightmares."

He had a point. Nicolas thrived being around people, being *included*. At least in some capacity. He did get mentally tired after a while. That was when he retreated to his and Mattie's room to play video games. But until he reached that point, he wanted to have fun.

My God, had I fallen for our routines. My life was finally filled with, well, *life*.

For Blake's birthday, we'd spent the whole day doing things she'd wanted. We'd gone rollerblading, we'd gone to the beach, we'd visited the zoo. And the boys—they'd never experienced that. Now, Nicky and Mattie liked to go with Joel for his run every morning, only the boys donned their new rollerblades.

When I did yard work or lifted weights by the pool, they wanted to join me. When I fired up the grill, Mattie wanted to help. Every day, there was something new to do together. Play football, shoot hoops, plant vegetables, finish decorating the house, paint a wall, go get tacos, meet up with Crew, Mercier, and Jack, take Madison for her ultrasound.

I craved it all.

I craved more time with Blake too, but I reckoned I couldn't get everything in life. The every-other-week thing sucked. Although, Piper and Joel had agreed to be flexible in the beginning. Partly to let Blake choose a bit more, partly so

that Piper and Joel didn't have to go a full week without seeing Blake.

The separation anxiety was no joke.

At long fucking last, a door opened down the hall, and I spotted Nicolas coming out.

I stalked over there, only to slow down when it hit me that he might be wary of me. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Buddy, are you okay?” I asked carefully.

He nodded hesitantly, eyes red from crying.

The shrink stepped out too, and she smiled sympathetically. “You should hug him, Elliott.”

What? I mean—what? I could do that, of course. Of course I could, but was that—did he want that? Oh, fucking hell, I was useless. If the doctor told me to hug the kid, I was gonna hug the kid. I closed the distance between us and pulled him in for a hug. As if I wasn't already screwed. Christ, how was I ever supposed to let him go?

I cupped the back of his head and pressed a kiss to his hair, and I closed my eyes.

*Dumbass.*

Maybe he'd needed affection sooner, but after everything he'd been through, I hadn't known. I hadn't wanted to crowd him or invade his personal space.

“They're all really dead?” Nicky croaked.

I cursed internally. “All of them.” I looked up, helpless, hoping for guidance.

Dr. Holm nodded encouragingly. “I've explained to Nicky that what he experienced today was his body releasing fears he'd unknowingly held on to. He was worried someone would come and take him away again.”

My chest tightened, and I cupped Nicky's face and made him look up at me.



“I promise they can’t,” I murmured. “You hear me? You’re safe, sweetheart.”

He bit down on his lip to keep it from trembling, and he nodded jerkily.

I hugged him to me again and released a long breath.

Goddammit, maybe Joel was right. Maybe I hadn’t fucked up too badly.

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“Can you gimme a beep, Julian?” I called.

“Beep!” he hollered from the living room.

I smiled to myself and turned a bottle of beer upside down into the bowl with the meat. Then I finished dumping shredded cheese on the potato skins.

At the sound of a car door closing, I looked out the kitchen window. Finally. Joel was back with Blake. Now she was ours for the next few days.

She laughed at something Joel said before she darted for the side of the house—not even coming through to say hello. She just wanted the pool. Goofball. I’d get my hug later.

Joel didn’t let me down. He came in with four cases of beer.

“Beep, beeeeeeep!” Julian came running upon seeing Joel, who was quick to swoop the boy up. “Beep!”

“Beep, beep to you too, little beepster.” He chuckled and growled playfully against Julian’s cheek. “You still watching movies?”

Julian nodded and wanted down again. God forbid he missed something of his twelfth time seeing his favorite Minions.

I wiped my hands on the dish towel and waited for Joel to come over. I’d prepared the fridge, moving some items into

the spare fridge in the garage, so we had all the beer in one place.

“How’s my dear sister?” I smirked wryly.

He huffed and shook his head. “Don’t remind me. It’s gotten embarrassing. She knows we know, we know she knows, she knows we know that she—blah.” He waved it off and leaned in to nuzzle my jaw. “I don’t wanna talk about her. If she wants to continue this ridiculous farce, let her.”

I couldn’t agree more. I wrapped my arms around him and stole a smooch.

“How’s Nicky?” he murmured.

“Much better.” If we listened carefully, we could hear him in his room, playing video games, presumably with Crew and Jack.

I didn’t know if the headset we’d given Nicky was good or bad. He definitely loved it for his “multiplayer” games or whatever he called them, but it meant we saw less of him at times. He could lose hours in there.

“And Mattie...? Is he around?” Joel trailed lower and kissed my neck.

I shivered and gave his ass a squeeze. “Out on the patio with Madison.”

He hummed, and then we met in a deep kiss. I took control and pushed him against the nearest counter, before I spun him around and pressed my cock against his ass.

“Fuck,” he exhaled.

I grazed my teeth along his neck. “We should probably take a shower and get ready for the barbecue...”

“Yeah—I’ll go talk to Madison.”

Excellent.

---

“Fucking hell, Joel—don’t make me come.” I bit back a groan.  
“I wanna fuck you.”

He hummed around my cock and sucked me harder.

I had no words. He looked so goddamn sexy and beautiful on his knees for me, mouth full of cock, hot water rushing down on us—and *now*. Fuck. Now I had to stop him. I grabbed his jaw and withdrew from his mouth as a whole-body shudder of pleasure rocked through me, and I hauled him to his feet.

“This is gonna be quick, baby.” I kissed him hard and reached blindly for the oil next to his shaving cream.

“Default mode of parenthood,” he chuckled huskily.

*Parenthood.*

As I slicked up my cock, he turned to the wall and threw me a look over his shoulder.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t hear me.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m honest,” he shot back. “You gonna act like they don’t have you completely fucking wrapped?”

Goddamn him.

I dragged my cock between his ass cheeks, then pushed into his tight ass, which shut him up for a few glorious seconds. Aside from a gritty sound between clenched teeth. Fucker. Did he even know what he was saying? I mean, I wasn’t blind. He’d connected with the boys so seamlessly too over the last few weeks—and he was invested and caring and... Fuck.

I dropped my forehead to his shoulder and gripped his hips.

He breathed shallowly. “*We* can be that family, Elliot.”

I closed my eyes, liquid heat seeping through me, and I slid my hands up his torso.

*What if something goes wrong? What if Mercier finds Keith and he’s a wonderful guy? What if we don’t get approved*

*to raise the boys?*

I didn't voice my fears out loud because I knew what Joel would say. He'd always been braver than me.

If we didn't try, it was definitely not going to work. If we didn't put ourselves out there and do everything we could to give those boys a future, they'd for certain slip through our fingers and end up in another foster family. Maybe they'd even be separated.

"I love you," I murmured hoarsely. "I'm scared shitless something will go wrong, but don't stop callin' me out."

He gathered my hands in his and kissed them. "That's parenthood. Constantly being afraid—it's amazing."

I exhaled a laugh and kissed his neck.

We were gonna try. I'd talk to Mercier later.

---

The Quinns and the Tenleys landed shortly before three and arrived together, about a minute or two before Crew and Mercier. Gray and Darius had brought their eldest boy, Jayden, and Ryan had flown down with his eldest daughter, Abby.

Jayden and Abby showing up lured Nicky out of his gaming cave, and the three joined Blake and Mattie at the pool.

Julian was also quick to leave the couch and jump up into Joel's arms. He'd bounce between Joel and me for the next few hours until he felt ready to explore on his own again. The boy was funny, 'cause he never wanted to hide; he wanted to be where the action was, just in the safety of Joel's arms or mine. He was so curious about the world.

"Darius, I have something for you," I said. I went over to the supply chest next to the patio, where I grabbed a basket. "Make plans for eating a lot of guacamole when you get home. Fill this with avocados. Hell, fill two."

He barked out a laugh, whereas Gray's eyes flashed with excitement.

“Actually, this is great—knucklehead, you can go fill it up right now.” Darius chuckled and handed the basket to Gray. “I don't wanna forget.”

“Sure.” Gray smiled and shrugged.

I lifted a brow as he left, a little curious. I could tell when Darius had ulterior motives.

Darius smirked. “Just doin' Reese a favor. He wanted the youngsters away from the pool so he—” He stopped abruptly, and his attention was caught by something by the pool. I looked over just in time to see Reese running up behind Shay and Crew. A second later, Reese was pushing his boy into the water, conveniently with Crew in the splash zone. “So he could do *that*,” Darius finished.

I cracked up.

“What the fuck, man!” Crew yelled. “Do you know how much these shoes cost in gold?”

For the love of—

“No, tell me.” Reese flinched forward and shoved Crew into the water too.

To be fair, the kid had asked for it.

I would've done the same thing.

*Excellent* start to our do-over barbecue.

The drenched puppy glares Shay and Crew sent Reese were just fantastic.

---

“Beeeeeep!”

“Julian comin' through, El!” Joel hollered.

I set the plate of meat next to the grill and watched Julian pummel his way across the patio, between Ryan and Mercier,

between Nicky and Abby, between Gray and Jayden, and between the half-naked Shay and Crew, who were down to boxer shorts after their swim.

Julian jumped, and I caught him. I guessed it was my turn with the little monkey.

“How you doin’, champ?” I kissed his cheek and positioned him on my hip.

“Beep, beep,” he said with a grin.

My little clown. “I think you can say *good*.” I’d heard him say both no and hi to Nicky and Mattie; he was just shy and working his way through months of anxiety. And what the head doctor had theorized: having been ordered to keep quiet, whether it was by Keith or the motherfuckers who’d held him hostage.

Julian’s sheepish grin said it all. He was plenty relaxed, maybe a little *too* relaxed, with that one thing. Saying beep was comfortable.

I bumped my forehead to his, and he giggled.

“Good,” he said.

*There we go.*

Christ, it was insane how proud I suddenly felt. A warmth enveloped my chest, and I had half a mind to get up on the table and tell everyone what he’d just said.

“Great job, sweetheart. That was really great.” I pressed my lips to the side of his head, and he beamed.

“What, no red carpet for us?” And welcome to the stage, Danny Payne.

“There he is!” Reese went over to greet the new arrivals, and that included Emerson and Coach.

Tariq should’ve been here. Damn, I missed him.

Dante was *supposed* to be here, but he couldn’t get away from work. Same with Cullen—and Greer was in Europe with his family, according to Crew.

I signaled to Emerson that I'd greet them later with a gesture at Julian. I didn't wanna overwhelm him.

Despite that we all wanted this do-over, a celebration of what we'd accomplished, a moment to finally smoke that cigar, everyone knew tonight was different. Shay glanced around the patio and up the hill every now and then, no doubt thinking back on the last time he'd been here.

Crew was extra fussy with Madison. River had already asked about my upgraded security system. I'd pointed out the cameras, I'd shown him the setup in my office, I'd mentioned what alarm system it was. And Blake, much like Julian, never strayed far from Joel or me.

By the time the food was done, everyone was here—well, those who could make it—and Julian had skipped over to Joel again. We'd told the kids they could eat in the living room if they wanted, but so far, they wanted to stick around.

Danny came over and threw an arm around my shoulders. “Good to see you, Daddy Jones.”

I chuckled and gave him an elbow.

“Ouch—such violence.” He sucked his teeth. “Now I don't feel bad that Em and I fucked in your pool. Twice.”

I let out a loud laugh. As if he'd felt bad before!

“Thank you so much for letting me know, dick.” I shook my head and plated the last of the sausages. *There's an image.* Steaks, sausage, hamburgers, chicken, ribs, and pork chops filled three platters, so hopefully everyone would slip into a nice food coma.

Danny and I carried the meat to the table, and Gray, Crew, and Jayden came out with the rest. Potato skins, potato salad, condiments, and bread.

It was loud as fuck with everyone busy catching up, and I kept seeking out the kids to make sure they were all right.

*Children are resilient, Elliott.*

As Dr. Holm had told me more than once.

I pushed through some more greetings, not wanting to be an ass, and I wished Ortega and Marisa could've made it too. She was thankfully making progress, but she wasn't ready for big gatherings.

What felt like half an eternity later, I planted my ass on the grass, just off the patio, where Joel was stuffing his face and talking to Crew and Mercier. His boy, Jack, was here somewhere too. I couldn't keep track of them all.

"Where's Julian?" I asked Joel quietly.

My sweet man had barbecue glaze smeared around his mouth, and he waved a forkful of pork chops in the general direction of the patio. "He's with Madison."

"Got it." And exhale. I could eat now.

"You're cute as fuck, boss."

*Not now, Crew.*

"I know." I crammed half a potato skin into my mouth and chewed slowly, willing my brain to power the fuck down.

Crew grinned faintly. "When you're ready to talk foster-care arrangements with Adrien, he's all set."

What the hell?

I turned to Joel.

He chuckled and nudged my shoulder with his. "I'm sorry, baby, but I know how you get. I wanted to get a head start—and I had questions."

Mercier cleared his throat and set down his plate on the grass. "Unfortunately, I'm in no position to make promises about adoption—though, I don't foresee any issues—but extending the foster-care situation won't be a problem. Keith Davis is wanted for armed robbery, so even when we find him, there isn't a chance in hell he's regaining custody of the boys."

I swallowed my food, and it slid down slowly, heavily, as the gravity of the moment hit me. Was this what Darius and Gray had gone through when they'd waited to hear if they could adopt their kids? I had this painful fear that my dream of



*permanent* would crash and burn. That we'd only be granted the temporary solution.

Joel reached over and kissed my cheek. "I know it's not the guarantee you wanted, but it's enough for us to actually ask the boys if they'd like to live here permanently."

Right. Yeah. He was right. That'd been my half-assed plan too. Talk to Mercier, extend the foster-care arrangement, then ask the boys what they wanted. And only then, if they wanted to stay with us, could we start fighting for adoption.

Could this actually be happening?

"I think they'll wanna stay temporarily, at least," I admitted.

Crew snorted softly. "With all due respect, boss, but your confidence is shit on this matter. I play *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* with Jack and Nicky, like, two or three times a week. Trust me, he wants to live here."

Goddammit, I should eavesdrop more often.

"What do you say?" Joel nudged me again. "All in?"

I grinned, nervousness and hope and all the fucking worries buzzing through me.

"All in."

---

The last kid fell asleep around one in the morning.

Madison had crashed at the same time Julian did, a little past nine.

It was just us grunts left.

Emerson and I emptied the house of chairs so everyone could get a seat around the table, and in the meantime, Danny lowered the volume on the stereo, a few of the others filled the table with snacks and alcohol, and Gray and Ryan started a fire in the grill, mostly for the light. The two patio lights I had by the door didn't always notice movement farther out.

It was on Joel's list of things to take care of. He seemed to enjoy little projects around the house.

I had no complaints.

Crew was the first to haul out his cigar.

"I'm gonna tell your pop you're smokin'," Ryan said.

"First of all, he'll take that as a compliment since I come from his gene pool," Crew replied, not missing a beat. "Second of all, fuck you, Gramps. Celebratory cigars don't count."

I exchanged a grin with Darius. He had to be thinking the same thing. Those two, man.

"I miss when you called me sir," Ryan sighed.

This was exactly what I needed tonight. It'd been a long fucking day, mostly good, but overwhelming, nonetheless. Now, though... I got comfortable between Joel and Emerson, drinks were handed out, cigars were lit, and lazy chuckles mingled with "remember when" anecdotes.

"Since this isn't my first rodeo, I wanna give the new family members a heads-up," Gray said, addressing Shay, Crew, Mercier, and Joel. "What we're hearing now is clearly the call of memory lane—and it's followed by favorite quotes from ancient generals and Murphy's Law. That's Darius's field of expertise."

I smiled into my whisky.

Darius looked mildly offended. "I say plenty of good shit that's original Darius Quinn. I don't need quotes."

Gray offered a deadpan expression in return. "Baby, I asked you to make a welcome sign for our front door. You made one that says 'If you want peace, prepare for war.'"

Where was the lie, though? It was a stellar saying.

Gray got the expected chuckles from Crew and Shay. As for the rest of us... He looked at us. "You're all the same."

"Do you take commissions?" Reese asked Darius. "Every time I try to make somethin', it ends up bein' another paddle."

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Gray gave up.

I shook my head in amusement and took a puff from my cigar. River did not mess around when he bought cigars. The smoky oak from the whisky mixed perfectly with the heavy notes of pepper, leather, and molasses.

Tuning out the conversation for a beat, I pressed a kiss to Joel’s shoulder.

He tilted his head my way and gave me a sexy smile. He was feeling good. He was happy, and that made me—

Now what?

I dug out my phone and frowned. A message from Piper at this hour?

I opened it.

*I’m so sorry for the pain I’ve caused.*

I let out a breath and showed Joel the screen.

Did it matter in the end? I could admit, it felt good to have her acknowledge what she’d done. But...I don’t know. That level of deception had broken something fundamental. No matter how much we’d riled each other up as kids, we’d been there. We’d had each other’s backs—and that was ruined now. It wasn’t a white lie or even a...a... Whatever. She’d run with that bullshit for *years*.

“It doesn’t change anything for me.” Joel took a sip of his rum. “I’ll play nice because she’s Blake’s mom, but she’s not the best friend I grew up with.”

That was essentially how I felt too.

“All right, everyone.” Coach evidently wanted our attention, and he even stood up. “I’d like to make the first toast for the evening. To Hillcroft’s newest addition—Shay Tenley.”

What the...?

“For noncombat work only.” Reese rushed out the words faster than I could say *hell*. “He won’t go near a single goddamn conflict area.”

“I’ve given you my word, man,” Coach reminded him. “Now, show some fuckin’ pride. He’s gonna make an excellent martial arts instructor.”

Hot damn, that was fantastic. A perfect way to channel the horrors he’d been through and put them to use.

“I’m prouder than a pride flag,” Reese replied defensively. “I’m just sayin’.”

“Well done, kid.” I raised my glass to Shay.

Shay smiled and took the congrats from everyone. “Thank you. It’s gonna be fun. I even got these two—” he jerked his thumb to River and Reese “—to agree to let me go through the recruitment process.”

I lifted my brows. That was impressive. An ambitious goal that would give him a lot. Plus, Shay would never have recruits thinking he had just waltzed in to get the job.

“That’s amazing,” Crew said. “I’m only slightly jealous I never got that far.”

He had no reason to be jealous. Crew had scored high on every stateside test. The only reason they hadn’t let him finish the selection in Ecuador was because he worked better in a unit.

“I actually went through your file the other day,” Coach said. “I’m glad my colleagues didn’t let you go further, but the part in Ecuador would’ve been a walk in the park for you. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being a natural team member, Crew.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Crew grumbled.

Shay cocked his head. “Well, can’t he do the Ecuador thing next summer when I get there? Just to see if he’d make it?”

Not a bad idea.

“Uh, can I get in on that?” Gray wondered. “I never got official training.”

“What am I, unofficial?” Darius frowned.

I laughed.

“You know what I mean,” Gray grated out. “It sounds fun.”

Oh boy, nothing about the selection in Ecuador was *fun*.

“I’m gonna suggest the obvious,” Danny stated. “We all go to Ecuador next summer, and the youngsters can run through the jungle while the rest of us pitch in as instructors. It’s been a while since Em and I were down there with recruits.”

Well, now. This was interesting. I sat forward and exchanged glances with the others.

“I’m no longer interested,” Crew said.

“Don’t be ridiculous, sweetheart—it’s a wonderful idea,” Mercier replied. “If I can bring my son, count me in. We learned a thing or two about suffering at Quantico too.”

“Okay, we gotta make this happen,” Danny said. “No bailing—we decide right here. We’ll all go.”

I looked at Joel.

He shrugged and smiled a little. “Could be a great vacation.”

Exactly. We’d terrorize the recruits, and then when they were off on the final trek, we could explore Quito, eat all the food, see the sights...

“Joel and I are in.” I nodded to Coach. “Probably with four kids.”

“Me too.” Ryan filed in. “I’ll bring the family.”

Next summer. Ecuador.

All of a sudden, Shay, Crew, and Gray were a bit nervous.

I smiled.

## EPILOGUE 2

*A few months later*

*At seven-ish o'clock*

*In Marina del Rey*

*Crew Finlay*

“**Y**o, food’s here!” I yelled.

“All the kids can go wash their paws!” Roe hollered. “Jake, can you get the door?”

“I’m hurrying, Uncle Crew! Don’t rush me!” Sammie complained.

“How am I rushing you, princess?” I widened my arms.

It was Finlay mayhem, and I loved it. The kids ran through the house, with Jack walking at a normal pace with Colin, Roe and Jake’s eldest. They’d grown pretty close.

I headed back to the terrace with sodas, napkins, and utensils, and I sat down next to Adrien. He looked content, so that boded well for the future. Not everyone could handle loud families.

“I love this place,” he admitted, looking out over the backyard. We were in the middle of Marina del Rey, so most properties were fairly cramped. And still extremely expensive. But yeah, it was gorgeous.

Jake was a hobby gardener too, so he took care of the place well. From the rose bushes to the lemon trees.

“I love *you*.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek quick.

He smiled and threaded our fingers together. “I don’t think hearing that will ever get old.”

I grinned. Good, ’cause I liked saying it.

“Speaking of our undying love...” He was cute when he was trying to broach a topic lightheartedly. “Have you considered us possibly moving in together one day?”

I laughed and tucked a napkin into my tee. “Only every time I gotta leave your place and drive back to my shoebox. Why—you ready, papi?” ’Cause I was game. Maybe after the holidays. His dad was going on some old-folks trip to Santa Fe, of all places, for Christmas, so Adrien and Jack were coming with me to New York. If they survived, they could handle anything.

“Well...I do hate seeing you drive back to your shoebox,” he replied. Was he uncomfortable? Nervous? He had no reason to be. I was fucking nuts about us. “And I guess I wouldn’t mind seeing us in a house like this.”

Shit, for real?

“How much gold did you take in Colombia?”

He snorted softly and rolled his eyes. “Perhaps not in MDR—but Los Feliz?” That was where his old man lived. It was nice up there.

“Why are you all...” I pointed to his face. “I don’t know, awkward.”

He cleared his throat and adjusted his tie. “It’s what you do to me, punk.” Oh, so now he got defensive too. “I’ve never felt so out of control before.”

He knew exactly what to say to make me fucking melt.

“Because you’ve never loved anyone as much as you love me?” I pressed.

He narrowed his eyes. “You already know that’s the case—could you please put me out of my misery?”

And he was supposed to be this world-class special agent? Couldn't he read the stupid grin on my mug?

I planted my hands along his face and got up in his business. "Adrien Mercier, let's get a freaking house after the holidays. I got gold."

He spluttered on a laugh and squeezed me to him. "God—don't ever change, Crew. I never know what you're going to say."

That was the kicker, wasn't it? I'd finally met someone I didn't have to force anything with. I was just myself, and I woke up every morning wanting more of him.

---

When it came to kids, I had a lot of experience with babies. They never stopped screaming and so on. But the older ones? Roe and Jake's kids were getting older, and Jack had shown me a new world too. In which they just fucking disappeared. Like, you saw them during meals, when they needed a ride somewhere, when they wanted something, and when it was time to go to bed. But that was it. As soon as we'd finished eating, they vanished.

Like, what the fuck? Was I not interesting enough?

I blew out a breath and patted my stomach. I'd eaten too much again.

"I'm so fucking full." Roe leaned back in his seat and popped the top button on his jeans.

"Me too," I said. "Why didn't you stop me? Why you gotta order so damn much all the time?"

"Are you a child?" he retorted. "Set your own fucking limits, man."

That was difficult when the food was so good.

Fuck him.

"You're unhelpful," I yawned.



“Are you sure you two aren’t brothers?” Adrien was entertained.

Jake chuckled. “I’ve learned to see the upsides. When the Finlays get together, it’s chaos—but it gets so quiet when they say goodbye. Roe’s gonna be all cuddly and tired when y’all’ve left.”

Relatable. It was possible we liked to rile one another up in my family.

Adrien was about to respond when his phone went off with an incoming call. “Excuse me—I thought I put it on silent.” He furrowed his brow, and I saw Elliott’s name on the display.

“Take it,” I said.

I totally knew what it was about.

“I’ll be right back.” Adrien excused himself and headed inside.

I smiled to myself and reached for my soda.

“Look atchu,” Roe chuckled drowsily. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Cause I’ve never felt this way before.” I shrugged. “And it’s been an awesome day full of good news.”

“Care to share?” Jake asked.

“It’s about the son of a bitch Adrien’s been tryna find,” I said. I’d shared the basics with them already, so they knew what was going on with Elliott and Joel’s boys. “This is some Hollywood shit for ya—the guy doesn’t exist.”

Roe raised his brows.

“I mean under that name,” I clarified. “Keith Davis is a fraud whose real name is Kenneth Duncan, and he’s already in prison for two murders. He ain’t getting out.” The fucker had been hella affiliated, which we hadn’t known. He’d been trying to become an official member of more than one cartel, but mostly the Blancos.

Jake let out a low whistle.

“Jesus.” Roe sat up straighter. “No wonder he was hard to find.”

Word. Adrien had vented to Emerson, who’d reached out to Willow. Two days later, the job was done. It was funny, really. Months of frustration for my man and his unit, and then one woman works her hacking magic—possibly breaking a law or two—and that was that.

“It’ll be easier for your boss to adopt the kids now, right?” Roe asked.

“We hope so.” I bobbed my head. “Adrien seems confident. It’s pretty much protocol to avoid foster kids leaving their foster parents if the situation’s good, so...” Yeah. I was happy for Elliott—and Joel, who was just as invested and attached as the boss. He’d shown that today when he’d driven all the way up to our headquarters.

Adrien had stopped by to share the news with us at work, and Elliott had called Joel. An hour later, my man had relayed the news once more to Joel, and he’d been all kinds of sweet. Super relieved. And a little mushy.

“And right now...” I looked over my shoulder, seeing Adrien in the living room. “I think Elliott is offering Adrien a job.”

“Oh yeah?” Roe slipped his hand into Jake’s.

I nodded and planted an ankle across my knee. “Elliott was gonna ask him last week, but he wanted to talk to me first—make sure I was comfortable with it. But I had the worst fucking client for a thankfully temporary gig, just a few work trips up and down the coast. So we talked today instead, and I’m like, working with my man? Sign me the fuck up. We make an awesome team.”

Granted, Adrien would be at the office most of the time, whereas I worked security for clients. But still. We’d see each other all the time for briefings and meetings.

If he accepted—and he’d better.

Roe grinned and glanced at Jake. “How many awful clients has he told us about? I feel like it could be a future *Off Topic*

episode.”

I laughed. “Sign me up for that too.” I loved their podcast. They were funny. “You’ve had plenty of guests on over the years, haven’t you? I’d make an excellent addition.”

Jake smiled, and it was kind of pensive. “The funny thing is, the more we’ve heard about your boss’s partner, the more convinced I am that he’s been one of those guests.”

Who, Joel?

“Oh yeah, what’s Joel’s last name?” Roe asked.

“Hayward,” I answered.

The two exchanged a look and grinned.

“Yup, that’s him,” Jake chuckled. “He joined us once or twice back when we filmed *Currahee*. He talked about the Coast Guard.”

Oh my God, that was too funny. I had to tell Joel that Roe and I—

“Sorry about that.” Adrien came back, and I could not drop a topic faster. I sat up straighter in my seat and faced him with an expectant *Well?* expression.

*Take the job, take the job, take the job.*

Major perks. Let’s be frank. He’d get to see me every day around the office. Way more money in the private sector. Casual Friday, Taco Tuesday, donuts every Wednesday. And did I mention he’d get to see me every day around the office?

“Would you like to discuss the weather?” he asked casually.

Roe laughed.

I scowled at the fucker before I refocused on Adrien. “No, I was more thinking since we agreed not to make each other suffer, you could tell me the good news.”

He let out a chuckle and gave my leg a squeeze. “As if I could resist the opportunity to boss you around at work.”

*Fuck yes!*

I wasn't worried for crap; if anything, I knew he'd fuss over me when I returned from a taxing gig.

"I'm going to sit down with Elliott after Thanksgiving," he clarified. "It seems he has big plans for the agency that involve Hillcroft, and he needs someone to take over Tariq's responsibilities."

I nodded, having heard Elliott and Tariq discuss the possibilities before. Elliott and Coach had talked a lot lately; Coach had even flown out to visit us at JATE. I thought it was exciting. It would be like a semi-merger of some sort. Hillcroft would always be Hillcroft, and same with JATE, but there'd be a tangible affiliation between the two. JATE would likely take over Hillcroft's private security sector for domestic contracts, and Hillcroft would lead the way for more high-risk ops, where they were the best in the field.

"It's gonna be fucking amazing." I leaned over and kissed him firmly. "You can rub my feet after I've had a long day following some bigwig around, and you can—"

"I think you've misunderstood something here, sweetheart." He tried to hide the mirth in his eyes. "I will make you my bitch."

I blinked.

Roe and Jake found that way too funny!

## EPILOGUE 3

*The following summer*

*One misty morning*

*At Hillcroft's training facility high up in the Ecuadorian  
mountains*

***Reese Tenley***

I folded my arms over my chest and eyed the recruits as Coach spoke to the six men and two women. His voice bounced between the walls of the courtyard.

Shay, Crew, and Gray stood in the back row as they weren't official recruits—though, everything they'd been put through could not have been more real. We wouldn't do anybody a favor by being lenient. They'd asked for a selection process, and we'd given it to them.

Now they wore the same black utility pants and tees as the rest of the recruits, and they were ready for their two-week trek through the jungle.

“And I don't wanna see anyone activate their distress signal for a fucking twisted ankle or mosquito bite,” Coach boomed out. “You've been training for this for a whole year, and if you fail these two weeks, you gotta do it all over again next summer. I repeat, you will not pass if you do not complete the tasks!”

That was my cue. I stepped forward and retrieved eight Ziploc pouches from one of my side pockets. “Personal belongings and anything that can identify you goes into these

bags!” I stopped at the first guy, who dropped his phone, wallet, and a bracelet a kid had obviously made into a pouch. “What kind of operators does Hillcroft create?”

“The gray kind!” they all echoed. “We do not stand out. We will not be identified!”

“Who speaks first?” I moved on to the next recruit.

“Never us!” they replied.

“Who strikes last?”

“Always us!”

One by one, they left behind driver’s licenses, wedding bands, phones, wallets...

Danny was next. He joined Coach at the front.

“As you know, we’ve made some changes this year,” he said. “If we spot your beacons on the wrong side of the border, you will immediately be evacuated and escorted back to DC, and you will not have a future with Hillcroft.” He paused to let that message sink in. “On your map, you’ll find seven checkpoints, and you’ll go to them all. If you return in two weeks and you’re missing one marker, you’re out.”

Last but not least, Elliott, Mercier, and River. While the latter two handed out backpacks, Elliott positioned himself next to Coach with his own backpack.

By then, I reached the last row, and it took all my strength not to say anything to Shay—or, hell, to kiss him.

Gray had nothing to leave in a Ziploc bag. He’d already given it all to Darius.

Shay had a single item. His ring.

*I love you, baby. You can do this.*

Last but not least, Crew dropped a gold band too, plus his phone and a necklace with a miniature dog tag that carried his personal information.

“Recruits, you can open your bags for inventory!” Elliott ordered.

I got out of the way and returned to the others.

This sure brought back memories.

Elliott bent down and grabbed the first handful of gadgets. “As I go through the items, you confirm you have each one. Starting with a water filter system.”

“Confirmed!”

“One multitool, one combat knife, one folding knife.”

“Confirmed!”

---

### *Shay Tenley*

What, no kiss?

Pffft. He had another thing coming. They both did. I appreciated River and Reese for acting professional, as they had throughout my yearlong training in DC, but I wasn't here to become a contractor. I only wanted to see if I had what it took—and then to start my job as an instructor.

I waited till after the packlist inventory, because that was the final step before the trek. We shouldered our backpacks and walked through the back section of the facility, and then we had nothing but jungle and mountains in our view.

Coach sent the first three recruits off and logged their starting time.

“In five minutes, it's Gray Quinn, Ames Wilde, and Finnian Kelley—get ready and remember to activate the glow sticks at night! Do not become your fellow recruits' targets!”

Nerves tightened my stomach, and I checked and rechecked my gear, retied my boots, and zipped up my hoodie. Priciest hoodie I'd ever owned. It was thin, hugged my body, and was made from wool, but it was really soft. Totally worth the money.

*Come on, you big worriers.* Why were they stalling? They'd stayed in the courtyard, but they better show up before

I was up.

Deep breaths.

Two weeks in this humid hell, and I'd be all alone. Seven checkpoints. Waterproof map. A new compass. Five emergency energy bars, each one providing 800 calories. We *had* to hunt while we were out there.

Adrien and Darius came out from the back door—and thank fuck, so did River and Reese.

“I'm up next.” Gray jogged over to Darius, who hugged him tightly and tried to hide his discomfort at the whole ordeal.

“You be fuckin' safe, knucklehead, you hear?”

Crew wrapped himself in Adrien's arms, and I hurried over to River and Reese on the stoop.

“What you did before was dumb,” I told Reese. “Don't ever pass me without laying one on me.”

His relief was instant, and he finally got his shit together and pulled me in for a tight hug. And a hard kiss.

“I'm sorry.” He squeezed me tighter and buried his face against my neck. “We're tryin' to come off like we ain't worried sick.”

My big oaf of a man—that was one of the reasons I loved him so much. “Your fussing makes the hard work more worth it.” Yeah, this year had been dedicated to my recovery. But I wasn't alone. We were a unit, and I never wanted them far away—or even remotely closed off for the sake of being professional. “I love you.” I cupped his cheek and kissed him. “I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you.” I meant that in more ways than one. Rescue was more than saving me in Colombia. It was about being there every step of the way as I'd battled my anger, my anxiety, my fears, my doubts.

In their case, it was about being part of my training too. Whether I'd been pushed out the door to go work out with Reese at the ass-crack of dawn, or if River had shoved another book about military strategy under my nose.



“I love you too, li'l fighter,” he murmured. “We’re so goddamn proud of you.”

I smiled at him and got a couple seconds of just watching him and resting our foreheads together.

Their voices never left my head.

*You got this, sweetheart.*

*You’re strong, pup.*

*We believe in you, little one.*

My name was announced once Gray and the other two were off, so I shifted my focus to River, and he almost crushed me in a hug.

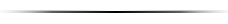
He pressed his lips to my temple. “We’ll keep an eye on you in the command center every day. You’re never alone, you got that?”

I nodded and closed my eyes.

*Never alone.*

“I love you.” I kissed him hard. “I love you so much. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“We’ll be countin’ the days, pup. Love you.”



### ***River Tenley***

Day thirteen.

I yawned and pulled on a pair of jeans, knowing full well where I’d find my brother.

After putting on a tee too, I left our room—where I was promptly turned into a crash test site by a half-naked boy darting down the hall.

“Oops!” Julian peered up at me and rubbed his nose.

I chuckled through a wince and patted the boy on the head. “You okay, trooper?”

“Yeah. I’m running from Daddy. Can you hide me?”

I snorted softly and offered my hand. “I reckon he’s tryna find you for a good reason. What’re you running from this time? Brushing your teeth? Bath time?”

He scrunched his nose. “I gots to put on clothes every day. It stinks.”

“You sound like Reese.” I grinned faintly and started ushering the boy toward the—

Never mind, Elliott rounded the corner just then, a sweater and a pair of mini-human-sized pants in his grasp, and he let out a breath.

“I swear, boy. We’re renaming you Houdini.”

“Hide me, Mister Rivvuh!”

Nope, don’t involve me in this family madness. Kids were so damn breakable, and I didn’t need that on my conscience. I’d already made one of Greer’s kids cry once when I accidentally threw a football too hard, and I’d felt like shit for weeks. So I just stood there and folded my arms over my chest.

Elliott let out a laugh and closed the distance in a few quick strides. “You should’ve picked a better bodyguard, sweetheart.” He scooped the boy up and threw him over his shoulder. “Breakfast in the mess hall when you’re ready,” he told me.

I nodded with a dip of my chin. He knew I had an errand first.

“Daddy, noooo!” Julian protested. “I don’t wanna wear pants!”

He *really* sounded like Reese.

The rest of my morning walk around the house was uneventful, and I ended up outside the command center a minute later. Upon opening the door, I spotted Coach and Reese by the wall of screens. One for each recruit.

Reese took a swig of his coffee and zoomed in on Shay's screen. The beacon blinked red against the digital illustration of the terrain. Judging by the topography, Shay was moving through a valley not too far away from his last marker.

"How's everyone doin'?" I asked, joining Reese at his side.

Coach was inspecting Ames Wilde's screen. That young woman was something else. I'd been impressed by her determination since we'd arrived.

"Just one marker left for most of them," Coach replied absently. "Finnian and Crew almost crossed paths during the night, and Shay's heart rate spiked at around four after staying still for three hours, so I'm guessing wildlife woke him up."

"He's on the run again. All's well." Reese pointed to Shay's screen.

Thank fuck. Encountering wildlife was to be expected, but it was never pleasant.

Reese extended his coffee mug without taking his gaze off the screen, and I took a couple sips.

The recruits were moving through a massive area of approximately four thousand acres, so running into wildlife was more common than stumbling across a fellow recruit. The terrain offered zero paths and roads; it was all thicket, trees, mountains, and valleys. Plenty of streams and rivers too.

A lot had changed since Reese and I had gone through the selection process. For one, we hadn't carried heart rate monitors or beacons transmitting through a satellite network. We'd appeared on no screens. We'd had flare guns... For two, we hadn't been able to contact each other out there either. These days, in case of an emergency, the recruits were allowed to reach out and perform first aid if necessary.

"Daddy, I'm *hungry*," I heard a boy complain.

"One minute, baby—Daddy's just gonna check in on the boys." Ryan poked his head into the room and nodded at us. "Final stretch, eh? No more dropouts?"

Four dropouts wasn't bad, actually. Three young men and one of the women.

"None last night," Coach confirmed.

"How's Crew doing?" Ryan pressed. "Asking for a Finlay."

I smirked.

Coach chuckled. "You can tell Cullen his boy will likely finish first."

I wasn't surprised. He had the most field experience—although, the vast majority of that came from deserts, not rainforest. Even so, he was one hell of a Marine who refused to quit.

Ryan disappeared again, but soon, another Quinn came in.

Darius. And he had their three runts with him. I liked Jayden; at fourteen, he wasn't as fragile as Justin and Cass.

"Which one's Dad's screen?" Jayden asked Darius quietly.

"Number three, up there." Darius nodded at the screen in question, studying it.

"Daddy, I want up." Cass held up her arms, and Darius soundlessly positioned her on his hip.

"Nothin' to report, buddy," Coach said. "Gray's on his way to his last marker in sector four."

Just twenty-four more hours.

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### *Reese Tenley*

When all the kids—and a few partners—had gone to bed, we marked our last night without our recruits with alcohol in the courtyard. We'd put the firepit to use a lot.

I leaned back in my Adirondack chair and planted my feet on the edge of the firepit.

One last drink, then bedtime.

“Where did Coach go?” Danny demanded.

“To check the screens,” Ryan yawned.

“I think he’s particularly interested in Wilde’s screen,” Mercier noted.

I cocked my head at him. Huh. He might have a point. Coach had been monitoring her closely.

River refilled my drink.

Maybe another after this one too. I hadn’t decided yet. To be honest, it was just nice to hang out with the guys. We had no young punks who gave us crap for going down memory lane, and most of us here went way back. Joel and Mercier were the exceptions, but they’d been in the game long enough to relate in their own way.

Aside from those two, Darius, Ryan, Elliott, Danny, Em, Coach, River, and I—we all had Hillcroft that refused to stay in the rearview. Something we’d come to accept now.

With Shay joining as an official employee next week, River and I had agreed to come in as consultants occasionally. For training and shit like that. And given the direction Elliott and Mercier had taken with JATE, they were more involved too.

“Darius,” I said, tipping my head so I could see him on the other side of the fire. “What about you? Will Hillcroft pull you back in?”

He barked out a laugh that echoed across the courtyard.

“You don’t have to be so cold about it.” Danny sucked his teeth.

“See, the real reason we’re hidin’ deep in the forests of Washington is to keep you out,” Ryan told us. “We’re not afraid of apocalypses or criminals out for revenge—we’re afraid of Hillcroft.”

I grinned into my glass.

“Because we’re irresistible.” Danny nodded. “I’ll accept that.”

“Like a drug addiction that kills ya,” Emerson joked.

“*Hey.*” Danny got defensive and slapped Em’s arm. “I expect that shit from the others, not from you.”

Em chuckled. “I’m joking, baby. Be a good boy and pour me another drink instead.”

I sighed. I couldn’t wait to see my own good boy soon.

We’d prepared the shower room and the makeshift infirmary already. The boys—and Ames—were bound to return with bruises, bites, rashes, possible minor fractures, and upset stomachs.

Coach returned to us with a printout, so we sat up straighter and waited for a final report.

“What’s the verdict?” Darius asked.

Coach gestured toward Mercier. “Crew’s comin’ in fast. If he keeps it up, he’ll be back around dawn—but hopefully he’ll rest on the way. He hasn’t slept the past thirty-six hours.” The kid continued to amaze us with his resilience. “At this rate, Shay and Finnian are tied for second place, followed closely by Gray from sector six—but he changed his course in the past hour, and he’s heading straight for Aaron. No distress signal has gone out, but I’mma keep an eye on him. He hasn’t moved in a while.”

“But Aaron’s heart rate’s all right?” River prodded.

“Yeah, just slightly elevated,” Coach confirmed.

That was good.

Coach finished his report before returning to his seat between Em and Ryan, and I—

“Okay, hear me out,” Darius said abruptly.

Those were the magic words that put grins on our faces, ’cause they meant he was drunk.

“This is gonna be good,” Elliott chuckled into his drink.

“No, no—it ain’t about...whatever. Just hear me out,” Darius repeated. “The rest of you with kids—aren’t you

worried they're gonna take after you? Jayden's fourteen and already talking about what he wants to do with his life. Ryan's boys wanna be Marines like Daddy when they grow up, and you—" He tipped his drink at Mercier, then in the direction of Elliott and Joel. "Before you know it, Nicky and Jack will be in college."

"I'd prefer mine to start high school first." Mercier's eyes flashed with amusement. "I know what you mean, though. Considering my son's hobbies, I'm not particularly worried."

"And we're trying to steer Nicolas toward the Coast Guard," Elliott replied. "He wants to be a mechanic but claims regular cars are boring."

"We need good mechanics at Hillcroft," Coach mentioned.

Both Elliott and Joel got their hackles up.

"You can shut the fuck up," Elliott told him.

River and I laughed.

"This is what I'm fuckin' sayin'," Darius went on vehemently. "Kids pick up on these things. When I get home—" He paused to finish his drink. "Fuck." He winced and rubbed at his chest. "I don't know, I'mma pick up knitting or something."

Oh God, I fucking howled at that image—Darius on his porch, shotgun next to his rocking chair, and he was *knitting*. Yeah. I'd pay to see that.

"I love drunk Darius," Danny laughed. "Say more things."

"What about pottery?" Ryan suggested.

"What's wrong with pottery?" Darius bitched.

I slumped back in my seat and slapped a hand over my face, unable to stop laughing.

---

*Shay Tenley*

*Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.*

*Don't throw up again, don't throw up again, don't throw up again.*

My fucking God, I'd never been in so much physical pain in my life. And I'd been both shot and stabbed. Panting and gasping, I grabbed on to ferns and trunks as I climbed higher and higher up the mountain. My legs were so weak that I had to pull myself up.

I paused briefly and took small sips of water. I'd learned the hard way that I couldn't chug anything at this point. It just came up again. Then I looked at my watch to check my heart rate. Fuck me sideways. *192 bpm*. I had to slow down a little. Goddamn. I swallowed dryly and considered throwing up. The nausea was right there, about to crawl up my throat.

Did they have to build a fucking training facility at the top of a mountain? I'd been running uphill for the past four hours, through terrain I never wanted to see again. Ferns the size of a truck, fallen trees you needed climbing gear to get over, rocky surface here, a mudslide waiting to happen there—

I bowled over and emptied my stomach.

Fuck.

*There goes the rest of the fish I had for dinner last night.*

When my heart rate was down at 170, I forced myself to move again. My head was pounding, sweat literally poured down—okay, it was rain too—and every fucking part of me either itched or ached.

The moment I finally saw the white sky up ahead, I choked on a breath and lost my fight against the tears. No words could describe my exhaustion. The only green I wanted to see was the color of River's and Reese's eyes. When we got home, I had half a mind to throw out every plant in the house.

We might have three.

The lush green canopy over my head parted more and more, until I broke through the tree line at the top of the mountain and laid eyes on the training center. Two weeks of



muddy hell were over. *Oh my God*. I couldn't take another step. I spotted Finnian on the ground, panting, and he had Elliott and Danny checking his vitals. He must've just come back too.

I took a page from his book and collapsed in the mud.

Seconds later, I had River and Reese sprinting over to me.

They got down on their knees on either side of me, River immediately checking my watch and feeling my pulse, and Reese cupping my face.

"Just breathe, sweetheart," he said. "You did so great. Now you relax. You did it."

"*Hnngh*." Yeah. I did it.

"Heart rate's going down." River unzipped my rain jacket and began checking my arms, my legs; he lifted my shirt and felt my stomach. "Do you have any strains or fractures, baby?"

I managed to shake my head.

"His skin is red here," he murmured, seemingly to himself. "Any bites from venomous reptiles or spiders?"

Another shake of my head. "Almost got..." Fuck. I panted some more. "Mauled by a boar the other...night."

"We need help over here!" I heard Elliott yell.

Worry shot through me, and I pushed myself up. Was it Finnian? It couldn't be—he was just throwing up. But then I spotted Gray breaking through the trees; he was farther away from where I'd come through, and he wasn't alone. He was supporting that Aaron guy.

Darius and Ryan were quick to run over.

"Lie back down," Reese urged me.

Yeah, okay.

They weren't satisfied until I was down to my base layer and they'd checked that I could bend my knees, my arms, my fingers, the whole shebang.

Only then did Reese relax enough to unleash his sense of humor. “So, did you have a nice vacation? Work starts in a week.”

I whimpered and laughed at the same time.

“Let’s get you to the showers,” River said.

“Where’s Crew?” I asked.

“Probably asleep by now. He returned a few hours ago.”

Jesus Christ, that guy was fast.

“Sleep sounds good,” I admitted and sniffled.

“As soon as we’ve fussed over you in the shower and in the infirmary,” Reese replied. “First things first, though—before Danny beats me to it.” He paused and touched my cheek, affection seeping into his eyes. “Welcome back, Operator Tenley. You passed Hillcroft’s selection with flying colors.”

*Operator Tenley.*

All right, I might cry some more now.

I threw my arm over my face and completely lost my composure, and it felt like a whole year’s worth of tension and emotions just burst out.

*Operator Tenley.*

I’d fucking made it.

## EPILOGUE 4

*That following December*

*Red-eye coming in for landing too early for Joel's comfort*

*In DC*

*Joel Hayward-Jones*

“Dad, wake up.”

I flinched and cracked my eyes open—fuck me, my neck hurt. I groaned under my breath and rubbed the sore spot, then turned in my seat. Mattie was right behind me in his own aisle seat.

“We’re about to land,” he informed me.

“Right.” I was gonna blame my exhaustion on Elliott. I didn’t sleep well without him next to me.

Asshole.

I let out a yawn and reached across a sleeping Julian to make sure Blake’s seat belt was fastened, and then I shook her leg gently. “Wake up, honey.” I wasn’t waking Julian until I had to.

“Noooo,” she complained.

“We’re landing soon,” I said.

“See if I care,” she huffed.

The pre-preteen attitude was fantastic.

Jack was in the middle of waking up Crew behind us, so we had that covered.

Forty-five minutes later, we were greeted by a snow-covered DC, and we aimed directly at the cabstand.

“I miss the West Coast already,” Crew yawned.

Eh. I kinda loved the East Coast in the winter. Christmas should have snow.

We found a big car that could take us all, and our luggage filled with presents, and Crew gave the driver the address of Hillcroft.

Blake wanted to sit next to Jack, and she fell asleep again in two seconds.

I had Julian in his car seat next to me, and he blinked sleepily at his surroundings. Even Mattie was on the cuddly side this morning. That happened too rarely these days. I put my arm around him and kissed the top of his head.

“Should we stop for breakfast on the way?” Jack wondered.

Crew shook his head. “No, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from Adrien’s Instagram whenever he and Elliott are in DC, it’s that Hillcroft serves one hell of a breakfast spread.”

Seriously. A few times a year, they came here to host a couple seminars and to put a handful of security guards through rougher training, and every morning began with breakfast in their own cafeteria.

Crew and Jack had come down for dinner the other night, and we’d bitched about missing our husbands, so here we were. It was our year to have Blake for Christmas, allowing me to make a snap decision to just move the holiday across the country. Nicky had tagged along with Elliott this time, giving me all the more reason. Missing Elliott was bad enough, but Nicky too? No, I had limits.

I’d been on the fence from the beginning when Elliott had told me they’d be home again on the twenty-third. This way, we got two extra days with them—and we’d get to see the Tenleys and the Paynes for dinner tomorrow night.

We arrived outside Hillcroft's own building less than ten minutes later, and I paid the fare while the others climbed out and got our bags.

"Daddy, I'm too sleepy to walk," Julian complained as I removed his car seat.

I chuckled and picked him up.

The building didn't even have a logo on it. Nor any character. It was a silvery metal box, four stories tall, and it blended in perfectly with the neighboring addresses. This was the headquarters for private security and US military.

"It's so cold." Mattie shuddered. "How do we surprise them?"

Unfortunately, it didn't get better than this. "By texting them to come out, I'm afraid," I admitted. "We don't have clearance to get past the lobby."

If we'd arrived even earlier, we might've been able to surprise them at the company condo they kept not too far away, but it was almost eight now, so they were definitely at work already.

My breath misted in the air as I sent Elliott a message.

***You can pick up a few Christmas presents in the lobby right now.***

"Let's go." I piled Blake's luggage on top of my own and grabbed Mattie's bag too.

Crew walked ahead of us and threw an arm around Jack's shoulders. "I'll give you ten bucks if you look away when I greet Dad, 'cause it won't be a kid-friendly peck."

Jack glanced up at Crew with a flat expression. "When is it ever?"

"I knew you'd understand." Crew landed a loud smooch on Jack's cheek.

I shook my head to myself. Those two had developed an interesting relationship. In their day-to-day life, they were more like brothers, or uncle-nephew, but Jack liked to talk

about Crew as his stepdad, especially online. And Crew was the same. At work or around friends, Jack was his stepson or “mini-me.”

It was sweet.

We entered the large lobby through the revolving doors, and having been here before, I knew that this area said absolutely nothing about what was behind the locked doors. It was quiet and sterile to the people who never got past the first floor.

The basement was probably the wildest. That was where they had their private shooting range, gym, martial arts studio, vending machines all over the place, every trash can filled with takeout containers, and rec center.

The woman behind the circular reception desk glanced up with a polite smile. “Can I help you?”

“Nah, it’s okay—our men are on their way,” Crew responded.

He’d barely gotten the last word out before I heard the ding of an elevator opening.

Nicky was the first to step out, and he lit up.

Fuck, so did I.

“Is it them, son?” I heard Elliott ask.

“Um, *yeah*.” Nicky took off toward us, and I deserted our luggage.

Blake was suddenly no longer tired, and she darted past me just as Elliott and Adrien emerged from the elevator.

“There’s Daddy!” Julian wanted down, and then he was off too.

“Oh my gosh, hi!” Blake ran into Elliott’s arms. “We brought Christmas with us!”

Mattie was soon there as well. “Hey, Dad!”

I hauled Nicky in for a tight squeeze, and I told myself not to be the dad who constantly pointed out how much their kids

had grown. But seriously, he was almost as tall as Elliott and me now. It felt weird.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked with a grin.

“One week is plenty,” I announced decidedly. I cupped his cheek briefly and couldn’t stop smiling. “Good to see you, son.”

“You too. Maybe someone will stop checking his phone every five minutes for messages from you now.”

I laughed and draped an arm around his shoulders, then ushered him over to Elliott.

Crew was right. The kiss he delivered to Adrien was not appropriate for kids.

“I can’t believe you.” Elliott shook his head at me, but his eyes were filled with all the relief and affection I’d wanted to see.

“At least when I get deployed, I can still pick up the kids from school and have dinner together most nights.” I closed the distance and kissed him, and he trapped Julian between us in a tight hug.

“You made my year,” he murmured into the kiss. “I missed you.”

“I missed you more.” I nuzzled his nose and kissed his scruffy cheek. “Change of plans. We’re celebrating Christmas here, and we have dinner with the Tenleys and the Paynes tomorrow night.”

He just grinned and tightened his hold on us, making Julian giggle.

“I just think it’s a little fucked up,” I heard Crew saying. “We should get keycards with the highest clearance.”

“On what grounds?” Adrien laughed warmly. “Elliott and I only have level two—but you want the top?”

“Well, that’s a travesty too,” Crew scoffed. “I’mma talk to Coach.”

Elliott and I glanced over to him.

“And say what?” Elliott chuckled.

Crew shrugged and scratched his nose, and he got a little defensive about it. “I’m just sayin’, it’d be nice to stroll through the lobby and flash a badge or somethin’.”

Adrien’s forehead creased. “Is this your way of telling me you want to become an operator here?”

“What the fuck? No!” Crew let out a laugh, surprised Adrien had said something like that. “Fuck being an operator. I’m a *renegade*, man. *That’s* what I want on my card.”

Good Christ. I smirked and faced my man. “Maybe Coach can make him a novelty one. With glitter and a backward R.”

Elliott’s shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“Dude, I heard that,” Crew said. And he paused, thinking about it. “I’ll take it.”

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***The End is never the end in Cara’s world.***

*The Renegades will show up in future outtakes as well in as Coach’s future series, which brings us back to Hillcroft.*

*Six full-length, standalone novels are planned under the Hillcroft Group umbrella—three MM and three MF.*

*Crossovers are to be expected.*

*Sign up for [Cara’s newsletter](#) so you don’t miss any updates.*

***The Renegades***

Book 1: [Rogue Launch](#) | Elliott & Joel

Book 2: [Enemy Combatant](#) | Crew & Adrien

Book 3: [On the Double](#) | River & Reese & Shay

Book 4: [Tango Down](#) | Joel & Elliott



## MORE FROM CARA

Cara freely admits she's addicted to revisiting the men and women who yammer in her head, and several of her characters cross over in other titles. If you enjoyed this series, you might like the following.

### [Auctioned](#)

**MM | Suspense Romance | Hurt/Comfort | Trauma**

At twenty-one, Gray Nolan became a human trafficking statistic. He and seven other young men were taken aboard a luxurious yacht where they would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Tortured, shattered, and almost defeated, he watched his new owner step out of the shadows in a swirl of his own cigarette smoke.

### [Breathless](#)

**MMM | The Game Series, #3 | BDSM | S/M | Daddykink | Standalone**

*“Will you beat me without knowing why I want it?”*

I'm used to rejection by Sadists at this point. No one wants to beat me or skip aftercare; they wanna talk and get all up in my business—where they don't freaking belong. But I give it one more try when I spot River and Reese Tenley at a kink party. The only thing bigger than them is their reputation as hardcore Sadists. To the memories of grief and why I'm seeking punishment, I ask them to hurt me.

*“Sure. It's your funeral.”*

### [Aftermath](#)

**MM | Kidnapping Drama | Suspense Romance |  
Hurt/Comfort | Standalone**

Austin Huntley and Cameron Nash are like night and day. One is a wholesome family man and works in a nice office. The other is an antisocial car mechanic on the spectrum with a short fuse. But after being kidnapped and spending five months together in a small cell, life will never be the same, and they can't go a day without seeing each other. This is their aftermath.

**[The Shepherd](#)**

**The Game Series | Book 6 | Standalone | High-Protocol M/s  
| Family | MMM**

At the not-so-tender age of forty-five, I could only scratch my head and wonder what the hell had happened to my life. Where was my big family? All the kids I wanted to have? I guess it made perfect sense that after so many years of wondering, waiting, and grumbling, a single week changed it all. My “the one who got away” showed up at a kink event, and my best friend shared a drunken confession that screwed with my head.

It was time to improvise, adapt, and...start believin' in pipe dreams.

Check out Cara's entire collection at [www.caradeewrites.com](http://www.caradeewrites.com), and don't forget to sign up for her newsletter so you don't miss any new releases, updates on book signings, free outtakes, giveaways, and much more.

## ABOUT CARA

I'm often awkwardly silent or, if the topic interests me, a chronic rambler. In other words, I can discuss writing forever and ever. Fiction, in particular. The love story—while a huge draw and constantly present—is secondary for me, because there's so much more to writing romance fiction than just making two (or more) people fall in love and have hot sex.

There's a world to build, characters to develop, interests to create, and a topic or two to research thoroughly.

Every book is a challenge for me, an opportunity to learn something new, and a puzzle to piece together. I want my characters to come to life, and the only way I know to do that is to give them substance—passions, history, goals, quirks, and strong opinions—and to let them evolve.

I want my men and women to be relatable. That means allowing room for everyday problems and, for lack of a better word, flaws. My characters will never be perfect.

Wait...this was supposed to be about me, not my writing.

I'm a writey person who loves to write. Always wanderlusting, twitterpating, kinking, cooking, baking, and geeking. There's time for hockey and family, too. But mostly, I just love to write.

~Cara.

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