

# KALYN COOPER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# UNRESTRAINED

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HOLT AGENCY

BOOK SIX



# KALYN COOPER



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**Unrestrained**

**KaLyn Cooper**

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ISBN: 978-1-970145-40-3

eBook Published by Black Swan Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

### **About this Book**

*Unidentified floating objects over the U.S.A. force the Holt Agency and Black Swan Team 2 into the frozen Alaskan winter.*

Kenner Lane grew up struggling in the unforgiving Alaskan interior. He knew what it meant to be freezing cold and how to avoid it. Move away. Joining the Navy the day after high school graduation was step one. Becoming a SEAL was step two. Subzero temperatures for months had been all the motivation he'd needed to earn his Trident. Now medically retired and a Holt Agency employee, he went where they paid him to go. Even if that meant guiding a bunch of women through his godforsaken birth state.

Lieutenant Piper Knight always expected the best of herself. She would have made the Olympic swim team but instead took a commission in the United States Navy. She'd been accused of being half fish because of her love of all things water related; swimming, snorkeling, SCUBA diving, even fishing. Completing the Joint All-Female Special Operations School at the top and joining Black Swan Team 2 accomplished her next goals. However, she had never aspired to go to Alaska in the dead of winter, hunting what might be nothing more than a high school science experiment gone wrong.

Opposites can attract, but can Piper get Kenner past his preconceived notions of women and his loathing of the cold and allow her to warm his heart?

## LETTER TO READERS

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for purchasing *Unrestrained*, my third and the final book in the Holt Agency series. Books number one, three, and five are written by Becca Jameson. Heroes and heroines from my books will make appearances in hers, and vice versa. My books are numbers two, four, and six. This final book in the series blends the last man of the Holt Agency with the first woman of my Black Swan Team 2 series.

Speaking of heroes and heroines, you're going to recognize the men of the Holt Agency from *Shadow the Desert* and *Shadow in the Darkness*, both by Becca Jameson, and *Shadow in the Mountain* and *Shadow in the Daylight* by KaLyn Cooper. You may wish to read all four of these books to fully understand the complexities of the characters in the Holt Agency series. All of these books are stand-alone romantic suspense and military romance.

Complete links to all of the above books can be found in the back of this book.

I hope you enjoy reading *Unrestrained*.

Always,

KaLyn

For the latest on works in progress and future releases, check out **KaLyn Cooper's website**

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*I dedicate this book to those who have found the love of their  
life under the stars.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Becca Jameson, for all your encouragement and late nights. You're a wonderful writing partner. This series was conceived almost three years ago. Without Becca's determination this series still might not be published.

I'd like to thank the members of the Black Swan Book Club for their constant support!

I cannot thank my editors enough. Tenda London thanks for keeping me going and offering ideas. Erica Scott, THANK YOU for correcting all my Dragonisms, commas, caps, and missing words. You're the best copy editor.

A huge thank you to my publicist, formatter, and right-hand woman, Michelle Duke.

Thank you to my wonderful husband who puts up with deadlines.

# CHAPTER 1



“NO WAY IN HELL CAN YOU BEAT US. IT’S EVEN CALLED THE fireman’s carry.” Kenner “Viper” Lane exaggerated the *man* syllable as he taunted the last two women in line for this relay race.

The closest one slid her golden brown eyes his way and grinned. “Pretty cocky for an old man.”

Old? He wasn’t old. He was the youngest man in the Holt Agency at thirty-two. Sure, he was older than any of Xena’s friends who’d shown up seemingly in the middle of the night. Kenner decided to ignore that age dig.

“Yeah, I am cocky.” With his left hand he removed his ball cap and ran his right hand over his close-cut hair. He’d started to go bald in his mid-twenties. His father had worn a disgusting comb-over. When Kenner’s receding hairline had reached the middle of his head, he’d decided to cut it all off. Almost all. “My body prefers to concentrate my testosterone on where it’s needed most.” He secured his hat back on his head and grabbed his crotch.

The woman with the gorgeous brown eyes turned to the blonde with short spiky hair next to her. “Why do men find it necessary to bring the size of their dick into every conversation?”

“From a medical standpoint, and this is just from my experience as a nurse, I’ve found those men with a small penis seemed to have a need to talk about the appendage proportionately more than those men who are well endowed.”

Both women stared at his crotch before their gazes wandered to the other men on the field. “Interestingly, though, research has determined that there is a direct correlation between the size of the man’s nose and his penis.” The women’s gazes once again swept the field.

Kenner carefully gazed at each man’s face, comparing his nose to theirs. He had a rather large nose, larger than most. Not that he would take the comparison any further than that.

“If that’s true, Xena is a very lucky woman,” the brunette next to him announced.

Of course, he looked at Ryker Tufano, one of his two bosses, just as everyone around them started yelling and clapping.

“Ready?” Holden Billings asked him. They’d decided that Holden would carry Kenner on the way down the field, switching at the opposite end so Kenner carried Holden on the final stretch for the men’s team. As Heath Kubiak and Tavis Neade approached, Kenner leaned over so Holden could pick him up.

The women’s team wasn’t far behind. They seemed to be able to make the handoff quicker, especially at the far end of the field when it was Kenner’s turn to carry Holden.

“Pick up the pace, Viper. She’s closing in on you,” Ryker yelled from the sidelines.

Easy for him to say. He wasn’t hauling Holden in a fireman’s carry a hundred yards.

With every step, Kenner questioned why the hell he’d volunteered to run cleanup, the last person in the relay races the length of a football field. And who the hell had decided he and Holden were the same size? His friend must have lied about his weight. Holden had carried Viper down the field, easily maintaining the Holt Agency men’s small lead. He couldn’t have lost that much ground. The switch had gone fast. When he and all the Holt Agency men had been in the SEALs, they’d practiced this drill almost every day. But they had been out of the Navy for five years.

Kenner thought he'd kept in shape but with twenty-five yards yet to go, he was breathing hard. He needed to step up his training. If he had to carry an injured teammate out of a hot zone, they would both be in trouble.

"You've got this, Piper," one of the women yelled from beside Ryker's very pregnant wife, Xena.

This was all her fault. She'd invited her former teammates to the Holt farm and then announced that some friendly competition might be fun. Men against women. He should've known something was wrong when Xena just smiled at her friends.

Kenner knew his boss's wife was a kick-ass-and-take-names woman who could keep up with any man in the Holt Agency. Xena was special. On more than one occasion, he'd been happy that she was on their side. He had no idea there were more women like her. And they were still active duty.

Kenner glanced to his left. Through puffs of frigid air in the late day sun he saw the two-women team were closing in with every step. Only a few inches at a time, but with overall points this close, every inch counted. He would bet that the woman she was carrying couldn't be anywhere near proportionately the same size as Holden was to him.

He had to lengthen his lead. Their all-male team couldn't lose this race. They were only ahead by one point. Kenner wasn't going to let them lose on his watch...not to a bunch of women officers. Everyone knew that officers were soft compared to enlisted men. Every man who worked for the Holt Agency was retired Navy enlisted.

Besides, Xena would never let the men of Holt Agency live it down if her former teammates beat them. It didn't matter that the women were still active duty and that most of the men had been medically retired for nearly five years. Ryker insisted they stay in peak physical condition, training as though they were even now members of an active-duty SEAL team.

"You're almost there, Piper," their dark-haired team leader hollered from the finish line.

“Just a few more steps,” screamed another woman.

“Run!” Holden yelled into his ear. “Pick up those clodhoppers and move it but be careful. The grass is very slippery about ten yards from the finish line.”

“Go team Kenner and Holden!” Melanie cheered from the men’s sideline. “Tell Daddy to hang on tight.” She bounced their toddler on her hip and pointed to his father.

“Dig deep,” Tavis Neade suggested as he knelt next to his four-year-old, Sophia. “You’re almost there.”

Kenner would’ve yelled back a snarky comment if he had any breath left in his burning lungs. They rarely ran outside in the winter. Southern Indiana could get damn cold. The day after Thanksgiving wasn’t technically winter yet. Maybe he’d eaten a piece or two too many of Ms. Nancy’s delicious pumpkin pie yesterday. That must’ve been it. Those two extra pieces of pumpkin pie had him weighed down for today’s competitions.

Only four steps left to go.

“You’re almost there,” Grant yelled.

Kenner’s front foot slipped. He immediately dropped to his knees. With Holden on his shoulders, he fell forward. Fortunately, they’d been trained for just such a possibility and Holden rolled before he crushed Kenner’s face into the wet muddy grass. He lay face down, gasping for his next breath of air.

“Not so cocky now with your dick in the dirt,” one of the women said as she strode by him and over the fluorescent finish line.

“Da!” Holden’s little boy toddled over to the big man rolling in the orange and rust-colored leaves scattered on the ground and jumped on top of him.

“That’s one more point for the women,” Xena announced. “Great work, Ladies,” she rallied the women while smiling at her husband. “We’ll get even more points in the shooting competition.”

“How about you give it a rest for a little while. The score is even. You have just enough time to come in and wash up for supper.” Frank Holt’s authoritative voice boomed over the playing field.

“Ms. Nancy doesn’t tolerate anyone being late for supper,” Xena warned her friends as everyone walked back toward the big farmhouse. “You all know where your rooms are, right?” When all the women nodded, she continued, “Good. I have to pee and I’m going to do it at my own house. I’ll meet you in the dining room in five minutes. Don’t be late.” She dashed into their home as the group of women passed.

Keene and Kelly Soto peeled off toward their house on the lake. Kenner had heard them bemoaning how quiet it had been with Jock, Kelly’s fourteen-year-old son, spending Thanksgiving with his father.

Ajax Cassman had been slipping off between his turns to compete to check on his wife, Serena, and their three-year-old daughter and newborn son. The women had deemed it too cold for baby Jefferson to be outside so his big sister, Charley, assigned herself to baby duty, allowing her mother to slip outside long enough to watch her husband race.

Since it was too far for Larson and Anya Aldrich to drive to their home back toward town, and she was about to give birth any day, Ms. Nancy had insisted that Anya watch from the front windows in the big house with her feet up.

“Better luck next time.” Heath Kubiak smacked Kenner on the shoulder with his free hand, his other arm securely around his wife Ali’s waist. They walked up the wide front steps to the large Holt house side by side.

“Nice you guys could make it down here for Thanksgiving.” Kenner was surprised they didn’t have Secret Service tagging behind them given that her father had just won the election for president of the United States earlier that month.

“We’ll be spending enough time in D.C. in January for the inauguration, and I promised my mother that we would celebrate Christmas with them, photographer and all.” Ali

rolled her eyes. “I’m so glad I work seventeen hundred miles away from them.”

“Me, too.” Heath pulled his wife closer to him in a one-armed hug and kissed her temple. “And I’m really glad that years ago when they first started the Holt Agency that Ryker and Ajax decided to have the annual business meeting at Thanksgiving time. It’s a perfect reason for us to be here on the farm, far away from D.C.”

“I’m just glad that you have a quasi-permanent bedroom here.” Ali smiled at Heath. “With Xena’s friends here now, and all the Holt agents with their families, it’s a full house.”

“Me too,” Kenner admitted. Ever since the Holt Agency had been created, he had lived in the same room. Why not? It had everything he needed; a bed, dressers, closet, television (which he’d personally upgraded in size), bathroom, and shower. He didn’t need a desk. He had one of those right down the road at the Holt Agency headquarters. It also had a gym where everyone worked out together first thing in the morning, just like they had as SEALs. Conveniently, it had showers, and each man had his own huge locker in the dressing room. He kept his work clothes there. He loved his room. He could close the door and close out the world. No one would bother him unless there was an emergency.

Frank Holt knew what he was doing when he kept expanding the old farmhouse to accommodate more foster children. The older man had once commented, “I was afraid Nancy was going to turn our big house into a bed-and-breakfast when all the children had left. Luckily, by the time the last ones left and were out on their own, Ryker and Ajax returned home, bringing with them wives and six more friends. The next thing Nancy and I knew, our house was filled once again, this time with adult family. This is so much better than a bunch of strangers rotating in and out every week.”

At the top of the stairs on the second floor Kenner said goodbye to Heath and Ali when they turned to the right, and he turned down the hall on the left. Kenner never paid attention to who else was billeted around him. None of them were there for long, not like him. He was pretty sure that Grant



and Callie Housman were in the room across the hall from him. He'd seen the manager of the Holt Agency D.C. office come out of that room with his wife who was a Chinese interpreter for the CIA. Such a smart woman. Grant was so lucky to have found her on a cruise ship.

Actually, all the men of the Holt Agency had found beautiful, intelligent women and married them. Kenner didn't see any reason why he should limit himself to one woman. He could have as many women as he wanted.

He never brought them home, of course. He winced at the thought of sex with a woman in his room at the big farmhouse. No. Never. They either went to her place or a hotel. Somewhere he could leave as soon as he was done with the woman. Sometimes, once was enough. Other times he availed himself of her pleasures several times. He always made sure she'd had a good time too. He wasn't a selfish lover. He enjoyed bringing a woman to that peak of ecstasy, feeling all her muscles tighten and quiver before he sent her flying over the edge, at least twice, before he took his own pleasure.

Kenner never kept a woman longer than a weekend and he could count those encounters on one hand. Women tied you to one place. He never wanted to be so tangled up in a woman that he couldn't move, the way his mother kept his drunk of a father tied to Alaska. The memories of his father's shouted complaints made him shudder.

That was one of the reasons the moment he turned eighteen he signed a contract to join the Navy and the day after high school graduation he left Alaska for good. Constantly moving was another reason he'd loved the military. First, he went to boot camp in Illinois on Lake Michigan where he did so well and fell in love with the idea of becoming a SEAL, he'd requested and was given permission to stay for Naval Special Warfare Prep School. He graduated second in his class. One of his instructors told him that becoming a SEAL was ninety percent mental. As Kenner walked away from the senior chief, he promised himself that he'd do better at BUD/S. There, he learned he couldn't be first at everything...but he could be damned good.

Mental toughness definitely earned him his Trident but it truly saved his life when he'd been captured and tortured by Ethiopian rebels. For three months he believed they wouldn't be rescued. Before Ryker and Xena liberated him, Heath Kubiak, Larson Aldrich, and Holden Billings from a prisoner of war camp in the mountains of Ethiopia, Kenner would never have believed a woman could match the skills of a SEAL.

Even after competing against Xena's friends that day, he refused to believe they could handle real-life situations such as combat. Kenner chuckled to himself as he walked down the long hallway lined with doors on each side. He'd give it to those women; they were the toughest female officers he'd ever met. Too bad they'd all lost their femininity. He couldn't imagine fucking any of them.

He smelled the fresh flowers on a stand at the side of the hall. He didn't see any reason he needed a woman in his life. He had one...Ms. Nancy. She was perfect. She was a fantastic cook. Never asked him when he left the house where he was going but he usually told her if he was going to Louisville or Cincinnati for the night or perhaps the weekend. If he was headed out on a mission, he always told her he'd be gone for a while. She usually deep cleaned his room then. He never knew when he'd return but if he was gone more than a week, he always came home to clean sheets. Otherwise, they were changed every Tuesday along with his towels.

After his first week living in his room, Kenner insisted on cleaning it himself. He hated to see Ms. Nancy work so hard. Life in the military had taught him to keep his surroundings spotless, a habit he easily carried into civilian life. But she had insisted, "Young man, you'd better keep it clean. As a military man I'm sure you have your cleanliness standards, but as a mother who has raised fourteen children, I have mine. Once a week I will supervise the cleaning of your room. There will be no argument."

He loved his room. It was his personal space. He could do anything he desired in the large bedroom, but usually what he wanted to do was decompress. When he stepped into his room

it was as though a weight instantly lifted from his shoulders. No one ever bothered him in his bedroom. As he approached his door, he couldn't remember anyone in the past two years coming into his room, other than Ms. Nancy and her staff.

He always met the other members of the Holt Agency somewhere else. The kitchen was a favorite because they knew that Ms. Nancy would have a snack available. Another reason she was perfect. If there was something serious or private they wanted to discuss, they did so in the large library filled with the most eclectic collection of books. They had everything from thick board books for infants to complete tractor repair manuals and cattle husbandry.

Kenner smiled as he opened the never-locked door to his room.

His life was perfect.

He had five full minutes before he needed to be downstairs for supper. That was more than enough time for him to take a quick shower and change into clean clothes. The minute his door clicked closed, he began stripping. He tossed all the dirty, smelly clothes into the hamper located just outside the bathroom. When he opened the door, steam rolled out.

What the fuck?

Ten seconds later the air cleared, unveiling a naked woman.

Nice tits...with a brunette landing strip.

His dick immediately stood at attention.

## CHAPTER 2



PIPER KNIGHT STEPPED OUT INTO THE STEAM-FILLED bathroom feeling a hundred percent better. She'd done well on the obstacle course with the best female time. The women had won the boat race, getting the zodiac into the water, around the small island in the middle of the lake, and dragged back onto shore. They probably had an advantage over the men because they had recently been to Coronado practicing boat skills. She was very disappointed in herself that she hadn't been able to catch up to the Holt agent in the fireman's carry. She'd been gaining on him though. She felt bad when he'd stumbled so close to the finish line but that gained the women a much needed win.

The steam was so thick she couldn't see where she'd set her white towel. Arms out, Piper tried to feel her way around the bathroom when suddenly all the moist air swooshed out.

Her gaze darted to the open door. The white mist seemed to dissolve, revealing a naked Adonis, strength emitting from every bulging muscle...and sporting an impressive erection.

It took all her CIA training to control her hands from attempting to cover her breasts and the sparse hair at the apex of her legs. She might need her hands to fight so she kept them by her sides as she slowly separated her legs enough to crouch into a fighting stance if necessary. She rolled to the balls of her feet, ready to move.

Deciding to take the high road, she announced with as much confidence as she could muster, "This is my room. You'll have to find another." At least she thought she'd been

assigned this room. As Ms. Nancy had been announcing who would sleep where, there was a huge crash somewhere near the foyer and she took off running. Kayla Scarlatto had finished the assignments from the vague descriptions Xena had given her. She hoped she could stay in that room. It was awesome from the huge television to the walk-in shower.

Straight white teeth showed through his black mustache and beard as he grinned. “No, ma’am, *you* will have to find another room. This has been my room for over five years and will continue to be my room until I choose to move elsewhere. If you need me to prove it, I’ll show you my underwear drawer.”

Oh, shit. It probably was his room, and she just used his shower. She was already on the high road, so she figured that was the best place to stay. “In that case, let me find a towel and I’ll leave.”

For the first time, she took her eyes off his beautiful light green ones, glancing around the large bathroom. Where the hell were the towels? She’d seen them when she stepped into the gorgeous bathroom. She was obviously more shaken than she thought. She looked at the hook next to the walk-in shower. A pang of regret ran through her that such a rejuvenating shower with multiple heads was not going to be hers during her stay on the Holt farm. Her gaze slid past him, still framed in the doorway and still erect, moving quickly to the granite counter. The towel wasn’t next to the square sink. Toilet. No. It wasn’t there either.

“It’s on the towel warming rack to your left.” His deep voice seemed to rumble, shaking the small room.

Her eyes automatically flew to him. She’d just left the SEAL training base, Coronado, where she thought she’d seen her fill of exquisite male bodies, but this man would give any BUD/S instructor a run for his money. He had cute toes attached to very white feet compared to the hundreds of tanned ones she had seen last week. Strong calves and thighs, and oh my God, a thick, long cock pointing right at her.

“My eyes are up here.” She could hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m checking out the scenery on the way there. Don’t be shy. I’m enjoying every inch of what I see. Regrettably, you’re going to have to take care of that yourself.” She forced a smile of her own as she slowly lifted her eyes over the enticing V of his hips that pointed straight to his erection. She took her time as she perused his eight-pack abs and across those broad shoulders of his.

Piper wondered what his thick, neatly trimmed beard would feel like between her naked thighs. Would it be soft as he licked her to orgasm or prickly and leave painful brush burn? She squeezed her legs together as her clit tingled. She finally reached his mesmerizing green eyes. Would they lighten or darken during sex? She glanced once again down to his cock. If possible, he looked even more aroused. Maybe that bright green was his heightened color.

Her smile automatically widened. “You might regret kicking me out.” With her left hand she grabbed a warm towel off the rack and with her right, her shower bag off the counter. Still naked, she strutted toward the door, his eyes dropping from hers to the floor and back. Still grinning, he stepped in and to the side so she could pass him. She could feel his eyes on her backside. She knew what she looked like naked. Her ass had been toned since she first started competitively swimming at five years old.

Piper dropped her shower kit into her duffel bag before glancing over her shoulder. “Show’s over.” She wrapped the towel around her body, tucking the end between her ample breasts. With the grace of a princess, and years of southern cotillion, she knelt enough to pick up her duffel bag and toss the long handles over her shoulder. She wished her hair wasn’t piled on top of her head and secured with combs. She’d loved to have given her long, dark tresses, highlighted with the southern California sun, a final swish before closing the door behind her.

Since this was Kayla’s fault, she went to her room to finish dressing. Hopefully they could find Ms. Nancy and get her

room assignment straightened out before supper.

Piper knocked on her team leader's door and heard an immediate *come in*. Her friend was struggling to tame her Italian curls into some semblance of order.

One glance in the mirror at the newcomer and Kayla asked, "What's wrong with your room?"

"It belongs to a naked man with an impressive erection," Piper said with a straight face.

Kayla whirled around, brush still in her hair, and stared.

They both burst out laughing.

"Call the Ladies. This needs to be shared," her team leader ordered as she turned back to the mirror. "Get dressed here while we're waiting for them."

Since the first week at Joint All-Female Special Operations School, the five women on their team had been tight. What had started as the toughest one hundred women selected from across all military services continually dwindled as they were trained the same as Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, Air Force Para-Jumpers, and Marine Special Operators. Then they underwent specialized training at the CIA. The four female flag officers—three generals and an admiral—who created JAFSOS understood women's unique ability to infiltrate places, sometimes in minutes, that could take a man years. The senior most female military officers also understood women's ability to kill just as easily as a man. The five women selected for Black Swan Team 2 had been the top of their class.

They'd been naked in front of each other more times than anyone wanted to count. Their team only had minutes before they were expected downstairs for supper and Piper wanted to get there early to find her actual room. While sliding on her panties, she quickly typed: 911 @ KS. They would all know to immediately come to Kayla Scarlatto's room.

Kira Frost was the first through the door. After a quick glance at Piper, she asked, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mia McCormick was through the door before it was closed. She stared at Piper who was wiggling into her tight

jeans. “I guess you’re the reason for the nine one one?”

Ashlin Cartwright slid in a second later. She finger combed her wet hair, the water making her wedding ring flash.

Kayla grinned. “You’re wearing your ring.”

Ashlin rarely wore the thin gold band and never during a mission or training. Her drunken Las Vegas wedding that no one remembered much about was a point of contention between her and her husband.

“I don’t want any of those men downstairs hitting on me. Legally, I’m still married. Damn it. I just tried calling Clint, and once again, got no answer.” Ashlin slowly shook her head. “He’s out of the Army Special Forces. He should be able to answer the damn phone.”

Mia stared at Ashlin. “You do remember who his father is, right? Digger Riggs. I’m quite sure Clint is now running a team of SpecOps mercenaries. He could be anywhere in Africa or the Middle East. He just might not be in a place where he can answer the satellite phone.”

“You’ll see Xena in a few minutes. Ask her where her brother is,” suggested Piper. “Now, let me tell you why I had to get dressed here. When I stepped out of the shower, there was a naked man entering the bathroom.”

“Did you kill him?” Mia asked.

“Do we need to dispose of the body?” Ashlin offered.

“No, I didn’t kill him.” Piper rolled her eyes.

Kira turned toward the door. “Do I need to get my kit? How bad did you hurt him?”

“I didn’t touch him,” Piper insisted. “I politely asked him to leave, then informed him that it was my room and he’d have to find another.” She cringed remembering his satisfied tone. “At that point, he informed me that I was in his room, and it had been his room the past five years.”

“Oh, shit.” Kayla shook her head. “I’m sorry, I thought that room had been assigned to you.”



“Oh, shit is right.” Piper glared at her team leader.

“And then you left.” Ashlin lifted her perfectly sculpted eyebrows expecting confirmation.

Piper rolled her lower lip inward, tucking it between her teeth. “Not exactly.” She gave her a small smile. “We sized each other up. We were both still naked.” Her smile flourished. “His very prominent erection grew, so I guess that means I’ve still got it. Whatever it is. Given my current dry spell, I’m not sure exactly sure what *it* is anymore. Thankfully, he verbally guided me to a towel. He has the yummiest heated towel rack and his shower is walk-in with multi heads and—”

“Speaking of heads...let’s get back to his.” Mia’s attention was completely focused on Piper.

“I already told you about his dick. Yes, it was definitely impressive.” Piper sucked in a slow breath through clenched teeth, holding in a shiver.

“In that case, I’m surprised you’re here.” Kayla slid combs into her hair above her ears holding back the massive curls. “Given your recent dry spell, why didn’t you jump his bones?”

“First of all, time wasn’t on our side,” Piper continued to explain. “I had to change my clothes, get downstairs and find my assigned room, then not be late for supper.” She checked her watch. “We’ve got to go.”

It only took a minute for Piper and Kayla to locate Ms. Nancy. She was doing last-minute prep in the kitchen. Piper had been assigned to the next room down the hall from Mister Hot Bod. Unfortunately, there wasn’t time to run back upstairs and move her bag before dinner was served.

When the five Ladies of Black Swan entered the dining room, the men had already taken seats spread around the table, their wives next to them with a few interspersed highchairs. Her team members found seats scattered throughout the table. After Piper sat down, she introduced herself to the men and women on each side before glancing across the heavily laden table into gorgeous green eyes.

Deciding to stay on that high road once again, she extended her hand. “Piper Knight.”

Their hands met mid-table as they briefly shook. “Kenner Lane, a.k.a. cocky bastard.” His grin was one she was sure had made hundreds of wet panties drop.

Piper wasn't in the least affected, but she didn't miss his double entendre. So, he was the man who slipped in the last relay race, giving the women the win for that event. “You'll have the opportunity to advance the score ahead for the men when we move to the range.” She gave him her best shit-eating grin. “If you think you can beat us.”

“Anyone can become proficient shooting at paper targets.” He put his elbows on the table and leaned in, lowering his voice. “It's a whole different matter when someone is shooting back at you.” He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Not that you'd know what that felt like.”

Oh, this man was so wrong. She mirrored his position. “You know nothing of my experience in the sandbox. Or in the jungle. You have no idea who we are and what we're capable of doing. But I will agree with you on one point. Shooting at paper targets is nothing like shooting at living, breathing, human targets. I'd give you my body count, but that's classified. By the way, I'm primary sniper.”

“Let's bow our heads and thank the Lord.” Frank Holt stood at the head of the long table. As soon as his prayer was finished, food was passed from one person to the next, family style. Piper couldn't remember when the last time she'd had a home-cooked meal.

She'd been home in Coral Gables, Florida for Easter but as usual, her mother had the meal catered. Thank God. Her mother could burn water. Piper's older brother, Chandler, had taught her how to make mac and cheese in the microwave when she was six and their mother had fired the most recent private cook. Since her childhood, her mother had learned how valuable their private chef was to the family. Now, she always gave their cook holidays off and annual vacations.

For the Fourth of July, both Black Swan Teams had been invited to celebrate the holiday at the new home of Katlin Callahan Wolf, their new boss at Homeland Security. Alex Wolf had barbecued the traditional hamburgers, chicken, and hotdogs, and members of team one had brought side dishes, many homemade. Piper guessed that counted.

Each woman on her team could cook at least one dish. Kinda. Piper had graduated from macaroni and cheese to fish. She could broil almost any kind of fish and make it taste amazing, thanks to Chef Louis, their executive chef while she was in college at the University of Florida on a swimming scholarship. But when her team was together at the condo on Dupont Circle in Washington D.C. that Katlin had so generously bequeathed them, they took full advantage of the multiple delivery services.

The meal spread out before them at the Holt family table was a feast prepared by Ms. Nancy, with the help of several of the agency wives. Enjoying every morsel, no one talked much.

As dessert was being devoured, Kayla's phone rang with the ever so familiar tone. All eyes went to their team leader as she stood.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I have to take this call." Kayla left the room but every woman on the Black Swan Team 2 knew they were being called to service. She returned within less than a minute. "Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Holt, for your extreme generosity. Unfortunately, we have to leave immediately."

Kira, Mia, Ashlin, and Piper all stood and gave their thanks to the group. They needed to grab their gear from the bedrooms upstairs. They'd be briefed on the way to wherever. Piper was the last in line to hug Xena, so she was still in the room when Ryker's phone rang. The way the men looked at their boss, they knew something was up. Piper finally got to hug her friend goodbye as Xena's husband returned.

He looked at the couples and apologized. "Ladies, I'm sorry but we have a mission and it's going to take all of us. Except Larson. Since your wife is about to give birth, you can

operate from here. Men, grab your cold weather gear. We're going to Alaska."

Piper stepped out of the dining room as she heard Kenner complain, "I hate fucking Alaska. I swore I'd never go back home."

## CHAPTER 3



KENNER RAN HIS HAND OVER ALMOST EVERY TOUCHABLE surface of the Gulfstream 650 as part of his preflight checklist. Although it had been given to the Holt Agency by Zesaro Neberu, the owner of several goldmines in Ethiopia, Kenner considered the nearly new corporate jet his baby. As primary pilot, he was meticulous about everything when it came to flying.

From the beginning of the Holt Agency, they'd had a close relationship with the multibillionaire. Over the past five years, they'd proven their worth to him on several missions. The plane was his way of showing his appreciation while enabling the company a faster response time without the hassle of commercial flights and customs. Bottom line, they could fly directly to anywhere Neberu needed them and step off the plane completely geared up, weapons ready.

Kenner had learned the hard way that maintenance wasn't just necessary, it was essential. Especially when flying small single prop planes over some of the tallest mountains in North America in below freezing weather. Alaska had very few roads yet thousands of personally owned airplanes. Flying was often the only means of getting from point A to point B and he'd been doing it since he was fourteen years old.

He finished his external preflight checklist as he passed the hold where his team was loading the last of the bags and boxes. "You guys almost ready to go?" he asked his teammates. He glanced inside the large open space at the

bottom of the plane to be sure his gear had been packed and the load was evenly distributed.

“We’re good to go,” Ryker announced as he closed and secured the external door. “Load up, men.” As they sat down, sinking into the soft reclining chairs, most of the Holt agents said goodbye to their wives and children on their cell phones, including Ryker.

Once everyone was secured in the cabin and the stairs were up, Kenner announced, “First stop, Seattle. We’re going to top off the tanks and get a good deicing at Joint Base Lewis-McCord before we head to Alaska. You’ll have a few minutes to stretch your legs and call home once again, but it’ll be late here. It’ll take us about four hours to get to the Seattle area. I have no idea how long we will be on the ground. We’ll be at the mercy of the military.”

“Where are we going in Alaska?” Heath asked.

“Eielson Air Force Base.” Kenner chuckled. “It’s right next to North Pole. Not *the* North Pole, which is also in Alaska. The North Pole as in Santa. They actually named the town North Pole. There’s not much there except a huge store that sells everything Christmas related to tourists with more money than brains.”

“Is Santa there?” Tavis asked.

“Damn right. And you can get your picture taken with him.” Kenner started the huge Rolls-Royce engines and began to talk to the tower. A few minutes later, he announced, “We’ll talk more once we’re at altitude.” He glanced at Heath who was copilot for the first leg. “Want to take her up?”

“Fuck, yes.” His friend had only recently qualified to control the stick on the company jet. Heath took over communications and got them into the sky with a relatively smooth takeoff.

“You need the hours in this plane more than I do so she’s yours for the next few hours.” The smile Heath gave Kenner lit up the cockpit.

“Can you hear me if I stand here?” Ryker asked as he leaned against the open door, controls and windshield at his back.

A low chorus of “yes” and “yeah” came from the cabin.

“Our orders are to meet an unspecified SpecOps team already on the ground. We’re all going to go through a very brief period, like twenty-four hours, of cold weather training. Then we’re headed to Nome and the outback. Flyovers have seen an unidentified flying object of a very suspicious in nature.” Ryker grinned and shook his head. “No. We’re not talking space aliens. One Air Force pilot said it looked like a dirigible from World War I with a huge box underneath about the size of three school buses.”

“Sounds like someone’s weather balloon got away from them,” Holden suggested.

“Except weather balloons float on air currents and this balloon is maneuverable,” Ajax added from the front of the cabin. He looked each man in the eye before informing them, “They’ve been hovering over silos.”

Ryker shook his head. “We’re not talking about silos like we have on the farm.”

“Oh, fuck.” Grant voiced what was on everyone’s mind. “Are you saying this UFO knows where our intercontinental ballistic missiles are located? The ones pointed at Russia, China, North Korea, and anybody else we considered our enemy back in the nineteen sixties Cold War and since?”

“Exactly,” Ajax verified.

Ryker grinned. “What makes you think we like those countries any better now than we did six decades ago?”

“I thought we agreed to dismantle all those in the early nineteen seventies,” Heath said from the copilot seat.

“We had an agreement back then with Russia, but politics have changed quite a bit over the years.” The mysterious voice over the speaker system was Larson, manning the computers and support system from their headquarters back in southern Indiana.

“I guarantee you that the United States has active missiles all over Alaska.” Kenner checked all the dials and gauges before he stood next to Ryker. “As many of you know, I was born and raised in Alaska, right outside Eielson Air Force Base. It’s not highly advertised, but there are several bases around Alaska including one that was recently renamed Clear Space Force Station. Guess what its primary job is?” He answered before anyone else could. “Yes. Early detection of ICBMs headed our way.”

“Aren’t we all glad that Space Force found mission?” Grant sniped.

Kenner continued, “Several of the bases are used to test weapons under extreme weather conditions. Fort Greely, not far from where we’re going, might be a small installation but it’s extremely important to American safety. That’s where many anti-ballistic missiles are tested and launched. Although most of the bases have some form of cold weather training, Eielson is where Air Force pilots get theirs before they’re sent to Korea and other places where they can freeze their balls off if they’re shot down or crash. Arctic Survival School is kick-ass.” Kenner should know. One of his neighbors had taught there. During his teenage years, he had taken the fatherless young man under his wing and taught him so much more than cold weather survival.

“We’ll pick up subzero gear and be supplied with anything we’re going to need from the base,” Ryker went on to explain. “At this point, our mission is top-secret. No one except our team and the SpecOps team we’re meeting there know what we’re looking for. According to the vice president, our mission is on a need-to-know basis and as far as he’s concerned, only the base commanding officer needs to know.”

“Have any of you had any kind of cold weather training?” Every man shook his head at Ajax’s question. Desert survival had been more important during their Navy careers.

Fuck. That meant that Kenner needed to be extremely vigilant. It was so easy to get frostbite or hypothermia in Alaska in December. He wondered if the other SpecOps team had any kind of cold weather training.



“What are we supposed to do if and when we find these balloons?” Tavis inquired. Then he added, “Is there just one or are there several?”

“At this point, they believe there’s just one. We’ve been ordered to figure out what they are, and where they came from. Flyby pictures aren’t showing any markings on the sides but there may be some facing downward. We are to take pictures of everything getting close-ups with telephoto lenses.” Ryker made it sound easy.

From over the speakers, Larson continued, “You’ll be issued several different experimental cameras. We’re testing them for military use in subzero weather. The pictures will be immediately uploaded to me via our secure satellite connection. I’ve ordered some very specific electronics to be waiting for you. You’re going to use it to try to determine if they’re transmitting data or storing it in that big box hanging underneath the metallic balloon. If they’re transmitting it, you’re going to figure out where the information is going. But I’m here to help you...at least until our baby is born.”

“Negatory, big boy.” Ryker shook his head at the onboard camera. “Mission has priority over babies.”

Tavis laughed out loud. Ajax looked at his partner as though he’d grown donkey ears.

“Wait until Xena has the baby,” Tavis warned. “Nothing’s going to take priority over that kid, not even the mission.” He should know; he had a three-year-old. Or was she four? Kenner couldn’t remember.

“Speaking of your baby.” Ajax looked over his shoulder at Ryker. “I can’t believe Xena let you come on this mission. Isn’t she due any day, like Anya?”

“No. Xena’s due date isn’t for three and a half weeks.” Ryker waved his hand through the air as though he had all the time in the world. “I think we can wrap this up in a week or two. I’ll be home in plenty of time to be there for the birth of my son.”

All the men in the cabin smiled.

“So, you know it’s a son?” Keene asked with his broad smile reflecting on the inside of the windshield. “Boys are the absolute best, especially when they are the age of Jock, in their teens.”

“We decided not to find out the sex of the baby.” Ryker shrugged. “But I’m sure it’s a boy. We need to wrap this up and be home by Christmas. How hard can it be to find a balloon two hundred feet tall with a box that big hanging underneath?”

“It’s better to have boys,” Kenner announced. All the men in the cabin stared at him, the only bachelor working for the Holt Agency.

Tavis’s eyebrows pinched together. “You’re wrong. Sophia is absolutely awesome.”

Keene nodded. “Viper’s right. When you have a boy, you only have to worry about one penis in town.” He grinned from ear to ear. “When you have a little girl, you’ve gotta worry about them all.”

At that revelation, Tavis’s eyes grew to huge white saucers. “Oh, fuck. I never thought about that.” He then shrugged. “Sophia won’t be allowed to date until she’s thirty-five.”

“I can’t wait to watch her grow up and for you to lose your fucking mind,” Grant announced. “Sophia is already such a rough and tumble little girl.”

“But she’s going to grow out of that. It’s just a phase,” Tavis insisted. “It’s because there’s so many boys in her preschool class that she has to be tough. She’s learning to be aggressive from them. Colette and I are talking about taking her out of that environment and enrolling her in a preschool with more girls.”

“She’ll grow out of it.” Ajax slapped Tavis on the shoulder as he took his seat in the row behind him. “At least that’s what Serena tells me about everything that Joni gets into.”

“I believe girls just naturally grow up to be more feminine. It’s the way of nature.” Kenner went on to explain his position. “I didn’t have any siblings, thank Christ. That would have

meant more children to be ignored by my mother. But I grew up in a neighborhood filled with kids. As we boys grew up, we became more protective of the girls, all the girls, as it should be. The girls helped their mamas around the house and the boys did what they could to earn money, even at an early age.” At least that’s the way Kenner had been raised...just like almost every kid in his neighborhood. “Growing up in Alaska was tough.”

He knew what it was like to be cold, looking forward to going to school on Monday. The building was heated and, like almost all the kids in his school, he got free breakfast and lunch. Unlike most children in the lower forty-eight states who looked forward to the weekend, Kenner dreaded Friday afternoon.

“Women are just naturally soft.” At least they were in Kenner’s world. “That’s why they need men in their lives. They aren’t good at handling pressure.” His mother was a perfect example. She always needed a man in her life. She’d asked their next-door neighbor, Ron, to help with the dumbest things. The woman couldn’t change a lightbulb by herself. When Kenner was finally old enough, he made sure everything in the house was repaired as soon as possible. Thank God for the computers at the library, which was also heated. In his teens, he’d watched do-it-yourself videos on how to fix shit while other kids were checking social media. When he became a SEAL, he was so happy he’d never opened a single social media account. His existence was easy to scrub.

“Xena would cut your balls off with a dirty spoon if she heard you say that.” Ryker crossed his arms over his broad chest.

“Your wife is different than any woman I’ve ever known,” Kenner admitted. “She’s aptly named. She truly is a warrior princess. I’m glad she’s on our side.”

“Her friends were just as tough as she is.” Grant stood. “Anybody else want something to drink? I’m headed back to the galley.”

Several men put in their orders before Holden pointed out, “One of those women beat you and me in that last race.”

“I slipped on muddy grass,” Kenner quickly defended.

“And dropped me, making us lose that relay.” Holden shook his head. “They were damn good competitors.”

“Anybody can be good at playing games, but we all know it’s totally different when the bullets start to fly.” Most of the men nodded in agreement. Kenner smiled with satisfaction. “Me...I prefer my women soft, tanned, barefoot, and in a bikini. Not completely bundled up head to toe in thick, warm coats, nothing showing but their eyes. In some ways, Alaskan women remind me of women in the sandbox. You just wait, you’ll see.”

Ten hours later Kenner announced as they were on final approach to Eielson Air Force Base, “Sorry for the bumpy ride but it’s snowing,” Landing was a little tricky. The temperature had fluctuated between twenty-five- and thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit depending on cloud cover. The sun had risen at ten that morning, warming the ground and melting the top of the two feet of snow that had fallen the past week. The sun had set shortly after three that afternoon, throwing everything into darkness. The temperatures bottomed once again, freezing the top layer to ice. Thankfully the runway was extra-long. It had been over fifteen years since Kenner had landed a plane in those conditions. The huge GS650 was worlds away from the little Cessna that he had flown in his teens.

They signaled him into an unmarked hangar where he was pulled next to a black Gulfstream 550. Four armed guards stood facing outward from the plane.

Ryker cat-whistled as he trotted down the steps. “Looks like somebody important is here.”

“Probably CIA,” Grant guessed. He would know since he ran the Washington D.C. satellite office of the Holt Agency and had made important connections with most alphabet agencies.

Tavis nodded. “Almost no markings. That would be my assumption.” He also lived in Washington and worked directly for Grant.

“What are they doing up here?” Keene asked as he opened the lower hold and started distributing bags.

Kenner chuckled. “Probably the same thing we are. Their Special Operations Groups are feared all over the world. They recruit only the best from SEALs and Army Special Forces and Marine SpecOps.”

“Do you think we’re working with those guys?” Kenner asked Ryker.

“No. The vice president said that we’re supposed to meet a team from United States Special Operations Command.” Ryker started passing out bags as they emptied the plane. “That makes them active duty.”

“What time is it in Indiana?” Holden held his cell phone in his hand, pointing in different directions.

Ryker smacked Holden on the back of the head. “The middle of the fucking night. Melanie will kill you if you call now and wake up the baby. Grab your gear.”

A garage door opened at the back of the hangar, allowing in a gust of snow followed by three large black SUVs. A man in a huge down parka jumped out at the passenger side of the first one. “Gentlemen, I’m Sergeant Vargas. Welcome to Alaska. We have orders to escort you to your rooms where you are to drop your bags and put on whatever winter clothing you brought with you. We are then to take you directly to the conference room. We need to hurry. Whiteout conditions are expected within thirty minutes.”

“Let’s move,” Ajax said in his command voice as he picked up his bags and headed to the first SUV with Ryker at his side.

At the back of the large barracks, they quickly moved inside and followed Sergeant Vargas to the second floor. “Mr. Tufano, Mr. Cassman, you have the next seven rooms down

this hall. The ones with keys hanging in the door are available for your men.”

“Grab a room. Get changed. Meet me here in the hall when you’re finished. You have five minutes,” Ajax turned to the sergeant. “Do you need to know who is in which room?”

“No, sir. We are not to know anyone’s names, except the two of you.”

Ryker grinned at his partner as he reached for a door. “Aren’t we the lucky ones?”

Kenner was used to rapid changes and layering clothes quickly, so he was the first into the hall. For years he’d been the youngest on their SEAL team, thus the most junior enlisted man. He instantly felt a kinship with the young sergeant. “Is the team from USSOCOM here?”

Surprisingly, Sergeant Vargas grinned. “Yeah, they’re here.”

Kenner looked up and down the hall. “Are they billeted next to us?”

The sergeant’s grin widened. “No. They have special quarters, ordered by the base general.”

“Who the fuck do they think they are?” Kenner then realized he’d said that out loud.

“You’ll see soon enough,” the sergeant warned.

Five minutes later the men from Holt Agency followed Sergeant Vargas out the barracks door into wind that seemed to pick up the sparse snow and form it into needles that slapped their faces. “Notice the ropes. They go between buildings. During the whiteout, grab the rope and never let go of it. Grab the shoulder of the person in front of you and never let go. The whiteout hasn’t started but it probably will while you’re in the meeting. We’re just going to that building right over there.”

Without the use of ropes, they crossed the large parking lot and were thankful to get out of the wind. Just inside the door, they shook the snow off their coats and stomped their boots.

“This way, gentlemen. The team from USSOCOM is already here and in a teleconference meeting.” Sergeant Vargas stuck his head in the door then pulled back out. “You’ve been given permission to enter. Do so quietly and take seats at the table while they finish their call.”

“I’ve dedicated two of my satellites to you for this operation, so you’ll be covered at all times,” the gray-haired man on the screen said as the Holt men took seats at the end of the table closest to the door in the darkened room.

“Thank you for the support, Uncle Tom,” the blonde in the other box on the screen said.

The older man grinned. “You know I’ll take care of my girls. DD CIA out.” His face was replaced by the shield of the Central Intelligence Agency with deputy director written underneath.

Holy shit. The CIA was involved. Kenner tried to see through the dark to the five people sitting at the front of the room. He wondered if that was their full team. A SEAL fire team was either four or eight men. The platoon had sixteen men. Five was a weird number but USSOCOM handled all services. Maybe they were from the Air Force, or Army. Maybe even Marines.

The woman’s face enlarged to replace both pictures on the screen at the front of the room. “Gentlemen. Welcome. I’m Katlin Callahan, Director of Operations for Section 7 of Homeland Security. Your security clearances have been increased for this mission. Per the United States agreement with your company, everything you see, hear, and do from this moment on is classified Top-Secret, Need To Know only. Do you agree to the documents you’ve already signed? For the record, I need each of you to stand, say your name, and state that you will abide by the agreement set between United States and your company.”

This was different compared to any other mission they’d ever worked on for the U.S. government. Kenner glanced at Ryker and Ajax who nodded. Ryker stood first. “Ryker

Tufano. I will abide by the agreement as set forth between the United States of America and our company, the Holt Agency.”

Each man followed in turn.

“Thank you, gentlemen.” The blonde woman stepped back from the camera. “You were about to learn one of the best kept secrets in all the military. We expect you to keep their secret. Their lives depend on it. These individuals have gone through the exact same training that you did as Navy SEALs, then they went through more. They’ve also been trained as Army Special Forces, Marine Corps Spec Ops, and Air Force Para-Jumpers. They’ve also been through specialized training by the CIA and speak multiple languages. They are better trained than you.” She repeated the last line. “They are better trained than you. For the next thirty-six hours you will train together in Arctic survival. You will then return to this room for your final mission briefing.”

There was a long pause before she continued. “Gentlemen, I want you to meet the team of Special Operators you be working with for the next several weeks.”

Chairs moved across the tile floor as the five who had been seated in the front of the conference room stood and turned. The lights came on. “Gentlemen of the Holt Agency, I’d like you to meet the Ladies of Black Swan. But I believe you’ve already met.”

“What the fuck?” Kenner’s mouth dropped open. *It’s them.*



## CHAPTER 4



PIPER'S GAZE SKIPPED PAST ALL THE OTHER MEN IN THE conference room and homed in on stunning green eyes. He wasn't traditionally handsome by any means. They would never make an animated movie character based on his face to marry the fairy princess. No. But they would use his body as the basis for a secondary hero. He would be the character who was employed by the king to protect the prince while they journeyed to save the fair princess.

Rugged. Oh, yeah. An underlying determination to complete the mission no matter the personal cost. Most definitely.

Mentally, she shrugged. A Special Operator to his core.

Just like her.

Since completing JAFSOS a few years ago, the kind of men she preferred to date had changed. During high school, she dated guys on the swim team. They were very physically fit and highly competitive, but silly boys at heart. In college, it was more of the same. She gravitated toward those young men who did everything within their power to become the very best in their field. Two in particular had interested her. Like her, they were also at the top of the podium at swim meets across the nation being considered serious contenders for the U.S. Olympic swim team. She'd spent hours with them both in the weight room and the pool at the university.

But when she'd gone to the SEAL pinning ceremony for her brother, toured the BUD/S facility at Coronado, California,

a new challenge piqued her interest. Whether fate was at work, or destiny was in play, Piper had wandered off looking for the ladies' restroom. She'd been directed to a training pool that was filled with women. Some were in SCUBA gear and others were just holding their breath, sitting on the bottom tying knots.

Standing back, Piper watched for several minutes before a blonde woman in her early thirties approached. "This is a closed training session. You'll need to move on."

"I didn't think women were allowed to be SEALs." Piper held the woman's gaze.

"These women are in a specialized training program." The older woman grinned. Under her breath she added, "They'll be better than SEALs." Her gaze shifted from the women in the pool to Piper. "You can use the bathroom in the locker room. Men are not allowed in this facility today."

Ignoring the suggestion, Piper pressed, "You said they would be better than SEALs. The admiral who just gave the speech to the graduating class and their families said that Navy SEALs were the best special operators in the world. What will these women do?"

"Anything they're ordered to do." The woman with two stars on each collar held out her hand. "I'm Rear Admiral Betsy Willett. You seem very interested in our program. Are you in the Navy?"

Two years later, Piper turned down an invitation to try out for the U.S. Olympic swim team. Instead of another medal to hang around her neck, she chose the rank of ensign and a single gold bar on each collar.

That seemed like a lifetime ago. She now proudly wore two silver bars signifying the rank of lieutenant.

As she stared at the man with gorgeous green eyes, she briefly wondered what his rank in the Navy had been. For some reason, she didn't think any of the men currently working for Holt Agency had been officers. Maybe Xena had told her that. Not that it mattered. The men were all now

civilians so she could be charged with fraternization if they ended up naked and horizontal.

His gaze met hers.

Damn. He'd caught her staring. Now she had to think of something clever to say.

*You're wearing all those clothes.* No. Not biting enough.

*Shame you're covering that magnificent body of yours in all those clothes.* Then she'd wink at him and walk past to greet the others. The wink would be a nice touch.

No. She couldn't tease him. They were on this op together. She had to be the consummate professional...even though he'd seen her naked. She wouldn't do anything to embarrass her team or Section 7. Katlin Callahan Wolf might reprimand her, or worse, kick her off the Black Swans.

Piper pasted on a professional smile and stood, ready to shake hands and greet the other team. Although she wasn't sure why they were needed for this op. Her team was perfectly capable of successfully finding the mysterious floating object and taking it down if necessary. More likely it would turn into a rescue operation of an aeronaut whose balloon had drifted way off course.

She shuddered at the thought of a recovery op. She could imagine the frozen body of the poor balloonist who had started someplace in warm, humid Asia and drifted on the air current all the way to Alaska. But the box underneath was reportedly about the size of a double-wide mobile home. Plus, he'd need a strong heat source to keep the balloon aloft for what had obviously been weeks.

Okay, hopefully he wasn't a human popsicle. Maybe he was warm and cozy inside the box...just lost.

As everyone stood to greet each other, Sergeant Vargas stepped into the conference room. "I know it's the middle of the night, but we've been given orders that your training begins now. They are waiting for you at Supply."

Since the men were closest to the door, they were the first out.

Ryker put his hand on Green Eyes' shoulder and the man next to him. "Are you guys going to be alright? You've been flying for most of the past twelve hours after leaving Indiana around eight o'clock at night."

"I'm fine." Green Eyes smiled at his boss. "I've been cold and tired before."

"It's been a long time since Hell Week," Ryker reminded them of the SEAL training.

"We'll grab our gear first and catch a power nap. This could take a while." Green Eyes lowered his voice, but Piper heard him say, "It'll probably take hours for the women to pick clothes that suit them."

She hid her grin as she walked down the hall behind them. They'd find out soon enough that the Ladies of Black Swan were testing a new line of polar expedition clothing for a U.S. manufacturer hoping to secure a military contract. They'd stopped in Portland, Oregon for their personalized fittings. Her team was good to go.

Poor Green Eyes. He might catch ten or fifteen minutes of sleep but that would be all.

They followed Sergeant Vargas down the long hall, taking several turns before he stopped in front of a well-used metal door. "Gentlemen, the men in here will help you."

"Oh, ladies first, I insist." Ryker motioned for the women to enter.

Kayla smiled. "You and your men go ahead, Ryker. We already have all our gear." Her gaze swung to Sergeant Vargas. "Where would you like us?"

"Since we're in whiteout, the safety officer has declared it unsafe for anyone to travel to the training site." The mid-twenties enlisted man glanced over his shoulder to where the last Holt agent stepped into the supply room. "The men are tired and that's extremely dangerous, as you'll learn."

Kayla's gaze swept their team, pausing for only a moment on Piper. They'd worked together long enough that she could read her thoughts. Piper had flown the jet most of the way,

only taking two hours away from the stick for a short nap. If asked, she'd tell her team leader that she was operational, but damn, sleep would be best.

“My team is also tired. A straight eight would be wonderful but if the training team wishes to get started sooner, can we get at least five hours down?”

“Yes, ma'am. Can you find your way back to your quarters or do you need me to lead you?”

“I know how to get there,” Ashlin popped in. She was a directional genius. One glance at the map was all it took for her to orient.

“Let's go, Ladies,” Kayla ordered. To Sergeant Vargas, she asked, “Can someone call us thirty minutes before we're expected to be somewhere?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he replied before he entered the supply room.

Seven hours later, fully rested, Piper joined her team in the lobby of their assigned barracks. She dropped her snow-camouflaged bag with the others. From a distance, the pile looked like a heap of snow, mostly white with several random blobs in shades of gray. They carried their outer clothing, which was the same pattern from their hats to their thick boots. Although the lobby was cooler, it was still heated and far too warm for subzero clothing.

Piper peered outside through one of the small windows and smiled. She'd never seen anything like the blanket of white crystals that covered everything. When it snowed in Washington D.C., their home base, the snowplows threw dirty snow onto sidewalks and piled it onto the corners. Within hours, everything looked dingy and gray, same as the sky. Growing up in South Florida, they never had snow. Even while in college when they traveled for swim meets to northern schools, she rarely saw snow.

This was magnificent.

“Transpo is on the way,” Kayla announced. Everyone quickly donned their snow pants, boots, jackets, and hats.

They had their bags in hand when the caravan of black SUVs pulled up to the outside doors.

Kayla opened the doors and all five women crowded into the space, assuring the inner doors were closed before they opened the outer doors.

Excitedly, Piper stepped into her position third in line as they stepped into sunshine. Her face was smacked with freezing cold. Actually, it was below freezing. The top layer of light snow barely stirred but her face felt as though the left half was more frozen than the right half. The pretty sparkles she'd observed through the window seemed to sear her eyes. She'd need to dig out those wraparound sunglasses they'd been given to test. She understood their use in the desert but had never thought of how freezing wind would affect your wet eyeballs. Fortunately, within a few steps she was inside the warm SUV.

“Good morning, captains and lieutenants. Your Arctic training will begin this morning. We'll reach our destination in about thirty minutes. On the way there, please listen to the briefing.” The driver put it in gear and followed the convoy.

“Good morning,” the voice came through the speakers. “I'm Staff Sergeant Mayo, lead instructor at the Air Force Arctic Survival School. Listen carefully to everything I tell you because it could be the difference between life and death. Yours. Or the man,” he hesitated then added, “or woman beside you.

“I've had to condense three days of intense training into the next twenty-four hours. Please note, I have the right to fail you. If I feel you are unsafe to handle the Alaskan wilderness, or any other Arctic environment, you will be pulled from whatever mysterious mission the government yanked me out of my regular training schedule and has sent you here for.” He obviously wasn't happy to see them.

“Let's begin. Everything in this environment is trying to kill you. Mother Nature does not like the fact that you're here. If you don't stay hydrated, you will die. If you don't stay warm, you will die. The most important thing I tell you is you

can't let anything go. You have to be constantly vigilant and try to improve your situation. Bottom line, you've got to be tough."

Staff Sergeant Mayo continued, "I hope you learned something in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, like how to make a fire from scratch because it sucks to be cold. It sucks to be miserable. Remember how I said in the beginning that you have to stay hydrated? You can turn snow into water...if you can heat it by building a fire. You can stay warm by building a fire. That's one of the first things you are going to learn here in a few minutes when we arrive."

Mia leaned over and whispered to Piper, "We learned that in Ranger School. I have a knife and a piece of flint for that purpose."

"You'll learn to scrape bark off trees to get tinder, using a knife to create a spark to start a fire." At the staff sergeant's words Piper and Mia exchanged a knowing glance. Been there, done that.

"You have to learn to survive, and thrive, in the freezing cold." He continued with the lesson. "Arctic survival in Alaska hasn't changed much since nineteen forty-six when the school was created. Thank Christ, the clothing has improved. A person can get frostbite in fifteen minutes, and it can kill you long before hunger or thirst."

Piper hoped the clothing they were testing proved to be as good as they were touted to be. She hoped the men would be warm enough in the military provided gear.

"Speaking of hunger, you'll learn to set up a snare line and hunt for your food. Without a fire, you'll have to eat it raw."

Once again, Mia and Piper exchanged a glance. "It'll be a good review," Piper said in low tones with a shrug. They had learned survival techniques during several of their advanced training sessions at JAFSOS. Besides, they were just going into the outback and would be able to carry food with them.

The SUVs turned off the paved highway onto a snow-covered road for several miles before turning left into the

woods, following a path barely wide enough for the vehicles. When they came to an opening in the trees, they stopped and pulled up side by side.

“This will be your home for the next twenty-four hours. Grab your gear. We’ll assemble in the middle of the area,” the staff sergeant announced.

Everyone got out of the vehicles, including the drivers.

“Are you guys staying here too?” Mia asked their driver.

“No, ma’am. But for safety reasons we’re leaving two of the vehicles.” He smiled at her. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

Piper slid a glance to Mia before returning her gaze to the young enlisted man. “I doubt it, but thanks.” The two women picked up their bags and placed them next to the others before joining the women on their team.

The first thing Piper noticed was that the trees protected them from the biting wind. The second thing that caught her attention was that it was considerably colder in the shade of the trees than in the sunshine of the open space. That made sense. Growing up in southern Florida where temperatures could reach triple digits with close to one hundred percent humidity, everyone knew it was cooler in the shade. The third thing she observed was that the snow wasn’t very deep.

Both teams gathered in the middle where Staff Sergeant Mayo introduced his instructors. The group then introduced themselves, starting with the women.

“Marine Corps Captain Kayla Scarlatto, team leader. You can call me Lady Lion.”

“Army Captain Mia McCormick. Lady Cheetah.”

Per their usual lineup, Piper was next. “Navy Lieutenant Piper Knight. Lady Leopard.” Since she’d never been formally introduced to Green Eyes, she watched him carefully. What would he think of her being a Navy officer? She immediately got his answer as he rolled his eyes. Then she reconsidered. Was it her rank? Or perhaps her nickname?



“Air Force Captain Ashlin Cartwright. Lady Tiger.”

“Navy Lieutenant Kira Frost. Team medic. Lady Cougar.”

All eyes turned toward the men lined up on the other side of Staff Sergeant Mayo.

## CHAPTER 5



KENNER LOOKED DOWN THE LINE OF MEN HE'D WORKED WITH for nearly fifteen years, first as Navy SEALs then as members of the Holt Agency. He glanced across the opening to the five female officers they'd obviously been assigned to babysit.

Fucking great. He knew the brutality of the Alaska outback as well as the instructors, if not better. Growing up just a few miles from where they stood, working search and rescue his senior year in high school, he also knew how stupid and naïve novices could be. He caught himself shaking his head in disgust when his boss began to speak.

“Ryker Tufano, cofounder of the Holt Agency.” His gaze rolled down the line of men before returning to the instructors. “We were all part of the same Navy SEAL platoon before retiring from the military five years ago. We're often still in service to our country including the upcoming mission. Although we rarely use them, my handle is Trek.”

Staff Sergeant Mayo grinned. “Ryker. Trek. As in Star Trek?”

Ryker simply nodded. “My mother loved that show.” He then looked to his right with a silent command to move on.

“Ajax Cassman. I guess you can call me Birdman. I'm the other cofounder of the Holt Agency.” His glance to the right kept the introductions going.

“Grant Housman. I run the D.C. office for Holt. You can call me House.”

“Holden Billings. I go by Loki in the field. I work out of the D.C. office.”

“Tavis Neade. Call me Bones. D.C. office.”

“Heath Kubiak. Pitbull.” He glanced at Ajax and Ryker. “I guess I technically work out of the Indiana office.” He grinned when his bosses nodded.

“Keene Soto. Indiana office. Everybody calls me Gramps.”

Finally, it was Kenner’s turn. Last but not least. “Kenner Lane. Viper.” His eyes caught and held the pretty Navy lieutenant’s. Even bundled up in all those civilian clothes, his mind could clearly see her gorgeous body as she strode naked past him in his bedroom about forty-eight hours ago. He didn’t bother to hold in the smile her vision brought to him.

“I hope you all ate a big breakfast because the first thing we’re going to do is build shelter. Why? Because you’re in fucking Alaska in December. We only have about four hours to five of daylight here this time of year.” He pointed up to the clear blue sky. “We’re wasting daylight. Now, who can tell me where you should pitch your tent or build a snow cave?”

His whole damn team looked at him. The instructors followed their gazes.

What the hell. The faster they got through this training, the faster they could move on to the mission. He pointed to the trees on the west side. “The wind comes from the west and those trees would block a hell of a lot of it. The sun rises in the east and will shine on those trees, warming that area first.”

Staff Sergeant Mayo smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Looks like somebody did his homework.”

Kenner needed to shut down this asshole now. He shook his head slowly side to side. “I grew up in North Pole. Worked search and rescue in high school. I’ve spent more nights in the Alaska outback than you have lived in my state.”

The staff sergeant straightened to his full height and strutted over to Kenner. “We’ve got ourselves a homeboy. And where did you acquire these outback skills? In Boy Scouts?”

“No. We didn’t have scouts. My neighbor, Roy, taught me.” Kenner grinned. “That would be Lieutenant Colonel Roy Hartig, the commanding officer of Cool School who rewrote the manual.” He shifted his gaze to Ryker and Ajax. “That’s who taught me to fly.”

“Okay.” Staff Sergeant Mayo drilled his index finger into Kenner’s chest. “You are not allowed to answer any more questions. Feel free to pitch in when you see the rest of these newbies doing something wrong. My men can’t be everywhere all the time. I’d appreciate the help.” He strode back to the middle of the group as Kenner let out a long silent sigh.

“There are four types of snow shelters,” the staff sergeant explained, then paired the group off into four small teams of three, each including at least one woman. Kenner wasn’t allowed to participate. “Each group will build a different kind. Snow will be your primary building tool. First group, you are to build the Quinzee. The second will build a simple snow cave. The third will build a tree pit. Group four will build connected snow trenches.”

Kenner was very familiar with each of these. More than once, his life had depended on his ability to build each of the shelters.

“The Quinzee is the most labor-intensive because you have to build a pile of snow. Thankfully, your Arctic kits all include a shovel.” He picked up a fistful of snow and tried to form it into a ball. “This type of shelter works best in heavy, wet snow. Unfortunately, you’re in fucking central Alaska, which is a dry, cold desert. But you will learn to build this kind of shelter anyway because I have no idea where you’re going and what the snow will be like there.” He uncovered a six-foot-tall pile of snow. “You can thank my men for preparing this for you. The rest will be up to the three of you.” He pointed to the first group. “You need to dig tunnels through this pile of heavy, solidified snow.”

The staff sergeant turned to Kenner. “What’s the first thing they need to do?”

With confidence, he answered, “Go into the woods there and break several sticks about twelve inches. You’re going to poke those through the top, so you know when to stop carving upward. You need to maintain about twelve inches above you.” He looked at the other groups and repeated, “You need to maintain about twelve inches of snow above you.”

Staff Sergeant Mayo nodded and continued. “Remember what Viper said about the wind? You want your door to be away from the wind if at all possible.” Group one moved to the correct side. Ryker slid a glance to Kenner who gave him a short nod. This group was going to get wet. Crawling on hands and knees, shoveling on their back and stomach, even in the cold snow, was hard work. They were going to sweat. He hoped the Air Force’s new base layer was self-wicking.

Group two was assigned a simple snow cave, which could be easily built by basically burrowing upward into the side of a snowbank or snowdrift.

The third group was ordered to dig a tree trench, which was basically what it was called. At the bottom of the tree, preferably a pine, you dug straight down along its trunk then covered it with fresh-cut pine boughs. Kenner didn’t care for that kind of snow shelter because you had to sleep sitting up.

A snow trench was assigned to group four, the pretty Piper Knight, Ajax, and Tavis. Although he’d never admit it to himself, he was thankful that the two men were happily married with children.

The next two hours were spent digging snow shelters for everyone except Kenner. He wandered around giving advice and passing out bottles of water, reminding everyone to stay hydrated.

“Be sure to add air holes for ventilation,” Kenner quietly told group one. Group two made quick progress, first digging down then upward. After glancing around, he suggested to them, “As you dig back, consider a T formation. That gives you bunks on either side and room to walk between them. Your third sleeping surface can be a shelf at the back. The cold will drop down between you and your breath will keep the

upper level a little bit warmer. Also, carbon monoxide from breathing will settle to the floor, which is several feet away from your head.”

He checked on group three, which seemed to be doing just fine. As he approached group four, Piper had taken off her outer layer jacket. She was strongly digging her trench, equally as fast as the two men. They had correctly laid them out side by side, using the snow they had removed to build up the sides for greater protection. “Once you have your trenches dug, decide where you’re going to put your heads. At your feet, dig a perpendicular trench at least a foot deeper. This will help capture the cold and carbon monoxide. Have you decided how you’re going to build a snow roof?”

“Pine branches covered by snow,” Piper announced. “Pine needles are an excellent insulator, their branches are strong enough to hold the snow on top, and they smell good.” She pulled her base layer turtleneck away from her body and sniffed. “A hell of a lot better than we do.”

The memory of honeysuckle as she’d passed him fresh from the shower hit Kenner. He couldn’t stop his eyes as they traveled down from her neck, past luscious breasts that had jiggled ever so slightly when she had strutted by completely naked. A little more than a mouthful. Perfect size for his hands. Even through two layers of cloth, he could make out the muscles of her flat stomach. He wondered what kind of a lover she would be.

Mentally, he shook his head. She’d be a ballbuster for sure.

Staff Sergeant Mayo’s voice interrupted his musings. “Curve the roof above your heads to give it strength. Then smooth it out. Your breath will warm the roof and melt it. You don’t want droplets of near freezing water dripping on you in the night. Being wet and cold can kill you.” He dug into a large duffel bag and pulled out a fistful of candles. “Make a little shelf near your head. A lit candle is your first warning of lack of oxygen.” Checking progress, he distributed one to each person.

Kenner noticed the sun sinking into the west. As soon as it dropped behind the trees on that side, it would get dark and cold quickly. “Staff Sergeant Mayo, with your permission I’d like to dig a fire pit. We’re losing the sun.”

The senior instructor looked longingly in that direction. “Good idea. I had hoped to teach fire building while we still had daylight.” His gaze strayed to each of the groups. “I have no idea what kind of training these women have but they’re damn hard workers. They’ve kept up with men. It looks as though they’re almost finished with the shelters. Viper, I’d appreciate it if you’d go collect wood for the fire. We might need to build one and then let everyone practice making their own.”

The woods were filled with fallen branches, so Kenner was able to quickly collect tinder, kindling, and firewood. He set them in three separate piles before digging a hole in the snow down at least a foot to get it out of the wind. By the time he was finished, so were the shelters.

The staff sergeant called everyone to the middle. “Would someone like to build a fire?”

“Lady Leopard,” the female team leader ordered, and Piper stepped forward. She laid four pieces of firewood onto the snow then quickly assembled some tinder on top before building a teepee-style firebase. She placed additional kindling close at hand before pulling out an impressive tactical knife, which she used to cut up the tinder into even smaller pieces. From one of her many pockets, she pulled out a three-inch magnesium fire starter. After shaving off a few pieces of magnesium, she turned it over, rubbing the steel side and creating an impressive array of sparks. Bending low, she gently blew on the hopeful embers until they ignited in a small fire. Carefully she fed it more and more tinder, blowing lightly to feed it the necessary oxygen. Within two minutes, the kindling had caught, and she added larger and larger pieces until the fire roared.

She stood and held the staff sergeant’s gaze. “All five of us women are capable of building a fire.” She glanced at the line of men where Kenner stood. “These men are former Navy

SEALs. I'm pretty sure they can also build a fire. I suggest you move on to the next subject. I'd personally like to suggest food. It's been a long time since breakfast."

Kenner agreed with Lieutenant Piper. But being an officer, she could talk to the staff sergeant that way and he couldn't say or do a damn thing. The only officer he'd ever respected was Lieutenant Commander Andrew Buchanan. He'd taken the fall for the Ethiopian debacle but had landed a great job as the head of security on a cruise ship. As a personal rule, Kenner didn't like most SEAL officers, even though they'd gone through the exact same training. He disliked female officers even more. In his experience, they wanted to be so tough, handle any job that a man could, but most were simply bitches.

Staff Sergeant Mayo continued with his lectures as they melted snow into water and filled their hydration bladders that they wore next to their skin. Finally, they cooked standard military MREs. The meals ready to eat had never been one of Kenner's favorites but he savored every warm bite as the temperature dropped to subfreezing.

"At its closest point, Alaska is only three miles from Russia. There are several places on the western coast where you can actually see Russia. Alaska was invaded in World War II, considered to be the back door to the continental United States. Recently, Russia has reactivated several military bases in their Arctic region."

The men and women on both teams exchanged clandestine glances. It was as though they were all thinking the same thing; could Russia have sent the balloon to investigate the readiness of the United States?

"I'm surprised no one has asked about bears." Staff Sergeant Mayo scraped the remaining food remnants from his bowl into a two-gallon sealable bag. "We're deep in the interior, far away from the ocean where polar bears are wandering around hoping to find some delicious seals." He glanced over his shoulder at the men. "The animal kind. Around here, we have brown bears and grizzlies but luckily for you they're all in deep hibernation. Even so, we carry out



all food waste. After you clean your dish, my men are going to set up some lights and I want you to grab your snowshoes, skis, and poles. Wear your headlamps.” He pulled the football from his bag and tossed it into the air, easily catching it. “We’re going to play football.”

Kenner was thrilled when he was assigned to wear the cross-country skis during the first round. He’d spent a lot of time in his youth on the thin tapered slabs of wood and polyurethane foam. At eleven years old, he’d rescued his first pair from a dumpster in town. They’d been severely abused rentals, broken, but he had been a resourceful young man and glued them back together. Sure, the glob of glue on the bottom dragged but it was so much better than walking. He didn’t care that his poles were severely bent or that he had to duct tape his boots into place. Getting into town was twice as fast and ten times as easy by sliding over snow-covered sidewalks. Years later, Roy had taken pity on him and bought him a thirdhand pair for Christmas.

The entire purpose of playing football while wearing skis or snowshoes was to quickly learn balance and become familiar with them.

Kenner couldn’t wait to watch the women stumble and fall time and time again.

## CHAPTER 6



PIPER EASILY SLID HER BOOTS INTO THE TOE PIECES. THE configuration was a little different than standard cross-country skis but easy enough to figure out. They had made accommodations for the large, thick military boots. She was equally as comfortable on snow skis as she was on water skis. She'd been on skis of one kind or another since she'd been able to walk.

Before her parents moved to the ocean, they'd lived in a gated community with a private lake and ranger whose job it was to keep alligators out of their pristine natural water. Even though all the homes had private swimming pools, most had docks and speedboats on the two-mile-long lake. In her parents' current living room was a picture of two-year-old Piper standing in front of her father on water skis. It hung on the wall next to a picture of her and Chandler, a few years later, bundled in puffy down coats and warm ski pants, standing on top of a Mount Hood ski resort, which was that year's Christmas ski vacation. The memory made her smile. She and her brother had raced to the bottom of the slope. As usual, he'd won. Although she'd enjoyed skiing all over the United States and several places in Europe, her favorite snow sport was snowboarding. It was also the only thing she was better at than her older brother.

Piper glanced at her teammates who were also buckling into their skis. Ashlin seemed to be having a problem, so she deftly slid over to help. Mia had awkwardly used her poles to maneuver herself to Piper, but impressively she'd made it without falling down.

“This is a hell of a lot harder than it looks,” Mia confessed.

Piper stood and glanced at Kayla and Kira who were making their way toward them in the dark, their path only lit by their headlamps. She checked the men’s progress and then decided there was enough time for a quick lesson. When her whole team was together, she positioned herself in front of them. “Hips over ankles. Knees bent. Just like when you climb, left leg right hand.” And she quickly demonstrated, and each woman followed her positions.

While practicing, several dropped their poles. Oops. Piper had forgotten to teach that lesson. “The rabbit goes up through the hole and grabs the tree.” Again, she demonstrated using her own poles and the attached straps.

Piper went through several balance moves with her teammates before Staff Sergeant Mayo called them all to the center of the clearing where his men had set up large spotlights. A loud generator was running nearby, almost drowning out the instructions.

“To start, I just want you to throw the ball back and forth to each other. The purpose of this exercise is to familiarize yourself with the feeling of doing everything on skis and snowshoes.”

“Thank Christ you gave us that lesson.” Mia patted Piper on the shoulder with her mitten-covered hand.

Kayla easily caught the ball from the training team. She was wearing only gloves, which was dangerous. Since the sun had disappeared, temperatures had fallen several degrees each hour. Everyone else had put on their mittens that went over top. She lobbed the ball to Piper who caught it in both hands. She tossed it to Mia who almost dropped it but rescued it a foot off the ground. After a few minutes they were instructed to toss the balls back and forth between the men and the women as the instructors added more and more balls. The action became fierce with balls coming from several directions.

“This is not dodgeball,” Ryker chastised as his men started to throw harder and harder.

“Time to mix it up a little.” Staff Sergeant Mayo walked around counting one, two, one, two. “Ones, you’re over here.” He pointed to the right. “Twos, you’re over here.”

Piper wanted to roll her eyes when Kenner skillfully skied beside her. Damn. They were on the same team. Balls started to fly once again. She caught almost everything tossed her way and sent it right back to the other team.

Keeping her eye on a ball as it was headed over her head, Piper leapt into the air, hands up.

Something hit her full force from the side.

She was falling to the ground.

Mentally she prepared to roll, same as she’d been taught when parachuting.

Arms went around her just before she hit and pulled her onto a soft body instead of the hardpacked snow.

All the breath left her lungs as they hit.

Green Eyes looked up at her from under the goggles they all wore to protect their eyes. “Are you alright?” he asked with concern laced through his deep sexy voice.

Piper caught her breath and forced herself to fill her lungs before she answered. “I’m good.” She was ready to roll off him and use her poles to stand as he grabbed her hips.

“I’m really sorry...lieutenant.” But his apology fell short when he grinned. “Feel free to fall on me anytime.” He lifted her off him and set her to his side but rolled toward her. His face was inches from hers when he spoke in low tones so only she heard, “Next time, let’s try this naked.”

He quickly rolled away to his knees and was standing before she could get her skis under her. He leaned over and picked her up by the shoulders.

She was standing but still a little stunned. Piper wasn’t sure if it was from the fall or his words. She was immediately thrown back into the game when a ball whizzed by her face.

Fifteen minutes later they changed gear. Piper found herself in cumbersome snowshoes. It was much easier to move laterally but several times she'd caught herself almost tripping when moving forward or backward. She quickly decided snowshoes were not her favorite.

As the fire she'd built in the center of camp died down to hot embers, everyone gathered around for a late-night treat of s'mores. The warm toasted marshmallows squished between graham crackers with a piece of chocolate were certainly better than the no doubt frozen granola bar she'd imagined eating.

"Don't forget to light the candle that should be at least one foot away from your head," Staff Sergeant Mayo warned as everyone headed to their snow shelters.

Piper unrolled her base pad and sleeping bag. Before she crawled in, Kenner walked by. "Take the clean clothes you're going to wear tomorrow and put them in the sleeping bag. Tonight, they'll help insulate and tomorrow morning they'll be warm as you change before you crawl out."

That was a hell of an idea. "Thank you, Kenner."

"Glad I'm here for you."

When she awoke the next morning Piper was surprised that she hadn't been cold. She'd actually slept quite well. Putting on clean clothes while still in her sleeping bag proved to be a minor challenge but she was so grateful that her bra and panties were relatively warm. She was also grateful for the tip because there was a man on each side of her. Through their conversations as they built their connected trench shelters, she'd learned that both Ajax and Tavis were happily married with children. She wondered how they were going to explain to their wives that they had slept with her, even though that's all they had done, sleep and share a modicum of body heat.

Dressed in clean clothes, Piper was ready to take whatever the instructors threw at them that day. After a breakfast of MREs cooked with heat tabs, they donned their skis and backpacks and trekked through the snow for five miles. They

ended at a makeshift rifle range where they learned to use their poles to support and steady their guns.

On the way back to camp, they had switched to snowshoes to Piper's chagrin. But she made it. Her thighs and calves burned from the effort. The fact the wind had kicked up didn't help. When her cheeks started to chill, she pulled on her balaclava, so her entire face was covered. Breathing through the thick face covering reminded her of the nearly year-long mandate during Covid when the world wore masks over their nose and mouth. But with the wind chill factor below zero, she appreciated her breath bathing her face in warmth.

When they reached camp, Kayla gathered her team. "The last twenty-four hours has certainly tested this new clothing. On the way back to base, I want you to make notes on its performance. Was anyone cold last night?" Their team leader was visibly relieved when everyone shook their head. "Other observations."

"I'm not real impressed with my base layer." Kira shivered. "Mine doesn't wick away the sweat very well. During the hike my back and chest were damp."

"Mine was great. I worked up quite a sweat yesterday building my snow shelter. When I took off the wind jacket, there was a lot of perspiration on the inside," Ashlin said, then went on to explain, "I did what they told us to do back in Washington; I simply shook it out. The water droplets were gone and yet my base layer was dry."

"Good to know," Kayla commented. "Kira, we'll trade yours out for the same thing Ashlin is wearing. Those are exactly the kind of notes we need to turn in. Once we get back to base, we'll compare notes and exchange any poorly performing clothing before we head out on our mission."

By the time they reached the training camp, more SUVs had arrived. It took less than fifteen minutes to break camp before they were on the way back to Eielson Air Force Base. Staff Sergeant Mayo continued blasting his lessons to all the vehicles. "Today is only minus five degrees Fahrenheit. That's about average for December in this area. But at minus thirty-

five degrees Fahrenheit, with winds at twenty-five miles per hour, your face can get frostbitten in four minutes. It's essential to consider the wind chill factor in everything you do."

"You guys are lucky." The senior enlisted trainer chuckled. "Usually we do the Arctic plunge as one of the final lessons. That's where we have you step into near freezing water, wearing full gear, and you have to get yourself out. It was decided that since most of the rivers in Alaska are now frozen over, it was one training module that we could skip. But just in case, I'll go over a few of the high points."

Piper listened with one ear as she made notes into her phone about the clothing they'd been given to test.

"The cold water will be an instant shock to your body. It will fuck with your mind and your muscles. The most important thing is don't panic. Without losing any of your gear, you need to swim, do whatever you have to do to get yourself to the thickest ice edge. Pull off your pack and throw it onto the ice. Do not let your pack drop into the water. There are too many things inside that you need to survive. Once the pack is off, pull your upper body onto the ice ledge and regain your breath. It's okay if the rest of your body is still in the water. You should still have your poles. They can be used as icepicks to help pull the rest of your body onto the ice. If you fall into the ice, it's an indication that the ice is thin. By spreading out your arms and legs, distributing your body weight, you can crawl back to land. We have a video on this technique that we'll show you once we get back to base."

*Good.* She'd just watch the video. Someone had already determined that information wasn't essential to their mission.

He continued, "Wet and cold can kill you in minutes. If you fall into water, it's essential to get the wet clothes off your body as soon as possible. I'm talking within a minute or two. You don't need to be wet to get hypothermia. All you need to be is cold. Hypothermia can hit you quickly. It's one of the reasons we never let anyone go out alone. Look for shivering, exhaustion or feeling very tired, confusion, fumbling with your hands, memory loss, slurred speech, and the worst one is

drowsiness. If you see anyone with these symptoms, take them to shelter. If their body temperature is below ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit, they are in a medical emergency. It's essential that you warm the body core. That's the chest, neck, and groin. Get a hat on his head. You'd be surprised at how much heat is lost through your head. You can use skin-to-skin contact under loose dry blankets or any kind of cloth you can find. Warm drinks help. One of the best things you can do is strip him down naked and to put him into a sleeping bag."

When they reached the base, the entire group quickly moved into the conference room they'd used before. Staff Sergeant Mayo stood in the front. "All of you did amazingly well." His gaze went to the women who sat on one side of the large conference room table. "I've been teaching this class for two and a half years and I have to admit, you women are some of the best shots I've ever seen. It's not easy to shoot a weapon in these circumstances but each of you did extremely well. On everything."

He moved his attention to the men. "Gentlemen, we've had other Special Operators take this class. All of them did well. For civilians, you did exceptionally well."

He smiled and swept his gaze over the entire group. "You're ready for the Alaskan outback or anywhere else your mission takes you. I wish you all luck."

From the back of the conference room a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force uniform moved to the front and turned on the flat screen television. The SEAL of Homeland Security faded in. Piper's boss, Katlin Callahan—she continued to use her maiden name at work even though she was married to Alex Wolf—appeared on the screen.

"Congratulations. You've learned how to survive in the wilderness in subzero weather. Good, because that's where you're going." A grainy picture appeared on part of the screen. "Three days ago, a two-hundred-foot-tall balloon floated over Nome, Alaska at approximately fifty-five thousand feet. It moved at a speed of twenty-five knots. Before you ask, this is the best picture we've captured so far. It's emitting some kind of electronic jamming that distorts its appearance. Even



satellites can't get a clear picture. Flybys with our most technologically advanced airplanes can't seem to take a picture of it."

She picked up the bottle of water on the desk and took a pull. "It was quickly determined that this is not a weather balloon. They can ascend for about ninety minutes before bursting and typically reach sixty thousand feet up to a hundred and five thousand feet. We haven't recorded it at those heights yet. No one became really concerned until it started to maneuver within the jet stream. It was able to move right and left. Alarm bells went off when it hovered over top-secret ICBM missile sites. The location of our intercontinental ballistic missiles is supposed to be top-secret. Command was concerned when it paused over top one. It has stopped over several."

She let that sink in before she continued, "Your mission is to find out everything you can about this balloon. We need better pictures. We need to know how it's gathering information and where it's sending the data. Your group will be transported into its trajectory, establish a base camp, then in groups of two you are to spread out, pre-positioning yourselves to where we think it might go next."

The Ladies of Black Swan Team 2 exchanged a glance. They could do this. They would do this.

"Lieutenant Colonel Avalon, you're up."

## CHAPTER 7



FINALLY, THEY WERE MOVING ON TO THE MISSION. KENNER hadn't learned anything new in the Arctic training. It hadn't even been a good review for him. Much of it was a way of life for him growing up. A life he'd left on purpose nearly fifteen years ago. He was excited though about this op.

Lieutenant Colonel Avalon stood at the head of the table. "Your planes are being loaded now with our standard base camp essentials. Since there are thirteen of you, we are sending fifteen snow machines." He scowled. "It's been our experience that Special Operators are harder than usual on equipment. These are not your normal snowmobiles you'll find in the lower forty-eight. They are high-efficiency machines. They have twenty-gallon fuel tanks so they can travel two hundred and fifty miles at speeds up to seventy miles an hour."

"All right," and other low words of approval came from his teammates. Kenner grinned. Roy had talked multiple times about the inefficiencies of standard snowmobiles. He'd been part of a joint Arctic training operation in Finland where they'd used such snow machines, snow bikes, and two-man four-wheel-drive machines that looked like a desert buggy. Obviously, he'd finally gotten someone to agree to purchase new equipment.

"You have new Arctic backpacks. We weren't sure what you'd used or needed replaced, so we just issued you new ones. These include an ample supply of hand and toe warmers." He gave them a self-deprecating grin. "The Arctic

school doesn't like to include those for training purposes, but you're mission go. Each of you may wish to grab a couple body warmers from the base camp supply and toss them into your packs. You'll find them in with the medical kit. Our physicians have found them essential in treating hypothermia in the field."

He glanced down at his notes. "To expedite the establishment of the base camp, ten airmen will be left with you initially. Five will remain permanently including cooks and security. Keep sending us a running list of anything else you want. We'll bring it when we come back to pick up the other men."

"Sir, exactly what is in the base camp kit?" Kayla asked. From across the table, Ryker and Ajax both nodded approval at the question.

"Five large tents. These were designed to stay warm at minus thirty-five degrees using the propane heaters included. One is for your kitchen and mess hall—all equipment needed for that is included—one for the men's and one for women's barracks. Another is for storage, which I need to remind you must remain heated. Propane freezes and won't flow if the combination of air and wind reaches minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. It's a good idea to keep your gasoline in there also because it will get slushy at minus forty degrees." He then smiled. "Yes. It could get that cold where you're going. Your camp essentials also include potable water, which will also need to be kept in that storage tent. To get you started, it contains a few canned items. If you don't use them right away, they need to be stored in the heated tent."

The lieutenant colonel grimaced. "You have several cases of MREs in addition to the ones already included in your backpacks. Director Callahan and I foresee groups of two leaving the camp for twenty-four to forty-eight hours at a time before returning to rest and replenish."

While looking at his notes, he continued. "The fifth tent is for the snow machines. They start better if they're kept out of the wind. That tent is only kept at forty degrees." He looked up at the screen. "Back to you, ma'am."

“Larson, you’re next,” the deputy director of Section 7 ordered.

The Holt Agency computer geek appeared in a box on half the screen. Sitting beside him was Ryker’s wife, Xena.

“Babe, what are you doing in the office?” The surprise in Ryker’s voice was there for all to hear.

Xena smiled. “I’m filling in on this mission for Serena since she’s home on maternity leave.” She referred to Ajax’s wife who’d recently given birth to their second child. Xena ran both hands over her huge belly as though massaging it.

“Okay, let’s get started on the data tracker.” Larson held up a small version of a satellite receiver. Its dish was only six inches across and sat atop a ten-inch square box that was only about an inch and a half thick. He then held up a square packing box. “Yours will look like this.” He opened the box and took out three pieces. “Carefully slide the post into the hole in the middle of the top. All you need to do is line up the nub with the notch and turn it clockwise until it clicks.” He held it up so they could see what he was doing.

Kenner was sure that part was self-explanatory.

Larson then took the circular object and popped it open. “All you really need to do is release the tension and it pops into a six-inch circle. The center fits right over the top of the post.” Larson again demonstrated how easy it was...or at least he made it look easy. “Last, your satellite phone slides in right here.” He once again demonstrated. “It’s very important that you charge your phones every day. You don’t get much daylight and need to take advantage of every minute of sunshine.”

“Each backpack has a solar charger and cables,” Lieutenant Colonel Avalon interjected.

“Your satellite phone feeds directly to me.” He then moved a joystick attached to his computer and everyone watched as the dish moved. “I can control the movement from here, but I may need you to reposition the box itself. With the phone attached, we have an open line between us.”

*Gasp.*

Xena sucked in air through clenched teeth.

“Are you okay, babe?” Ryker’s concerned voice filled the conference room. “Is it the baby?”

Xena showed two rows of gritted white teeth. “Yes. No worries. It’s just Braxton Hicks,” she declared as she rubbed her huge stomach. A few seconds later she breathed a sigh of relief and inhaled an audible breath as she shifted in her seat. “What do I need to send up on the next transport?”

“I believe we’ve got them covered,” the lieutenant colonel declared.

“Excellent,” Xena said with a true smile. “That makes my job easy. But if anything changes, you’ll let Larson know, right?”

Her husband nodded. “Absolutely. And if anything changes there with you, he can get a hold of us.” Ryker cocked his head to the side as though he was remembering. “You saw the baby doctor today.” A huge smile split Ryker’s face. “What did she say?” he asked as though no one else was in the room and nothing was more important.

“Are you sure I can’t send you anything? Does anyone need more clothes?” Xena asked, avoiding his question.

Worry painted Ryker’s face. “Babe,” he said sternly. “Talk to me.”

Xena let out a long, slow breath. “It’s nothing to get concerned about. The baby is in position, its head is down.”

“Xena.” There was an edge to Ryker’s voice. “I don’t give a shit if everybody in this room and on this conference call hears whatever it is that you aren’t telling me.”

With a shrug she bleated out, “I’m dilated to two.” She quickly added, “But some women walk around dilated for weeks before the baby is born.”

Relief seemed to wash over Ryker. “So, everything is okay?”

Xena's smile looked forced to Kenner.

"I'm fine. The baby is fine. Finish this mission and come on home." Xena arched her back, making her baby bump look even larger.

"Okay, babe. I'll be home as soon as I can. I love you... both."

"We love you too, Xena," several of the men repeated.

"Holt Agency, out," Larson said with finality.

Ryker immediately turned to everyone in the room. "Should I be worried? The baby isn't due for two and a half to three more weeks."

Katlin Callahan laughed, and all eyes turned toward the screen. "I can tell you from experience, due dates are guesstimates. Babies come when they're ready."

"My wife delivered a healthy baby girl what was supposed to be two weeks early," Tavis, the proud papa of the three-and-a-half-year-old spitfire, announced. "She was seven pounds eight ounces. I'm so glad I was there when she was born."

Ryker's eyes went wide. "Sophia was that early?"

Tavis nodded. "Yep. And I was in the delivery room from the minute Colette went into labor. I was beside her all ten hours. She was magnificent."

"You're a fool. We told you to stay home," Ajax chastised. "I've got this." He laid a hand on his partner's bicep and grinned. "You know Xena will never forgive you if you're not there for the birth of your child. She'll probably castrate you, so you don't have to worry about missing any future births."

"Fuck. You're right." Ryker looked at Lieutenant Colonel Avalon who smiled reassuringly. "Grab your personal gear. You might be the luckiest son of a bitch on this base. We have a resupply plane headed to Joint Base Lewis McCord in Washington within the hour." He reached over to the phone in the middle of the table and quickly made a call before stepping out into the hall and briefly talking with Sergeant Mayo who stepped back in behind the senior officer.

“Sir, follow me, please.”

“Good luck, everyone. I’ll stay in touch.” Ryker waved just before he exited the conference room.

“Ajax, Kayla, pair up your teams. Good hunting. Homeland ops out.” The women’s boss disappeared, leaving only the seal of Homeland Security on the screen.

“You have enough time for a hot shower and to change into clean clothes.” Lieutenant Colonel Avalon stacked the papers in front of him. “Meet back here in forty minutes for any last-minute details. The first flight for the base camp has already left. We want you guys to get into position before we lose daylight.”

Kenner was surprised when he walked back into the conference room thirty-five minutes later and all five women were already there, occupying what he’d come to think of as their seats. Their leader, Kayla, was talking with Ajax near the head of the table. A topographical map of Alaska was on the screen. When the rest of the Holt agents filtered in, the two team leaders turned to face them.

“Ajax and I will stay at base camp for now and coordinate everyone from there,” Kayla announced. “We’ve paired you up as follows: Tavis and Kira, Holden and Mia, Grant and Heath, Keene and Ashlin, Kenner and Piper. We’ll assign you coordinates once we’re on the ground out there. In the meantime, you can see on the map how far the balloon has traveled.”

The red line tracked from the Alaskan coastline a few miles north of Nome heading slightly northeast. It crossed the Nulato Hills and seemed to skirt just below the Arctic Circle in what most considered no-man’s land. There was only a smattering of villages located along tributaries to the Yukon River. Most had less than three hundred inhabitants who primarily lived off the land. Kenner had been to several of these places with Roy, delivering the mail and supplies in his single engine plane. Even as a young teen he couldn’t imagine living in such desolate places but many of the inhabitants didn’t know anything else. They would be scared to death and

unable to survive if dropped into the land of sunshine in San Diego. Kenner, on the other hand, had thrived.

“Base camp is being established here.” She pointed to a place northwest of Fairbanks about two hundred miles. “We’re using best guess estimates on its trajectory based on air currents at that height. We’ve put base camp in front of it. You will all move east toward it.”

“We need you to check your backpacks while on the plane.” Ajax picked up the narrative. “You and your partner decide what additional items you’re going to grab from the base camp. Divide up the list. We’re losing daylight fast. Let’s move out.”

Piper fell into line next to Kenner. “I’m not sure how we got paired together but I hope we can put the situation back in Indiana behind us and work together.” When they slowed at the conference door, she held his gaze. “If you can’t do that, I’ll ask to switch with one of my teammates who hasn’t seen you naked.”

Kenner wasn’t going to let her win this one. “I don’t have any problem working with you at all, Lieutenant Knight.” He grinned and lowered his voice. “I can be as professional as you can...even though I’ve seen you naked.” Inwardly, he smiled and thought about the two of them snuggling in the small winter tent. He wondered if he’d get the opportunity to see her naked once again.

They boarded the transport plane and sat side by side as they were handed their new backpacks. He wanted to rearrange his according to when he’d need it. He glanced at Piper who seemed to be digging through it rather than emptying and repacking.

“Take everything out and repack it in the reverse order of what you’re going to need.” He picked up the hydration bladder. “We’re going to need to fill these as soon as we get to base camp and place them between your base layer and secondary layers of clothing.”

She nodded. “I was thinking the exact same thing.” She picked up the small stove, fuel, and cook set. “Bottom.” There



was no question in her voice.

Kenner bobbed his head in agreement. As though by unspoken agreement, both picked up the medical kit and put it in the same outside pocket at hip level. He caught Piper looking at a small bag. "It's a repair kit for the stove." He chuckled. "The damn things seem to break all the time."

She stuffed it in the bottom of her bag. Next went in her towel and personal hygiene kit but he noticed she laid her bathroom items to the side. At his questioning look, she raised an eyebrow. "I don't know about you, but I fully intend to use the facilities at base camp before I hop on that snow machine and ride it for several hours. I can guarantee you that once we reach our destination, I'm going to have to go again. This goes right on top."

He was used to traveling with men. Camping with men. They could pee anywhere then shake it off. He rarely traveled into the woods with toilet paper unless it was first thing in the morning for his daily constitutional. But he understood her needs.

Kenner watched as she hooked her portable solar charger to the outside of her backpack and threaded cord into the top side pocket where she connected it to the satellite phone. Damn good idea. He followed her example. Every ray of daylight counted. The hand and toe warmers went into another outside pocket.

"We need to pick up several more of these." He wagged one of the packets before sliding it into the pocket.

"And we need to pick up the big body warming packs," she added. "I'll go grab more warming packs if you'll grab extra batteries for the headlamps. I don't see any in here."

Both picked up their sleeping bags at the same time and stuffed them into the packs before putting the tents on top. The camp chair and tent poles got strapped to the sides of the packs.

Piper picked up the snowshoes and growled. "I wish I could have skis instead of these damn things."

“When we get to the base camp, see if you can switch them out.” He shrugged. “Or maybe they’ll just give you a set of skis in addition to the snowshoes. That would give you the choice depending on terrain.”

Piper smiled at him. “That’s a damn good idea.” It was a genuine smile that made her eyes sparkle in the low light of the transport plane. It struck him that she was beautiful. He’d seen her snide and snarky smiles but this one hit him center chest. He wondered what other suggestions he could give her that would make her smile at him like that again.

## CHAPTER 8



PIPER SECURED HER PACK TO THE BACK OF HER SNOW MACHINE with the help of Staff Sergeant Mayo. He'd also found her a pair of skis to her absolute delight. She was surprised that Lieutenant Colonel Avalon had sent the Arctic training squadron out to establish the base camp. In some ways, though, it made sense. Who would know better what worked in the freezing cold and what didn't?

“Ma’am, I know it might go against your grain, but I suggest you let him take the lead.” The staff sergeant nodded his head ever so slightly toward Kenner. “We didn’t have time to teach you snowmobiling. There’s considerably more than hopping on and pointing it in the direction you want to go. It’s all about looking for the right terrain, what to avoid, and how to get yourself out of trouble. Follow him. Pay attention to everything he does. Kenner is really a nice guy. I’m sure if you ask him, he’ll give you a lesson.”

“I’ve been riding jet skis all my life. I understand exactly what you’re saying.” She tightened the strap holding her backpack onto her snow machine.

“You ready to go?” Kenner asked as he looked over her equipment and gave one of the straps a little tug. “I’ll take the lead.” He walked to his machine and swung a leg over.

Piper gave Staff Sergeant Mayo a smile and mouthed thank you before she pulled down her facemask and put on her goggles. He walked over and pressed a button on her handle. Leaning in, he whispered next to her ear, “These have heated

handles. After riding for about two hours, you can thank me for turning them on.”

“Thank you,” she called through several layers of cloth. “I’m going to thank you now.” She turned on her machine and waved goodbye to both teams as she passed them on the way out of camp. Several times she checked the coordinates, but Kenner seemed to know exactly where to go. They flew across open spaces and slowed to pick their way through or around small stands of trees and low growth. When he finally stopped, she pulled up next to him, glancing down at her own GPS. They were there.

A momentary look at the time and Piper knew they had to set up camp quickly. She hauled her tent out of her pack and glanced around trying to decide the best place to set it up.

“We don’t need both tents,” Kenner announced as he headed into the trees on the east side carrying his tent and poles. “These are two-man...I mean person...tents. We should share one. We’ll both stay warmer.”

Made sense. Not that she’d been cold in the trench she’d slept in the night before, but she certainly wasn’t toasty. She was all about being warm. She loved being in the desert even when the temperature dropped at night. She left hers in the backpack and started to follow him.

“Ma’am, grab your saw.” He then added, “Please.”

“Anything else I need to bring?” she offered as she retrieved the saw.

“No, ma’am.”

As soon as she reached him, she became aware of how quickly he was getting the tent up. He hardly needed her help.

“Ma’am, would you please cut some of those pine boughs? We’ll lay them under the tent for insulation and padding.”

Piper was over this ma’am shit. “Kenner, that’s your name, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Would you prefer I call you Kenner, Ken, or Viper?” She was happy she remembered his call sign. He stopped assembling the poles and stared at her as though she’d grown a unicorn horn in the middle of her forehead. She stared back, waiting, but he didn’t answer.

“Okay, I’ll go first. you may call me Piper or Lady Leopard if you prefer to use handles.” She slid her hands to her hips. “You may not continue to call me ma’am. You can also cut the polite bullshit. I can tell it doesn’t come easily to you yet for some reason you think it’s necessary for me. You’re no longer in the military and I am definitely not your commanding officer. We need to be a team. So, what’s it going to be?”

She swore his eyes flashed bright green before he gave her that snide smile. “Cut the fucking boughs before we lose what little daylight we have left...Piper. You may call me Kenner.” It was his turn to put his gloved hands on his hips. “Never call me Ken, Kenny, or any other derivative of my name. I’m Kenner.”

She nodded once and picked up the saw, heading toward the closest pine tree. “Got it...Kenner.” It took her a few tries to get used to the saw. It was different from the ones they’d used in SpecOps training. By the time he had the tent assembled, she had several branches ready to lay over top hardpacked snow. “Is this enough or do you want more?” She looked at her pile then wondered out loud, “Should I cut some more for over top the tent? Or is snow a better insulator?”

“Cut a few more. We’ll use them for both.” Kenner quickly covered the ground then anchored the tent before piling more pine branches on top. Together, using their shovels, they quickly covered the tent in snow.

“It almost looks camouflaged here in the woods,” she declared as she threw a shovelful of snow on the side and packed it in. “Not that we need to hide our presence from anyone. I feel like we’re the only human beings for fifty miles.” The teams of two had been spaced out approximately fifty miles apart and base camp was about seventy-five miles away.

Kenner smiled over his shoulder at her. “It’s kind of a nice feeling, isn’t it? Just you and me and the wide-open space.”

Piper wasn’t that enamored with Alaska. “And Mother Nature trying to kill us.”

“But that’s the challenge. It’s just you against whatever the bitch can throw at you.” He stopped and stared at her for a moment, leaning on his shovel as the sky overhead turned a soft peach. “Do you feel unprepared? Are you worried?”

She straightened her back and squared her shoulders. “Hell, no,” she said with as much bravado as he had challenged Mother Nature. “I’ve seen what she can do. I’ve lived through a category four hurricane, ridden thirty-foot-tall ocean swells, baked in triple digit desert heat, and felt the world shake under my feet. She hasn’t defeated me yet.” She gave him one of her sassy grins. “Besides, you won’t let me freeze to death.”

“You’re right. I won’t.” He moved a few feet away from the tent and started digging a hole. “While I dig a fire pit, go gather firewood.” They both worked quickly as the sun started to drop below the trees that sat on a hilltop to their west.

“I’ll grab a couple different MREs, so we have a choice for supper.” Kenner sauntered toward his snow machine and backpack. Both their headlamps were still packed but he seemed to be able to see in the dusky light.

“I’ll get the fire started then grab my cooking pot. After we make supper, I’ll melt some more snow so we can replenish our hydration bladders.”

“Good idea,” he called from his snow machine. “I’m going to move these into the woods out of the wind. It would suck if one or more of these didn’t start in the morning.”

She’d scraped some magnesium into the scraps of cloth she always carried with her in the small waterproof container with her fire starter. Rubbing the flint against steel lit up the darkening night as the sparks caught fire. Blowing a slow steady stream of air on the growing embers, Piper quickly had a stable fire going. When she felt confident to leave it, she

made her way to her backpack. The first thing she dug out was her headlamp. She then grabbed her sleeping bag and blew up her pad before stuffing them both inside the very small tent next to Kenner's. It was certainly going to be cozy.

Another trip back to her bag and she retrieved her cook pot and mess kit. On the return trip to the fire, she found some clean snow and filled her pot. Kenner sat in his camp chair, his outer jacket unzipped.

"Good fire," he complimented then picked up several dark brown bags. "I was able to snag some good supper ones before we left base camp. Which do you prefer? Beef goulash? Beef patty? That one comes with a pretty decent jalapeno pepper Jack cheese. Beef ravioli that tastes like the crap out of a can my mother used feed me as a kid. Chicken burrito bowl. Or perhaps you'd like the Mexican-style chicken stew? Or would you prefer shredded beef in barbecue sauce?"

"You really did get some good ones. Thank you for not grabbing the tuna crap-oli one." She mock shuddered. "I swear that's all they gave us on one mission in the sandbox. I love a good piece of ahi tuna on sushi. I even like a grilled tuna, but a tuna MRE is the worst."

Kenner chuckled and nodded. "Totally agree." He pointed to the bags at his feet. "Which do you want?"

Since he had been so wonderful and generous all day, she decided to give him first choice. "I'm good with any of them. You've worked harder than me today. You choose."

He shook his head side to side. "Piper. We're not going to play this game."

"Fine. Beef goulash." She flashed him a smile. "I actually like to put the strawberry jam on the sugar cookies."

His smile was slow and genuine as he tossed her the brown bag. "Me too."

"See, we have something in common." She took out her knife and cut open the bag. She removed all the various packages then opened up the boxes containing the primary and secondary food. Carefully she ripped open the heating bag

before grabbing the pot that now contained water. There was plenty for both of them, not that it took much water to activate the heating tab. She slid her goulash into the heating packet then added water before handing it to Kenner. It started heating immediately so she folded the top and slid it back into the first box. It only took a few minutes before she and Kenner were both switching packets to heat up the next course.

Piper couldn't stand the silence any longer. She was curious to know more about Kenner. "I usually get to know a man before I sleep with him." She stuffed a huge bite of goulash into her mouth so she couldn't say anything more.

Kenner captured her eyes with his. "What makes you think we're going to do anything more than sleep?"

She chewed a few more times then swallowed. "I can assure you, we're not. I meant my comment to be a play on words. We will be sleeping side by side in the same tent, thus sleeping together."

"I know," was his only response as he dug into his own supper.

Was he teasing her? She'd try again as she dug around the bottom of the packet for the last of the noodles, scraping the sides for any remnants of the sauce.

"I think we need to get to know each other a little better. I'll go first. I was born and raised in Florida. My dad works at NASA and my mom teaches mathematics at the community college. I have one brother. He's four years older than me. You might know him. He's Navy SEAL too. Any chance you know Lieutenant Commander Chandler Knight? He spent most of his career in Virginia, when he wasn't deployed. Now it's your turn." She stuffed the last noodle into her mouth and looked at him expectantly.

Kenner dug into his food bag as though he hadn't heard her. She wasn't sure he was ever going to answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and quiet. "Alaska. No father. No mother anymore. No siblings. No, I don't know your brother."



For such very few words, that was a lot of information. She had follow-up questions, but his tone and body language warned her away from the subject of family. “Now it’s your turn to ask me a question.”

He didn’t even look at her. All his concentration seemed to be absorbed in opening his second hot package. She opened her warm applesauce and spooned out the first bite. She could wait for him. She was willing and prepared to answer anything he asked. She just hoped he’d finally get around to asking a question.

With a spoon halfway to his mouth, Kenner watched her carefully as he asked, “How many lovers have you had?” His food finished the journey to his mouth, but his eyes never left her.

She stilled for only a fraction of a second before swallowing. She’d been trained by the CIA not to react unless it was part of a mission. She’d started this get-to-know-you session and had to be truthful with the man. He just might break her dry spell. “You want me to be honest?”

“Always.” He held her gaze.

“I’m not sure I’d call many of them lovers. Sexual partners might be a more appropriate term. Unlike some women, I never saved myself for the right man. There were several sexual encounters before I dated a graduate student in my sophomore year in college. He was a lover.” Piper couldn’t withhold the small smile every time she thought of Patrick. He’d been a gentle lover, teaching her as much about her body as he did about his. Their relationship, which she’d now consider little more than a booty call, was all about the sensation of sex. He’d taught her to ask for what she needed and to demand satisfaction.

She was brought back to the present by the crinkling of packaging.

“To finish your question, a dozen or more since then.” She gave him a knowing grin. “After we return from a mission, we like to let loose. Fortunately, Washington D.C. has a lot of clubs. We never go home alone unless we want to.” She

shrugged. “We’re like the men who we leave the club with. None of us are looking for anything except a good time. Sex is an excellent stress reliever.”

Piper studied him for a long minute trying to decipher his thoughts. It was no use. Had he asked the question to try to shock her? Probably. Had she shocked him by her answer? Possibly. Would he be interested in acting on this new information? She had no idea. Would she be interested in sex with Kenner? Hell, yes. She could imagine riding him and looking down into those mesmerizing green eyes just before they rolled back into his head and he shouted her name.

## CHAPTER 9



WHY THE FUCK HAD HE ASKED HER THAT QUESTION? HAD HE expected her to be shocked? Maybe. Had he expected such an honest answer? Hell, no. Before this game went on any longer, he needed to nip it in the bud. Kenner was glad he was sitting down several feet from Piper. Maybe the distance and the three layers of clothes he wore on the bottom half of his body hid his erection.

He'd answered her innocent and benign questions with a lie. He had no idea why he'd told her that he didn't have a mother anymore. He was pretty sure she was alive and still living in North Pole. He hadn't been notified as next of kin that anything had happened to her, but he wasn't about to go check. Not that she wanted to see him either.

Over five years ago, when he and his whole platoon been declared dead in Ethiopia, everyone except Ryker and Ajax, their next of kin had been awarded five hundred thousand dollars in service members' life insurance. There were no bodies to bury because he and the men in his platoon had been captured by rebels as prisoners of war, rather than blown into molecules as reported. When Ajax and Ryker freed them from that hell and unearthed a cover-up that went all the way to the vice president's son, the men had cut a deal with the U.S. government, which ended in the formation of the Holt Agency. As part of that deal, the families were allowed to keep the insurance money.

Kenner didn't want to see how his mother had wasted all that money. During his early days in the Navy, he regularly

sent money to his mother who had promptly drank it all in the way of her Inuit ancestors. During his captivity in Ethiopia, the payments had stopped, of course. He considered the insurance money payment in full, in advance rather than monthly. He hadn't seen his mother in nearly ten years and had no desire to see her ever again.

Thoughts of his mother had quickly taken care of his erection. He'd also lost his appetite for the sweets and snacks he had left. His gaze slid to Piper who was collecting all the trash from her MRE. He watched her slip the cookies and other snack food into her pockets. Instead of throwing his away, he did the same thing. Although there weren't any bears this time of year, he sealed all the garbage in a durable closable bag.

Piper's yawn was so fake before she announced, "I'm gonna hit the head then crawl into bed. Are we going to try to keep the fire stoked all night?"

Kenner shrugged. "If I wake up, I'll tend to it." He gave her a hopeful smile. "You're so damn good at building fires, I'm not going to worry about it if it goes out."

"Thank you." She grabbed her toilet paper and shovel and headed deeper into the woods. She returned a few minutes later and grabbed clothes out of her backpack. Without saying anything, she sat with her butt just inside the tent and kicked the snow off her boots before taking them off and disappearing inside. In less than two minutes, the light from her headlamp was gone.

Ten minutes later, Kenner repeated her steps, except he took off his outer jacket before quietly creeping into the small tent. He was afraid he might hit her if he took it off inside. He placed his boots next to hers at the bottom of their sleeping bags before crawling into his in nothing but his base layer. He took his clothes for tomorrow and stuffed them inside side next to him and around his socked feet. The last thing he did was place his outer jacket on top of his sleeping bag. With the light of his headlamp turned on red, he saw that Piper had placed her outer jacket between the two of them.

She'd regret that by morning.

Kenner laid her warm jacket overtop her sleeping bag. It would add another layer of insulation for her.

"Thank you," she mumbled.

"You're welcome," he whispered, although he was pretty sure she was sound asleep.

He lay there in the dark tent listening to Piper's slow, even breathing. Every time he closed his eyes, the movie emblazoned on his brain of her walking past him, naked, played on repeat. That gorgeous body with all its luscious curves was only inches away from him.

She was untouchable.

Piper was so far out of his league. He'd been an enlisted man in the Navy. She was currently an officer. Her brother was a senior officer of Navy SEALs. Kenner was technically retired but in truth, he'd been thrown out. After the torture they'd undergone in Ethiopia, his body had been broken. So had his desire to serve his country. They had abandoned him. Written him off for dead. If it hadn't been for Ryker and Ajax, and the mystery woman named Charley, he and his entire platoon would have died in that fucking Third World country at the hands of rebels who were fighting a war that the United States wasn't even participating in.

Kenner owed his life to Ryker and Ajax. That's why when they had asked to join the Holt Agency, he hadn't hesitated. He'd laid in the hospital recuperating and wondering what the hell was going to do with his life. The only thing he'd known for sure was that he would never return to Alaska.

Yet, he was camping in a tent in December in the middle of fucking nowhere Alaska. Proof he would do anything Ryker or Ajax asked of him. Including sleep only inches away from the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen...and yet he didn't touch her.

He couldn't touch her. Not only was there the officer and enlisted separation, but she had obviously come from money. Too many times in his childhood his mother barely had

enough money to feed them. Although he did well now as a member of the Holt Agency, and he spent very little of the money he made since he lived in the big farmhouse and Ms. Nancy always had food on the table or available in the kitchen, he would never feel rich enough for a woman like Piper. He'd also invested well and had a sweet portfolio, but Kenner was sure it didn't compare to Piper's.

She wouldn't be interested in him anyway. He was an ass and proved it less than an hour ago by asking about her lovers. He really should apologize for that question. Had she asked him the same question, he never would've answered it. He couldn't. As a young SEAL back in Coronado, he'd slept with so many base bunnies he couldn't count them all. After every mission, he and his friends would hit the bars and the women. Since returning from Ethiopia and joining the Holt Agency, his sex life had slowed down considerably, more so each time one of his teammates found that someone special. He hadn't enjoyed a weekend in Louisville, Kentucky or Cincinnati, Ohio in nearly a year. Not one.

Maybe that was his problem. He'd been months without a woman.

Piper rolled over in her sleeping bag and Kenner caught a whiff of her hair. Or maybe it was her body. Every nerve in his body came to attention at the smell of spicy fruit and woman.

His cock twitched and started to grow.

No. No. No. Piper was too much of a temptation. They were a team and he needed to treat her the same way he would anyone from the Holt Agency. First thing tomorrow morning, he would apologize for his rude question. He had to think of something else for them to do tomorrow besides hanging around camp and torturing each other with small talk. That put them too close to the tent and all the thoughts of what they could do inside that tent to stay warm.

Since they arrived at camp after noon and spent all the remaining daylight hours setting up, Kenner decided they needed to explore their surroundings. They'd first have to check with base camp and see how close the balloon was in

the possibility of it showing up tomorrow. With the all clear, he and Piper could take one of the snow machines and check out the five miles surrounding their camp.

With a plan decided, he rolled over onto his side, his back against Piper's, and let his mind rest in peace.

Sometime during the night, they had both changed positions. Kenner woke to find his arm around Piper, her back to his front. He listened carefully as she continued to breathe softly. He carefully lifted his arm and slipped out of his sleeping bag. He grabbed his boots and outer jacket, determined to check on the fire. He slid into his boots without lacing them up and trudged to the fire pit where he found a few embers glowing red. He fed them more tinder and kindling and finally some larger logs.

The sky lit up as though someone turned on a green light. Streaks of bright green curved and danced across the sky before it faded into the starlit night. The horizon shone with greens and reds as new lines formed and disappeared.

The lady was dancing and that night she was particularly beautiful. It had been years since he'd watched the wonder of the Aurora Borealis. It was one of the few things he missed about Alaska.

Kenner glanced toward the tent and pondered if Piper had ever seen the northern lights. He should go get her before they stopped. He went back to the tent to see if she wanted to watch with him and to put on more clothes. It had to be about twenty below zero Fahrenheit. Thankfully the trees kept away most of the wind.

He gently shook Piper.

"Is it time to get up?" Her voice was sleepy and soft as she snuggled back into her bag.

"Only if you want to see the northern lights."

Her eyes popped wide open. "Really? You can see them from here?"

Kenner chuckled. "The lady is dancing like crazy tonight."

She cocked her head and gave him a questioning look. “Some lady is out there dancing?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Lady Aurora. As in the Aurora Borealis.”

Piper started to crawl out then burrowed deep in her bag. “Give me a minute to get on my secondary layer.”

He reached over and grabbed a few clothes of his own, putting on the insulated pants first. He had to dig to the bottom of his sleeping bag to find his sweater. He stepped out of the tent first and into his boots, still not lacing them up, and slid on his jacket as he walked toward the fire.

Piper was right behind him zipping up her outer jacket. “Where are...” She trailed off as a wide swath filled the sky overhead, lighting the earth.

“Come sit and put your back to the fire,” Kenner suggested as he pulled up his own camp chair.

“This is amazing,” Piper declared as her head was tilted all the way back looking straight up. “I can see the stars. There are millions of stars. I’ve never seen so many.”

“There’s no light pollution out here except for our fire.”

“Oh, look. That one is kind of curling at the bottom.” Piper jumped out of her chair and ran back toward the tent.

“Are you okay?” Kenner couldn’t imagine the problem.

“I want my phone. I need to take pictures. Nobody is ever going to believe how breathtaking this is.”

He leaned back in his chair, smiling as he stared skyward. He wouldn’t tell her that this lightshow was only about a four out of ten. Without the app on his cell phone, he couldn’t tell the intensity. He’d seen ones that painted the entire sky in green, purple, and red.

Piper reappeared beside him with her satellite phone.

“Pictures don’t always come out well because the light is in constant motion,” he warned. “On the flipside of that



problem, cameras are often able to capture more colors than you can see with your natural eyes.”

She clicked a few pictures then looked at the digital viewer. “Oh, my God. I didn’t see those reds.” She looked skyward.

He bit his tongue because he didn’t want to tell her *I told you so*.

“Do they come out every night?” Before he had a chance to answer, she asked a second question, “Why didn’t we see this last night?”

“Technically, they’re always here. Last night was overcast so we couldn’t see them,” he explained. “Feel how much colder it is tonight?” He wandered over to check the thermometer and wind chill. “It’s about fifteen below and with the wind chill factor it feels like twenty-three below zero. We’re warmer here by the fire but we’re not wearing anything on our faces so we have to limit how much time we’re out here.”

“How long will we see them?” Piper snapped another picture then turned to the other horizon to watch a new one form.

“Sometimes they only last a few minutes and other times for several hours. It depends on solar activity.” Again, he wished he had his personal cell phone, and that it would work out here in the middle of nowhere. The app would tell him exactly how long it would last and the peak hours.

A few minutes later, Piper shoved the phone in front of him, smiling ear to ear. “Look at this picture. That’s the big dipper in the middle of the lights. This is so fucking awesome.” She bent down and gave him a hug. “Thank you for waking me up.”

Kenner wouldn’t have believed that he could feel her arms around him all the way through the thick outer coat and two layers of clothing, but he did. And it felt wonderful. He could only imagine what she would feel like wrapped around him as

he thrust into her. Or as she pinned his hips to a bed and rode him hard, those fabulous breasts bouncing in his face.

Fuck. He was hard again. And with her lying beside him, there would be no way he could take care of it himself. He felt his eyebrows start to chill. Thankfully he had a full beard to keep most of his face warm and two hats to keep his bald head from losing all his bodily heat.

“Piper, we need to think about getting back to bed. It’s much colder out here than you think.”

“Okay, just a few more pictures.” She looked at him with an excited childish smile. She was thoroughly enjoying the show Mother Nature was putting on tonight.

Indulgently he gave her a few more minutes. “We really need to go in.” He decided to let her in on tomorrow’s plans. “We need to get our sleep because tomorrow we’re going exploring.” Then he added, “As long as the balloon isn’t anywhere near us.”

She flashed him that smile one more time. “That sounds like fun.” She let out a heavy sigh before she walked back toward the tent.

Once again, Kenner decided to give her a few minutes to strip off her clothes and climb into her sleeping bag.

“I’m in,” came her muffled call.

When Kenner slid into his bag, he could tell she wasn’t asleep. She rolled onto her side to face him then cupped his face with her warm hands.

“Thank you so much for sharing that with me. I know you didn’t have to wake me up but I’m so glad that you did.” She leaned in and quickly brushed her lips across his. He wanted to grab her and pull her to him, deeply kissing her until she was dazed with lust. He’d then zip the sleeping bags together and they’d enjoy each other’s bodies until daybreak.

As quickly as her lips touched his, they were gone. Piper rolled over so her back was to Kenner. She exhaled a long, slow breath, and she was asleep.

## CHAPTER 10



WHEN PIPER WOKE UP, DARKNESS FILLED THE TENT. SHE listened carefully for breathing, expecting to hear Kenner still sleeping. She was met with silence. Unsure of the time, she tapped her watch face, which immediately illuminated the entire tent. She glanced over at his empty bed.

It was already seven o'clock in the morning. When the entire team stayed together at their Dupont Circle condo, they usually got up around five in the morning for a run. They'd hit the gym in the basement for weight training or yoga before grabbing breakfast and showering. Normally they had to be at Section 7 by eight o'clock in the morning. Compared to that routine, she'd slept in.

After quickly dressing, she joined Kenner who'd thankfully already made coffee.

"I only have two breakfast options," Kenner told her after she downed the last drop of her first cup of coffee. "Maple pork sausage patty or hash brown potatoes with bacon. I have several of each so don't worry about taking the last one."

"Definitely the hashbrowns and bacon. I actually like the granola with blueberries and the fake milk isn't that bad," she admitted.

Kenner grinned as he tossed her the packet. "That's my favorite too. I like to take the cheddar cheese spread and smother everything."

"Oh, no. Not me. I save the cheddar cheese spread and the crackers for a midmorning snack. The peanuts don't hold me

long enough. I need carbs and fake cheese.”

While they ate their breakfast, Kenner pulled out his satellite phone and called the base camp.

“The balloon is about a hundred and fifty miles west from you,” Kayla told them. “It crossed the Nulato Hills last night. Grant and Heath are on an intercept course, provided it doesn’t take off in a different direction, which it has done before.”

“We’re going to check out the surrounding area.” Kenner didn’t leave any room for discussion.

“By the time we got here yesterday,” Piper explained, “we barely had time to set up camp before we lost daylight.”

“That’s not surprising,” Ajax said. “You two are the furthest away from base camp. The others were stopped by mountains. If the balloon changes direction today, we may pull them back in and redirect them. You two are fine for right now. We’ll call you if we think it’s headed your way or if its trajectory has changed. Base ops out.”

“Let’s take poles and snowshoes in case we need to get a closer look at something,” Kenner suggested. “Be sure to put toe warmers in your boots and hand warmers in your mittens. Since I’ll be driving, you won’t be using your fingers to help keep them warm.”

She’d put new toe warmers in her boots before she put them on that morning. She had a terrible time pulling yesterday’s out of her boots. Who knew that sticky back was so strong? This morning, she’d read the directions on the pack. She was supposed to stick them to the bottom of her socks. In some ways, that made more sense but in others, sticking them to the bottom of the boot made more sense. It took her two tries to get her feet into her boots with the toe warmers attached to the socks. She’d see how they worked today and then decide what she was going to do tomorrow.

The ones that went in her gloves were much easier. She looked at her supply then threw a few more packets into her smaller daypack. If she didn’t use them, no problem. But she needed them, she’d have them. The first aid kit went in as well

as her backup mittens. Again, better safe than sorry. Her satellite phone went in on top after she checked the battery. She needed to charge it since she'd used it last night to take so many pictures of the northern lights. She attached the charger to the top of the pack and connected the cord to the sat phone.

She was good to go.

Piper found Kenner checking over the snow machines. He'd already strapped their snowshoes and poles onto one of them.

“Ready?” His gaze traveled the length of her.

“Yes.” She noticed he didn't have a backpack. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” He swung his leg over the machine.

“You're not taking a backpack?”

“We're not going to be gone that long.” He pulled out the tube to the water he carried on his back. “I'm good.”

Cocky bastard.

She climbed on behind him, glad for the extra room behind her. She didn't have to take off her backpack. She pulled on her helmet and lowered the face shield. “Ready.”

He reached back and grabbed her hand and put it around his waist. She automatically wrapped the other one around him. “Now we're ready.” He pointed to the mountains to the left. They hadn't discussed where to go but Piper figured it didn't matter.

Within fifteen minutes they were at the base of the mountains and followed along them. She'd seen mountains all over the world, but these seemed to jut out of nowhere. The rocky sides were almost vertical. They were so steep snow refused to cling to them.

Kenner stopped. He pointed to a wall of ice about fifty feet away. “Come on,” he said as he took off his helmet and slid off the snow machine. “I'm going to show you something rare and beautiful.”

She was up for rare and beautiful. Within a few minutes, they were clipped into their snowshoes, poles in hand, and trekking toward the side of the mountain. Then she heard it. The thunder of water falling over the edge. "It's a waterfall," she said excitedly.

"Yeah." He looked over his shoulder and smiled at her. Kenner's smile changed his entire appearance. It softened all those hard edges. It also made him even more handsome. She could swear his eyes twinkled like lights in a Christmas tree reflecting off the green needles.

They stopped where Piper imagined to be the side of the river.

"Waterfalls rarely freeze, even here in Alaska, because the water underneath keeps moving," Kenner explained. "Some of our lakes freeze five to six feet thick because the water doesn't travel much. But in constantly moving water, like a waterfall, the molecules can't bond easily. The water temperature can actually drop below freezing yet it doesn't freeze."

Kenner pointed to the small pool at the very bottom of the waterfall that was still exposed. He indicated the tiny needles of ice turning in the water. "These are called frazil. They're the start of the freezing process of moving water. When several of these clump together, they can attach themselves to rocks, which become the foundation for icing over until it covers the entire flow."

He walked on the snow, closer to the waterfall and pointed with his pole to the ball of beautiful crystals sparkling in the sunshine attached to a wet rock. "Check out all these little frazils around the waterfall." He swung his pole in a circle, and she followed it with her gaze.

"Absolutely fantastic." She breathed the words. "I've never seen anything like it."

"And you probably never will again."

He stepped closer to the side of the waterfall and tapped his pole on what looked like a forty-foot-tall icicle that started at the top and went all the way to the bottom. "When it turns

blue like this, they are spectacular for ice climbing. It's a big sport here in Alaska."

Piper let her gaze move all the way up the biggest icicle she'd ever seen. "You would climb that?"

"Sure." She heard the shrug in his voice. "I haven't done it since I was a teenager, but I've climbed a lot higher than this one."

He stepped closer to the waterfall and pointed again with his pole. "Come here. You can see the waterfall through this hole that hasn't frozen over yet."

She joined him and carefully peered around the giant icicle. Sure enough, water splashed and splattered underneath.

Why hadn't she thought to bring the satellite phone? She wanted pictures of this. "Let me grab my phone so I can take pictures."

Kenner dug into a pocket. "I have mine. What do you want pictures of?"

Piper giggled. "Everything."

He stared at her with those gorgeous green eyes. "Could you be more specific?"

"The hole in the ice so you can see the water underneath. See if you can get a close-up of those frazil balls. And I'd like a picture of the whole waterfall. Be sure to get that huge icicle in it."

He took several pictures before turning to her. "I think I can get a really good picture from over there." He moved across the snow with the ease of someone who had walked in snowshoes for long periods of time.

*Crack.*

"Oh, fuck!"

As though in slow motion Piper watched Kenner disappear.

"Kenner!" she screamed.

His Navy-blue watch cap appeared an inch above the snow. A few seconds later his shoulders and head appeared then immediately disappeared with another crack.

“Fucking ice.”

She could hear his voice but couldn't see him. She inched her way down, following his footsteps. When she thought she was on the edge of the bank, she laid down on her stomach and spread her arms and legs out wide. She was still three feet from what she could now see was flowing water. She looped the strap from one pole around the basket of the other and secured it tightly. The next time he came up, she tossed the extended pole in his direction.

“Grab hold,” she ordered. “Then spread your legs out wide.”

She felt him tug on the pole. This was going to be the tricky part. She needed to get into a sitting position. She knew she didn't have the upper body strength to pull him out while lying on her stomach. Hanging on tight to the pole, her hand secured through the loop, she pulled her knees under her then sat up in one smooth, strong stroke.

He'd held on.

*Thank you, Jesus.*

“Are you still on the ice?” she yelled down to him.

“I...I'm...not sure.”

*Heavenly father, give me strength.*

She slid her feet so they were in front of her butt.

“Hang on. I'm pulling again.” She took a deep breath. “Now.”

With all the strength in her legs, she shoved back and pulled the pole with her as she lay down flat on her back. He should only be three feet away. She'd felt resistance the entire time.

Piper sat up. Kenner's head and shoulders were covered in snow from dragging him. His entire body was shaking. She



had to move fast.

She scrambled down the short incline to him. It wasn't easy but she rolled him over. "Kenner. Talk to me."

He didn't say anything, but his teeth were chattering so hard she could hear them click.

She prayed for strength once again and took a deep breath. She went to grab his hand and found the satellite phone. She pried it from his near frozen hand and stuck it into a pocket. Another deep breath and she pulled him onto her shoulders. He was completely dead weight, still alive, though. "I've got you. We'll be back to the snow machine in just a minute."

It was closer to three minutes. It took Piper an entire minute to figure out how to hang onto Kenner and maneuver her poles so she could walk in those stupid snowshoes. Once she got the hang of it, she could move much faster. She was thankful when she was able to lay him flat on the seat of the snow machine.

"Kenner?" She called his name over and over with no response.

She wished she had listened to Staff Sergeant Mayo's lecture on hypothermia. Or that she'd seen the movie they hadn't shown them. She did remember some of her SEAL training on hypothermia.

She needed to get him out of those wet clothes. But all his clothes were back at camp. The idiot hadn't brought a backpack. She quickly grabbed hers and saw the hand and toe warmers. Neck and groin. There was someplace else, but she couldn't remember where. She quickly ripped open the bags and activated the heat. She peeled off the white paper revealing the sticky side. The hand warmers were larger than the toe warmers, so she stuck a hand warmer on the back of his neck.

She felt his hat dripping onto her hand, so she tore the soggy thing off his head. She had two hats, a wool one and one on her jacket. She put her hat, warm with her own body heat, onto his bald head and pulled it over his ears.

Groin. She'd seen his impressive groin but touching it was a definite invasion of privacy. He wasn't coherent. But if she didn't get him warmed up, he could die.

No. He would die.

Not on her watch.

She peeled the back off two of the toe warmers. She lifted his soaking-wet shirts and journeyed down his layers of pants until she found skin. She knew her way around the man's body. She'd seen plenty of them naked. She made her way down his happy trail until she hit the large patch of hair. Where to put the warmer? There on the hair? Or on his big dick, that wasn't anywhere near as big as when she'd seen it? But he had just been drenched in a freezing river. Or should she put it between his dick and his balls? There was a small patch of skin there. Refusing to question herself anymore, she stuck one toe warmer on that small patch of skin between his shriveled dick and balls.

Would that be enough?

Probably not.

She took the second toe warmer she'd already prepared and dove back into his wet pants. The femoral artery ran past the groin. She could find that. Once again she followed his line of hair until she bumped his shrunken penis. She felt to the right until she came to the crevice that started his leg. Lightly pressing in the area between his groin and his leg, she found a thready pulse and affixed the already warm pad on that area.

Feeling successful, she took the last hand warmer and placed it over his heart. She hoped it would stay there. He had a lot of chest hair.

Now she had to figure out a way to get him out of those wet clothes. The speed of the snow machine was like wind. He would freeze to death before she got back to camp.

She scrounged through her backpack for an idea. It practically fell into her hand when she opened the first aid kit.

A solar blanket.

She stripped him out of his wet jacket and two layers of shirts. She used the gauze pads to wipe him as dry as she could then wrapped the solar blanket around him, using every inch of tape found in the kit to secure it.

She was putting things back into the backpack when she came across her spare mittens. That's when she remembered two more hand warmers in a side pocket. It was a good thing the mittens usually went on the outside of her gloves because his hands were huge.

After popping his helmet onto his head, she leaned him forward straddling the seat. Between the engine and the windshield, she hoped that would be enough to protect him from the majority of the wind. She straddled the snow machine behind him and took off for their camp, leaning over his body.

Finding the way back to camp was easy; she followed the tracks they'd made on the way out.

## CHAPTER 11



ONCE BACK IN CAMP, PIPER HOISTED HIM OVER HER shoulders and fireman carried him to the tent. She didn't want anything to be wet inside, so she peeled off the solar blanket and laid it flat. She stripped Kenner out of all his wet clothes as quickly as she could and rolled his nude body into the tent. It took some maneuvering, but she finally got him zipped inside his sleeping bag.

She rubbed his chilled face, hoping to get circulation moving. "Kenner, can you open your eyes? Can you hear me? Kenner. I need you to wake up."

There was no response except shallow breathing.

She jogged to their backpacks and pulled out all the large body warmers they'd taken from base camp. It was much easier slapping two of those onto each his chest and back. With the extra toe warmers, she put one on the top of his toes and one on the bottom of each foot. She dug into his backpack and found an extra pair of socks, which she quickly put on him. She found his stash of boxer briefs and base layers. She was used to taking clothes off men, not putting them on unresponsive men who weighed nearly a hundred pounds more than she did.

When she'd completed her task, Piper fell onto her own sleeping bag, exhausted. She'd done everything she could think of. She needed to call base camp. They might have more suggestions or need to airlift him out.

She tried one more time to wake him before crawling out of the tent. Success! Kind of. He moved his head, and she swore she heard a grunt.

While stoking the campfire, she pulled her satellite phone from her backpack. It lifted out easily because it wasn't connected to the solar charger. Piper's heart sank. Not only hadn't it charged, but it had used what little life remained.

"Damn." She tried to turn it on, but it was completely dead. She still had an hour or so of daylight so she securely connected the cable to the phone and set it where the panel would get the most amount of sun while they still had it.

She didn't have much hope, but she reached into her pocket and pulled out Kenner's sat phone. This new model was supposed to be water resistant. The dunking it took in an ice-cold river would certainly test that claim.

Her hopes were dashed when it wouldn't turn on. She dug through the MREs to find the ones with rice, combining it into a plastic bag with the phone. Maybe that would help dry out the electronics. Searching Kenner's backpack, she found his solar charger and cable and set that in the waning sunshine.

What the hell was she going to do with no way to contact base camp?

She glanced at the sun, then at the solar chargers, and hoped one of the satellite phones would get enough power to be able to turn it on. Her gaze fell to the tent where Kenner's wet clothes still lay on the solar blanket.

Piper built up the fire then hung his jacket on the back of his camp chair. After checking on Kenner, who was unresponsive once again, she took the saw into the woods and cut branches sturdy enough that she could stick them into the snow to hold his clothes close enough to the fire to dry. She brought his boots to the fire and tilted them so heat would travel up and inside.

By then, it was time to check on Kenner again.

Although she didn't have the thermometer, he seemed warmer. "Kenner, I need you to wake up and open your

beautiful green eyes.”

He seemed to try to blink.

“That’s it. Wake up, Kenner.” Hope swelled within her. “Kenner, you have to wake up.”

He seemed to moan before he returned to shallow breathing.

Piper took hope in the fact that each time he seemed to be more and more reactive. Her stomach growled. Darkness was falling quickly, and she knew that she needed to eat to keep up her strength. Staff Sergeant Mayo’s words raced through her mind. She knew she couldn’t let anything slide, including feeding her body. She then wondered if she had consumed enough water that day. She had exerted a great deal of energy and had not paid attention to her own needs.

She found an open meal, minus the rice, that she liked and prepared it for supper while tending the fire. She wandered far enough away to scoop clean snow into her pot for melting to replenish her water bladder and make coffee. If Kenner didn’t wake up soon, she’d have to try every few hours all through the night.

The yellow fire reached toward the stars in the night, turning the dry logs to glowing red embers and white ash. As she sat staring into the fire, guilt hit Piper like a punch to the chest. Kenner wouldn’t be in the tent suffering from hypothermia right now if she hadn’t wanted fucking pictures of that damn waterfall.

Had she walked back to the snow machine and gotten her own satellite phone, she would’ve discovered then that somehow the cable had been disconnected on the bumpy ride. She would have had a working satellite phone to call base camp two hours ago when they’d returned. Hell, he probably wouldn’t have fallen in the water because he wouldn’t have moved to a different position to take the picture for her.

Had she listened to Staff Sergeant Mayo about hypothermia rather than write up her report on the clothing

they had been testing, she might've been able to treat him more effectively.

Rather than wallowing in her failures, Piper stood and checked his wet clothing one more time. Most of it was drying. She'd stoke the fire then head to bed. In a few hours, while checking Kenner, she'd get up and make sure the fire was still going strong enough to dry his clothes by morning. She gathered a change of clothes from her backpack, and a sweater and pants from Kenner's, and headed to bed.

At the tent, she took off her outer jacket and boots, turned her headlamp to red, and crawled into the tent.

"Kenner." She took his face in her warm hands. "Kenner, please wake up. Show me those beautiful green eyes."

He shook his head side to side. "No." He mumbled the word and tried to turn away from her.

Well, that was an improvement. She stuck her hand down into his clothes at several different places. His skin was still very cold. She knew body-to-body contact was one of the faster ways to warm someone up.

Stripping out of her sweater and thermal pants, she was ready to crawl into his sleeping bag in only her base layer.

Skin to skin. Oh, yeah, she remembered. She also remembered how tight he fit into his own sleeping bag. She unzipped hers, and his, and zipped the two bags together. She crawled in and removed his shirt, then hers. She moved next to him pressing her bare breasts to his naked back, throwing an arm over his waist.

That should be enough skin-to-skin contact. They both still wore the bottom half of their base layer, giving each a minimum of privacy.

Her watch buzzed every two hours, waking her. Piper would check Kenner for responsiveness then and throw on clothes before re-stoking the fire. By five o'clock in the morning, she was completely exhausted.

As she crawled into bed, Piper hoped she woke up next to a warm man rather than a cold corpse.



Kenner's mental alarm went off. He didn't need to look at his watch to know that it was six o'clock in the morning. After joining the Holt Agency, he'd allowed himself to sleep in an entire hour. While he was a Navy SEAL, he had to be up at five. As a civilian, he could sleep in his late as he wanted except his body seemed to be wide awake these days at six.

The first thing he noticed was that he had to pee like a racehorse. That wasn't particularly unusual, especially if he'd been out partying the night before. Who had he gone out with? He couldn't remember and that scared him a little. His mother had been an alcoholic and Kenner rarely ever had more than a few drinks. He couldn't ever remember drinking to the point that he passed out.

As he tried to remember who he'd gone out with the night before, he noticed a warm, soft body wrapped around him.

Oh, fuck, no. Kenner may have gone home with a woman, or sometimes two, when he and his teammates had gone out on the town, but he had never spent the night with one. That was a hard and steadfast rule. If he'd gone to her place, he often left before she woke up from round one. Sometimes, very rarely, he stayed for around two. Never, never had he fallen asleep with a one-night stand and that was the only kind of woman he'd ever had. He didn't do relationships. It sounded like the woman was still asleep. He could sneak out of bed and be gone before she ever woke up.

That's when realization number three hit. He wasn't in a bed. He was in a sleeping bag. Correction. They were in a sleeping bag. He was camping, and it was fucking cold.

Where the hell was he? Or was this a terrible dream? He'd taken Mary Alice Galinsky camping when they were sixteen years old, and they'd had sex twice that night and several times the next day. Was he dreaming about that?

Kenner pinched himself and it hurt, so he must be awake. He carefully lifted the woman's arm from around his middle. It



was so dark inside the tent he couldn't see who she was. As he slowly and carefully crawled out of the sleeping bag, his hand brushed across what had to be his shirt. He slipped it over his head, thankful it wasn't hers. As he pulled it down, he noticed he was still wearing pants.

That was weird. He now wondered if she was completely nude. Had he fallen asleep before he'd even gotten his pants off? How much did he have to drink? He didn't feel hung over. That was, he felt fine. Except for the fact that he couldn't remember a damn thing about last night.

He hoped his boots were right outside the tent, because they weren't at the bottom of the sleeping bag where he always put them. But he did find a headlamp. As he emerged, he was hit with freezing cold like he hadn't felt since his youth. He hated the fucking cold. The only thing he hated worse was being wet and cold. Spying a fire fifteen feet away, he sprinted through the snow. He recognized his clothes hanging on branches stuck in the snow. His boots were closer to the fire...and wet. He snatched up his clothes and started putting them on. When he grabbed his heavy jacket, parts of it were damp but he was cold. He put it on anyway.

As soon as the wet chill reached his neck, his memory returned. He and Piper had been at a mostly frozen over waterfall. He'd moved to take a picture.

He'd fallen in the freezing cold water.

Kenner looked around the camp they'd made at their given coordinates. How the hell did he get there? He didn't remember crawling out of the water, say nothing about driving the snow machine back to their camp. And how did he end up in bed? With Piper?

His bladder reminded him of why he'd crawled out of bed. He slid into the damp boots and trudged deep into the woods. When he unzipped his pants and reached for his dick, something was there. It was stuck next to his balls. He ripped it off...and screamed.

"Holy motherfucking sonofabitch." That hurt. He'd been shot and wasn't sure if it hurt nearly as bad as removing that

thing.

It had taken off every hair from one of the most sensitive parts of his body. Since his right hand was busy holding his dick, his left hand immediately went to the offended area. His long middle finger nudged something that didn't belong there. As soon as he'd emptied his bladder and shaken off the last drop, his right hand slowly moved to where his leg joined his body.

No. Just no. There can't be another one. He was still writhing in pain from removing the first one. "What the hell is this?" he asked the night as he tried to bend and see it, pulling his unzipped pants as far to the side as they would go while still snapped at the waist. Maybe there was another way to take it off? Did he have any more on him?

Maybe Piper would know. He zipped up on his way back to the tent. He was considerate enough to take off his boots and outer jacket outside but called her name as he crawled in.

"Piper. Wake up. What the hell was this thing I had stuck on my balls?"

Piper immediately shot into a sitting position and the sleeping bag fell to her lap, exposing her magnificent bare breasts. "Kenner, You need to wake up." She turned toward the empty side, her hand shooting out and sweeping around her. "Kenner," she nearly screamed, her eyes darting around the tent while she reached for her pistol.

Kenner moved in front of her and grabbed her face with both hands. He instantly saw his mistake. He'd awakened a Special Operator with urgency in his voice. "Piper," he said slowly. "I'm right here. Everything is fine. I'm fine." Even though he wasn't. "Look at me, sweetheart." Her panicked eyes met his. He could tell when recognition kicked in.

She set down the gun. Both her hands came to his cheeks. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

"Confused." That was the truth. He had so many questions. His gaze dropped to her bare chest. "Starting with why are you naked in my bed?"

She glanced down then picked up the sleeping bag and covered herself. "I'm not naked," she insisted. "I have on pants. And it's our bed. At least it was last night." She reached over to her side of the tent and grabbed her clothes.

"You don't have to put those on as far as I'm concerned."

She turned her back to him and slid on her bra and base shirt. "Smart ass. That's what I get for saving your sorry ass?" She turned back toward him. "I am not a morning person. I normally don't speak until after I've had at least one cup of coffee. If you expect me to answer questions at this hour of the morning after I've been up every two hours checking on your frozen ass and the fire that was drying your clothes, the least you can do is make coffee."

"Yes, ma'am." He ducked out before she could say anything. He'd called her that because he knew it irritated her.

He'd make the coffee.

## CHAPTER 12



KENNER BUILT UP THE FIRE AND MOVED HIS BOOTS AND OUTER jacket closer while he waited for the water to heat for coffee. He slid on more layers of clothing, topping it off with the rain jacket he'd brought in case he got too hot. It wasn't very thick, but it did have a hat and would hold the wind away from his core while his warmer coat dried completely. While his heavy military boots dried next to the fire, he put on his spare pair of lightweight boots after affixing toe warmers to his socks. He was going to need them.

The coffee was finished at the same time Piper appeared in the tent doorway. She slid into her boots and outer jacket then tramped to the fire. Without a single word she held out her coffee mug. Once it was full, she flopped into her camp chair and stared at the fire as she sipped the hot liquid. When she finished that cup, she stood up and extended the empty cup toward him.

"Are you ready to tell me what happened?" he asked as he poured black liquid into her mug.

Piper put the cup under her nose and inhaled deeply with her eyes closed. She stepped back and sank into her chair. "I'm human now. I'm capable of coherent speech." She sipped and closed her eyes once again. "What do you remember?"

"I fell into fucking cold water trying to take pictures for you." Kenner didn't intend for it to sound so mean. It just came out that way.

Piper had the decency to wince. She opened her eyes and met his. “I’m so sorry I wanted a fucking picture of that goddamn waterfall. I’m so sorry you fell into the water.” Her voice broke as she blinked away tears.

*I’m such a fucking ass. It wasn’t her fault. It was mine. I knew better than to get that close without testing the ice. Until he knew exactly what happened last night, he wasn’t going to be quick to forgive her, though.*

“After I fell in, I’m a little hazy on the details.” To the point he couldn’t remember a single one until he woke up this morning.

“I moved as close as I dared, hooked my two poles together, and when you came up the second time, I ordered you to grab hold of the pole. I pulled you out of the water then picked you up and carried you to the snow machine.”

“Whoa. Wait one minute.” He put both hands in the air, palms toward her. “Are you telling me you picked me up and carried me,” he had to think for a second how far they’d walked to the waterfall, “fifty feet?”

“Yes.” There was nothing in her expression that looked as though she was lying. “I picked you up in a fireman’s carry. I will admit it took a few minutes to figure out how to maneuver my poles and hang onto you, but once I got the hang of it, I could move rather fast...even in those fucking snowshoes.” She paused then asked, “Shall I continue?”

“Yes, please.” He still wasn’t sure he believed her but wanted to hear the rest.

“I stripped you out of your wet shirts and wrapped you in the solar blanket from the first-aid kit. Oh, I forgot. I stuck all the toe and hand warmers on you.”

“Is that what was on my balls?” He reached down and rubbed the offended area, remembering there was another one down there.

Piper straightened her back and squared her shoulders. “You were unconscious and literally freezing to death. I’m sorry I touched your precious balls, but I remembered being

told to warm the neck and groin. I put them where I thought they'd work the best. You're alive, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he admitted quietly.

"You're welcome." She paused to drink the rest of her coffee, stood, and started to walk away.

Once again, he'd been a perfect asshole. "Piper." She stopped but didn't turn and look at him. "How did we end up naked in bed together?"

She whipped around. "We weren't naked. We were both fully clothed on the bottom. But I couldn't wake you up for hours, I thought I would try skin to skin." She cocked her head to the side. "Looks like it worked. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to unzip our joint sleeping bags and crawl into mine. Unlike you, I didn't get hardly any sleep last night because I was trying to wake up every two hours and keep the fire burning so your clothes would dry." She took a few more steps then stopped.

She called over her shoulder, "Your satellite phone went into the water with you. I pried it out of your frozen hand, stuck it in rice. It's connected to your solar panel. Mine didn't get charged yesterday either. Make sure they get every drop of sunshine they can today." She disappeared into the tent, leaving him alone by the fire. Alone with his thoughts.

He moved both satellite phones to full sun before his stomach growled. He was starving so he grabbed an MRE and made some breakfast for himself. He glanced around the fire where his clothing had hung on green saplings and pine boughs.

*Those are fresh.*

He pulled one out of the snow and examined the cut end. He glanced at the copse of woods behind them.

*She must've cut them herself.*

He still had a hard time believing that she could pick him up and carry him through the snow. The competition at the Holt Agency came to mind. She'd carried her teammate three

hundred feet seemingly with ease. He was much heavier and dead weight.

Dead. He would've been dead if it weren't for Piper.

He shifted in his chair and jumped out of it. Something had pulled on the hair at his groin.

Fuck. He reached into his pants and ran his finger around the edge of the cooled toe warmer. It had obviously done its duty. He walked carefully to his backpack and retrieved his first-aid kit. For the next hour, he used a wet washcloth and petroleum jelly to work the heating pads loose. He still lost a lot of hair in sensitive places. He couldn't get the ones on his back and would have to wait for Piper to wake up.

His gaze wandered to the tent. The woman who had saved his life was in there. Not only was she clever enough to link her poles together, but she was able to start him warming and safely get him back to camp.

He owed her everything, starting with his life.

Piper was unlike any woman he'd ever met before. He wasn't sure if Xena could do what she had done,

although they had supposedly had the same training. He wondered if all the other women on her team were as able to adapt to any situation as Piper and Xena. Were there other women in the world trained like them?

Where were women like Piper all his life? She was smart with not just book intelligence but common sense. He thought about the silly girls in his youth who wanted to go out with him because he was the bad boy at school, the one their fathers would hang by his testicles had they known what he'd done to their daughters. The base bunnies only wanted a SEAL for that dependent ID card and the insurance money that would make them rich if he died. None of them gave a shit about him.

Nobody did. Nobody ever had...except Roy. He suddenly wondered about the neighbor who had taken him under his wing and showed him a different life.

*I wonder what he's doing now. Probably still flying single engine airplanes above the Arctic Circle to deliver mail and*

*packages. Maybe before I leave Alaska I'll look him up.*

Roy tried to teach him to treat women with respect, starting with his mother. But if she didn't respect herself enough to stay sober, and remember she had a son who needed to be fed and clothed, he certainly didn't need to respect her. The same went for the girls at his high school. If they didn't respect themselves enough not to let him, and the other boys, fuck them then they didn't deserve his respect either. Same went for the base bunnies.

Piper was different. She demanded his respect. And if he was truthful with himself, she deserved it. After what she'd done for him yesterday, he admired her even more. During their Arctic training, she'd kept up with the men while building her trench shelter. She'd kept up with him while riding the snow machines for over fifty miles, not an easy task. Then, she didn't complain about how sore her legs must've been because his certainly had been.

Kenner dropped his chin to his chest. He'd been an ass from the beginning. Piper wasn't like any other woman. Correction, like any other woman he'd known before meeting Xena, or since...other than Piper's team. She was special.

Roy had once told him that when you find that special woman, don't let her go. Make her yours.

Kenner glanced at the tent. He had a lot of apologizing to do.

After stripping off his coat and boots, he climbed into the tent and laid down beside Piper. She smelled like campfire and the great outdoors. He debated on whether to wake her or let her sleep. He knew what it was like to have to wake up every two hours. It sucked. Until you caught up on sleep, you were constantly tired and didn't always make good decisions. He'd let her sleep.

As he shifted position to leave the tent, Piper rolled onto her side facing him. "Kenner, are you okay?" Her hand came out from the sleeping bag and cupped his cheek.



“Physically, I’m fine thanks to you.” He mimicked her position with his large hand on her small face. “Go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m good, now. I’m sorry I was such a grouch to you. My teammates know that I need a straight eight to be civilized. That and a cup of black coffee. I’m sorry. I should have warned you.”

She was apologizing to him, and he was the one who had been a royal ass.

“No, I’m the one who owes you an apology. It wasn’t your fault that I fell through the ice. It was mine. I know better than to walk out on ice with moving water underneath.” She tried to speak, and he pressed his thumb on her pretty pink lips. “No, I’m not done. I owe you...thank you sounds so lame, but I assure you it comes from my heart.” He chuckled. “My heart that has no hair over top anymore. Neither does some of my favorite body parts.”

Piper giggled. It sounded like tinkling bells, a sound he’d like to hear more often. He made a mental note to try to make her laugh more often.

“I’m sorry but I put them where I thought they’d do you the most good. You scared the shit out of me, you know. I said more prayers yesterday than I have in years. I don’t ask God for help very often, but I believe that our team does his bidding by removing evil from the world.”

Did she just tell him that they were assassins? “I wondered why you were such good shots.” It was the truth. Her team were fantastic shots, much better than the men of Holt Agency.

“You’ve already been vetted by Katlin Callahan and Section 7. I guess it’s all right that you know one of our secrets.”

“I owe you my life. Thank you.” He leaned forward slowly so she had time to turn away or stop him. She didn’t.

When their lips met, hers felt soft and pliant. Perfect. He expected her to cut the kiss short. She reached her hand to the back of his neck and ran her fingers up his bald head, pulling it

closer. She opened her mouth and dove in, tangling her tongue with his. The kiss seemed to go on forever as they learned each other's mouths.

"I want you, Piper." He kissed his way along her jaw then down the pulse line in her neck.

"I want you too, Kenner." She grabbed his face with both hands and forced his eyes to meet hers. "This isn't an 'I'm sorry you fell in the water because I wanted a picture' fuck. I've thought about you several times since I walked out of your bathroom back in Indiana."

"I've wanted you so many times since that evening. Your naked body as you walked past me. Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" He leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. He had more to say. "This isn't a 'thank you' fuck. I want to make you feel good." He wanted to see that smile again. Hear her giggle.

She captured his head in both hands and pulled it down until their lips met once again. When they came up for air, Piper announced, "I'm good with that. But you have to understand when this mission is over, I'll be gone. We'll have some fun while you're here, but then you're headed back to Indiana, and I'm stationed in Washington D.C."

"Got it." He gave her a quick peck on the lips. "An Alaskan fling for both of us."

He didn't wait for her to nod or say anything in agreement. He repeated his kisses down her neck, lifting his head when she grabbed the bottom of her base shirt and pulled it over her head. She reached around behind her to unhook her bra, shoving her chest forward as though offering her delicious nipples to him. He helped her out of it then started to lay her back down.

"One sleeping bag is too small for both of us, I can guarantee you." Piper unzipped her bag while Kenner unzipped his. It didn't take long before they had been zipped back together.

“Take your clothes off,” she ordered. “And I’ll take off mine.”

“No.” He put his hands over hers before she pulled down her bottoms. “I want to do that.”

“I appreciate that.” She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. “If we were anywhere else except in this cold tent, I’d be happy to let you slowly strip off all my clothes. But given it’s probably below zero in here, we’ll each take off our own clothes and dive under the covers.” She grinned. “We’ll see just how well skin on skin works to preserve heat.”

Kenner had his clothes off in seconds and was under the covers created by her sleeping bag. When Piper crawled in, he pulled her into his arms. “You owe me a slow seductive strip.”

“We’ll see. I only promised this fling to last as long as we’re in Alaska.” She ran her delicate fingers down his chest. When she came to the bare spot over his heart, she giggled. “Sorry. No, I’m not. The hand warmer I stuck over your heart may have been the one that saved your life.”

“And here I was thinking it was the two huge ones on my abdomen. It took me several tries, but I discovered that petroleum jelly works best to remove those little suckers.” He guided her hand to where less hair was missing.

“How did you get the ones off your back?” She reached her arm around him and found the two body warming pads. “Oh, no, Kenner. Let me take those off.”

“Lie down.” He gently pushed her onto her back. “I have more important things to do. We’ll worry about those later.” He took one nipple into his mouth and kneaded the other breast with his hand. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger before switching sides.

He kissed his way down her amazingly solid abs, past her belly button and kept on going south. When he reached her neatly trimmed hair, he knew he was almost there. He parted her wet lips and found her hard little bundle of nerves, swollen and begging for his attention. As he circled it with his finger, she arched off the bed, quivering.

“Don’t worry, Piper. I’ll take care of you.” He debated for only a second whether to use his fingers or mouth. He needed to taste her. He crawled deep into the sleeping bag, curling his body into the bottom. Admittedly, this would be a lot easier in a bed. He gently pushed her knees apart, giving his shoulders more space. Using his thumbs, he spread her lips apart before he gave her clit a kiss. It was almost a little nip with his lips. She bucked up so fast she barely missed his nose.

She was more ready than he’d thought. He licked and sucked then slid two fingers inside her wet sheath. In minutes her legs stiffened, and she rocked into his fingers. He could feel she was ready by how her walls fluttered and clamped on his long, thick fingers.

“Kenner,” she warned.

“Come for me, sweetheart. This one is all about you.”

He sucked hard on her clit and pumped in and out with his fingers. Her whole body shook as he continued to ride out her climax. He wormed his way to the top of the sleeping bag and propped his head on his hand, content to watch her come back to herself.

She looked beautiful in sleep. Long, dark hair, tangled and mussed, lay across her pillow.

All too soon Piper blinked, then a slow seductive smile crossed her pretty face. “Do you have a condom?”

Oh, shit. Did he? He reached over to his side of the tent, groping for his second layer pants. After what seemed like minutes of searching, he found his wallet. He knew right where to look. Thank Christ. He had two. He only hoped he would get to use them both.

Piper snatched one from his hand and tore it open with her teeth. “Allow me.” She placed her small hand on his chest and guided him to his back. Kenner was normally the one in charge in bed, but he’d give Piper this play. As she slowly rolled the condom down his length, he thought he was going to burst before he got inside her. He started to roll over and she held her hand on his chest.

She grinned at him and slowly shook her head side to side. “No, no, no. My turn.”

Kenner reached over and ran his finger through her still wet heat, making sure she was ready. When he came to her clit he circled it once again, making her shiver. She threw a leg over his hips and took his cock in her hand. She rubbed the head through her wetness before notching it at her entrance. With one long push, she dropped onto his full length.

Kenner would swear he touched the bottom and immediately started doing division tables in his head. If he didn't distract himself, he'd have liftoff in seconds. She rose up and came back down once again. Either she was tight or squeezing her muscles because he felt every inch as she took him. He needed to move this along faster for her or he'd finish long before she did. He moved his hand from her hip and with his thumb circled her still hard clit. He felt her internal muscles squeeze him.

“Do that again and it'll be over quick,” she cautioned.

“It's been a while for me,” he admitted. “I'm barely hanging on so don't hold back. I want you to go first.” With the pad of his thumb, he pressed her clitoris.

She jumped, internally squeezing him. She rose and fell one more time.

Kenner pinched her clit and nipple at the same time.

Piper fell apart and collapsed on top of him.

He pushed into her one more time and let himself fall over the edge right behind her.

## CHAPTER 13



PIPER OPENED HER EYES, FULLY AWAKE, AS THOUGH SHE HAD something she needed to do. But Kenner was perfectly fine now. He was better than fine as a sex partner. She was completely satisfied cuddled in his strong arms. She'd had four orgasms to Kenner's two, but he'd only brought two condoms. She was still exhausted from the night before, waking up every two hours to check on him. Part of her wanted to close her eyes and enjoyed sleeping beside a man. But she wasn't sure what had awakened her.

Then she heard it.

A satellite phone was ringing.

Damn! She couldn't go running out there naked because most likely there was still had a wind chill factor below zero. As the phone continued to ring, she hurried into clothes that would keep her warm enough at least for a few minutes. At the door to the tent, she slid into her boots and threw on her jacket as she followed the noise to find the sat phone. Kenner had obviously moved it to greater sunshine.

"Knight here."

"Is everything okay?" Kayla asked. "Ajax tried to call Kenner but he didn't answer."

How much should she tell them? The truth. "Kenner is asleep in the tent. He fell into a stream at the bottom of a waterfall yesterday with his phone in his hand. He was unconscious due to hypothermia yesterday and last night but has recovered completely. I was in the tent with him. Our

phones are out here in the sunshine recharging.” Every sentence she said was true.

“When you two return to base camp I expect to hear about Kenner’s rescue. Right now, it’s time to go to work. The balloon is headed your way. You should see it within the next half-hour. Put the machine from the Holt Agency together as soon as possible. We need to test it.” Kayla paused then asked, “Is Kenner’s satellite phone working?”

Honesty was the only way. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know for sure. When I hang up with you, I’ll wake up Kenner and he can test it while I put together the machine.”

“Sounds like a plan. Contact us as soon as you see it. Base camp out.” Her team leader was gone.

Piper ran to the tent, slid out of her boots and outer jacket before crawling back in. “Kenner.” She shook him. “Kenner, you have to wake up.”

He pulled her over onto him and pinned her to his chest. “We don’t have any more condoms but that doesn’t mean we can’t have more sex.”

She gave him a quick kiss then rolled off to her side of the tent, grabbing more clothes. “Sorry, but we have to go to work. The balloon is headed right toward us and should be here within a half-hour.” She slid off the clothes she’d quickly put on and replaced them with her base layer. “You need to check your satellite phone to see if it’s working. We need to test the machine and take pictures at the same time.” She put on her second layer and outer layer pants then the first layer of socks. She had one set of toe warmers left so she stuck them to the bottom of her socks before she put on the second pair.

Kenner was dressed before she was. Men. How could they do that? She certainly didn’t dillydally. He gave her a quick kiss then went out the door.

Piper went to her backpack and retrieved the machine. It only took a minute to assemble. She slid her satellite phone into place and called the base camp. “Testing machine,” she

announced. It was a good thing she'd gotten dressed quickly because it took several minutes for everything to connect.

In the meantime, Kenner was able to get his phone working, to both their surprise. "The satellite phone company will be thrilled when they hear what this little baby went through and still worked."

"I can assure you that it didn't work yesterday." Piper moved to a different position per Larson's instructions. "Perhaps they need to include rice in the Arctic backpack essentials."

Using binoculars, Kenner scanned the sky to the west and the northwest. "I see it," he announced. "But it's too far away for pictures."

"Are you reading anything?" she asked everybody who was listening, which included several people at the base camp on a speakerphone and Larson down in Indiana.

"Just barely," Larson replied. "Walk around the area and I'll tell you when to stop."

Piper started walking slowly, turning the box in one direction and another before moving on.

"Damn, that thing's moving fast." Kenner held up his satellite phone for the first pictures. "Is NORAD tracking this balloon?"

"Both the U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command are military radar operators and aren't attuned to picking up inflatable airships. They're busy watching for missiles headed our way and airplanes that don't belong in U.S. airspace," Larson explained. "Eielson Air Force Base is keeping track of it with airplanes. At the moment, the balloon is currently moving at about twenty-five knots, that's almost twenty-nine miles per hour, and flying at fifty-five thousand feet. To put that in perspective, commercial airplanes fly at an average of thirty-five thousand feet. Thankfully the military has a few planes that can fly that high."

"Damn, that thing is big." Kenner continued to take photographs that were automatically uploaded to Larson who



transferred them to base camp.

“Can Kenner zoom in a little more on the writing that seems to be on the underside?” Kayla asked. “We’re all trying to figure out what language it is.”

“Is this any better?” Kenner asked. It was kind of weird for Piper because she heard him twenty feet away and through the phone a few seconds later.

“That’s Chinese,” a man said but Piper didn’t recognize his voice.

“That’s Grant. His wife is a Chinese translator,” Kenner said in a low tone so that only Piper could hear.

She gave him a thumbs up as Larson gave her another direction in which to move. She looked up into the air and was shocked at how huge the balloon was... And how close.

“Let me send this to Callie. She’ll be able to translate it in minutes,” the man she now knew was Grant obviously said to people at base camp.

As the balloon got closer, it seemed to drop and slow to a stop.

“That’s definitely Chinese,” Grant confirmed. “Let me put Callie on the line.”

“Hi, this is Callie. That says People’s Republic of China. Careful or warning, high-voltage or electricity. Their words can mean several different things in English.”

“This is just got bumped to the president.” Piper recognized that voice. It was Katlin Callahan, so obviously she was listening from the Homeland Security Section 7 Operations Center. “Larson, are you getting any readings?”

“Yes, ma’am. Forwarding to you now. Piper, can you move further to the east?”

“Yes, but there’s a hill with a bunch of trees on top. Will the machine still work there?”

“Move and we’ll see.” Larson could be heard clicking on his keyboard. “Kenner, move to the other side and see if

there's more writing over there. Callie, stay on the line... please."

Piper climbed the hill and stopped partway up before she hit the trees. "Larson, is this any better? I'm not quite to the top yet or to the trees."

"Definitely getting a stronger signal, keep going," the computer geek in Indiana ordered.

She continued up the hill and stopped just outside of the trees. "Larson, how's this?"

"Very strong. Keep going."

"I'm entering the trees. Tell me if I need to turn around." Piper concentrated on the only two dials that were on the machine. This was going to be a real test for the satellite phone. Usually they had to be out in the clear to work well. "Larson, can you read me?"

"Yes. I'm getting excellent reception. Turn in a circle and I'll tell you when to stop."

Holding the box in front of her because it took both hands, Piper slowly turned in a circle.

She never heard anyone come up behind her. A strong arm squeezed her neck at the same time a hand came over her mouth and fingers pinched her nose. She knew she only had seconds to fight him off, but she was afraid if she dropped the box so she could use her hands, they would lose the data uplink. She made as much noise as she could with her throat, hoping that either Larson or base camp would hear her. Hopefully the noise had made it to Kenner's ears. He would come for her. Sooner than she thought possible, she saw stars and felt herself drop to the ground.



"Did anyone else hear that?" Kenner asked. It sounded like someone talking underwater.

At the same time, Larson asked, “What the hell just happened, Piper?”

Two other voices speaking a singsong language could be heard talking.

“They’re speaking in Chinese,” Callie interjected.

Kenner glanced toward the trees on top of the hill on the far side of the open space. He couldn’t see Piper, but knew she’d walked into the woods.

“I’m going to check on Piper.”

“Radio silence,” Katlin Callahan ordered. “Kenner, stay where you are. Complete the mission. Larson, can you mute all voices on Piper’s sat phone?”

No. He needed to find Piper and make sure she was all right. He glanced up at the huge box that hung underneath the hovering balloon. He was there on a mission. The balloon and box overhead were the mission. Kenner asked himself, if the same thing had happened to one of his Holt Agency teammates, what would he do? He’d be confident that the agent could take care of himself and would be all right for a few minutes while Kenner completed the mission. Piper could take care of herself. There was no one else to complete the mission. He fought the urge to say *fuck it* and run up the hill on the other side and do everything he could to rescue Piper, but he knew in his military trained heart that was the wrong thing. They would have time to save Piper.

“Working on it.” There was silence for less than thirty seconds before Larson announced, “Done. We can still hear each other and what’s coming through Piper’s satellite phone, but they can’t hear anything.”

“Callie, do you understand what they said?” Katlin asked.

“Yes, ma’am. They’ve obviously taken Piper captive. She hasn’t spoken.” No one said what they suspected; somehow, they rendered her unconscious.

Kenner fought with himself to stay on mission and not run after Piper. The thought that someone who might be on the other side of that hill had the balls to take his woman hit him

in the heart. Then the realization that they might come for him next grabbed him by the balls. Fuck. He wasn't even armed. His gun was still in the tent, which was now fifty feet away.

Callie continued, "Man one ordered man two to pick up her feet. For further translation, that's the way I'm going to identify them. Man one ordered man two to come back for the box."

"Stop there a minute," Katlin ordered. "Larson, is the box still transmitting?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Kenner, is the balloon still overhead?" the director of Section 7 asked.

He looked up just to be sure. His eyes hadn't left the trees, even though he'd been ordered to continue taking pictures. "Yes, ma'am. It seems to be hovering at about five thousand feet. If we have enough pictures, I can run up the hill and see if I can retrieve the box." And take a peek over the hill to see where they'd taken Piper.

"Continue to take pictures," Katlin ordered. "Get them from every angle. The box is still transmitting. Callie, continue."

"Man two was complaining how this wasn't his job. He's a scientist. Man one was sent to protect them. After that I didn't hear anything. Their voices faded during this conversation, but I was only able to discern this much."

"Callie, stay on the line. If they come back and retrieve the box, I want to know exactly what they're saying." Katlin's authoritative voice left no room for questions. "Kenner, I'm not seeing any pictures. Are you sending them?"

Kenner quickly clicked several as he moved. It was as though the boss of this mission knew he hadn't moved. "Sending them now." Kenner had taken hundreds of pictures of the balloon and the large, suspended container underneath. What the hell were they going to learn from more pictures? He needed to go find Piper.

“I hear voices,” Callie announced. “It’s more like... mumbling. Damn Yi. The word really isn’t damn but it’s their equivalent of a swear word. Yi is definitely a man’s name. He sent me out here to get the box after he found a spy. What if there are more? Did he ever think that someone might capture me? I’m a scientist. I work in a lab. I don’t know the first thing about self-defense. And what the hell are we going to do with a woman?” The voice got very loud. “But this little beauty? I can’t wait to get inside you.” There was a rustling before a few thuds. “What are these gauges for? And why was she walking around an empty field with you? What do you have to do with our balloon?”

Everything was quiet for several minutes. Kenner continued to take pictures of the same things he had several minutes ago when the balloon first arrived. He noticed a mechanical sound. A door on the bottom started to slide open. Kenner started taking pictures as fast as he could while announcing the change to base camp.

The Chinese men were speaking again.

“They are talking about preparing for a blast in ten minutes.” The fear in Callie’s voice was easy to hear.

“Callie, what kind of blast?” Katlin said in an urgent voice. “Are you sure it’s ten minutes?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, they just keep calling it a blast. And yes, I’m sure man three said ten minutes.”

“We started a clock at nine minutes thirty seconds as soon as Callie said ten minutes,” Kayla interjected from base camp.

“Katlin, should Kenner take cover?” Ajax asked.

“His pictures are coming in almost every second. These are vital to the mission,” Katlin told everyone listening. “Let’s see what comes out the door before we pull him away. Kenner, you think you can still get this quality of picture if you move back twenty-five or fifty feet?”

“I’m not sure, ma’am. I’ll stay here for a few more minutes. A countdown would be nice, though because I can’t look at my watch and take photos.” Kenner was mesmerized at

what was happening thousands of feet above his head. The bottom had looked almost like a solid piece until part of it moved. When the door stopped, a long metal piece that looked like a pole extended in sections. "Are you getting this?" he asked anyone. He hoped the pictures were being sent to Larson as fast as advertised.

"Yes." He recognized Katlin's voice.

"We're down to five minutes," Kayla announced.

Kenner figured he could run to the tent and dive in in less than one minute.

"Kenner, you're down to three minutes," Ajax said.

An umbrella popped open around the end and began to move.

There was suddenly lots of Chinese chatter.

"Send the signal," Callie translated.

"Kenner, run," Ajax all but screamed.

No one had to tell him twice. He ran as fast as he could, dove headfirst into the tent wearing all his outer clothing and jacket. Since both sleeping bags were still zipped together, he threw them over top himself.

"They're counting down from ten," Callie announced.

He had no idea which direction the umbrella-covered pole was pointed. He just hoped that Piper was with whomever was counting. He seriously doubted that it would be pointed at them if it was going to blow something up.

"Three...two...one," Callie counted down.

Kenner heard a winding noise like a jet engine, just nowhere near as loud. Then a single beep approximately two seconds long.

More Chinese talking followed.

"One man after another is saying data download complete. Four men all said the same thing."

Kenner didn't wait for the all-clear. He grabbed his gun and extra magazines. On his hands and knees, he crawled out of the tent then sprinted back toward the clearing. The door had almost closed, so he quickly took pictures. The second the door was closed, the balloon started to rise faster than a helicopter taking off from a hot landing zone.

The Chinese men were speaking again. It almost sounded like they were cheering.

“Man three is telling them to pack everything up. They all did a good job. They are headed home.” Callie paused for a moment. “Man two is asking what they're supposed to do about the woman. Man three said to leave her there and let nature take care of her. Man one just told everyone to get packed. He'll take care of the woman.”

Oh, hell, no.

## CHAPTER 14



PIPER WAS GOOD AT PLAYING POSSUM. SOMEONE HAD CHOKED her the ten seconds it took to knock a person unconscious. Whoever did it also knew that she would gain consciousness within ten seconds. If the blood dripping from her temple was any indication, he'd hit her there before she regained consciousness.

She mentally cursed herself for paying too much attention to the machine and not enough to her surroundings. She'd been trained much better than that. Situational awareness was always essential whether on a mission or at the grocery store.

She'd been dumped in the back of a huge tent, tall enough for the men inside to stand. Nobody had to duck to come through the solid door. The little propane heater in the center kept the entire room warm aided by thick and insulated walls. Lucky for her, no one was guarding her. They probably figured since they took her boots and outer jacket, she wouldn't be tempted to run away. They didn't consider that she was wearing two pairs of socks with toe warmers. Or that she wouldn't hesitate to steal one of their jackets conveniently hanging next to the door.

Whoever had kidnapped her didn't know shit about dealing with captives. Her hands were tied with rope in front. They obviously hadn't frisked her because she was able to get into her thigh pocket and removed her tactical knife. The first thing she did was cut her hands free and wrap rope back around them as though she were still tied. All she had to do was wait for the right opportunity.



The machine she'd carried so carefully around the clearing sat ignored in the corner. Her satellite phone was still attached and active according to the red light. That meant somebody was listening to every word these men said. Hopefully, they had a good interpreter. If nothing else, she was sure that Kenner knew she'd been taken.

Her boss could always find her. Like all Section 7 operatives, she had an embedded tracker that sent not only her location but her heartbeat to S7 ops center. She wasn't worried about being rescued if she couldn't escape before then.

The men in the tent seemed to be engineers or scientists. They were much more concerned about their machines than her. At least until he walked in.

She recognized his type immediately, not just because he was the only one carrying a rifle slung across his back and a pistol holstered to his thigh. No. It was his eyes. He'd seen too much and done too much. He might as well have had Special Operator tattooed across his frown.

If she intended to get away, which she did, she would have to kill him.

When Piper saw the men delicately put their machines into padded metal boxes, she knew she needed to make her move soon. One man pointed to her and the Special Operator answered him. She immediately knew she didn't like his answer. Unlike the other men, he watched her like a hawk, never taking his eyes off her.

When the men she thought of as scientists started taking the metal boxes out of the tent, she knew the opportunity would be very soon. She tried to determine if he was wearing a Kevlar vest, but his outer jacket was too puffy to tell.

The last box was carried out the door, leaving the Special Operator alone with Piper. He slowly crossed the room as he took off his gloves and stuffed them in his pockets. He knelt on one knee and gently ran his finger down her cheek.

When he reached her chin, he grabbed it and jerked it up until her eyes met his.

Piper sliced upward, cutting through his pants over the femoral artery.

The Special Operator looked down at the spurt of blood with every heartbeat.

She jumped to her feet and twirled behind him. Grabbing his chin, she lifted it up and sliced his neck open from ear to ear. She let the body slump forward. She quickly gathered his weapons then looked around the room for something to put on her feet. His boots were way too big but better than nothing.

She slid one foot into a boot then decided to stuff his socks in front of and behind her foot. She kept watching the door, waiting for the scientists to come back wondering where their Special Operator was and why he hadn't joined them. Once she had the boots on, she realized the tent was absolutely empty. They had even taken the box she'd been carrying when captured. She debated on cutting out a piece of the insulated tent and wrapping it around herself when the door slowly opened.

Piper pulled the gun, ready to shoot anyone who dared come in.

A head peeked around the edge of the door, withdrawing as quickly as it appeared.

All she saw was a knit hat and the face covered by a balaclava.

“Piper? Is that you standing in the middle of the room?”

“Kenner!” she screamed and ran for the door.

She flung it open and threw herself into his arms.



It was almost midnight by the time they loaded the last scientist onto a helicopter. Piper and Kenner had decided to spend one more night in their tent and to ride the snow machines back to base camp in the morning.

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I still need to hear how you captured five scientists.”

Kenner chuckled. “It was easy. They were loaded in the snowcat, and I had a gun. They didn’t. As soon as I climbed in the big machine and showed them my gun, they all put their hands in the air. I put the phone on speaker and your boss, Katlin, told the Chinese translator what to say. She translated their words back.” He laughed. “I like your boss. She lied to them, telling them that the snowcat was surrounded by armed men with guns pointing at them. If they moved, they’d get shot. That was the only way I could come and rescue you... who didn’t need rescuing.”

“Not true. You found my coat and boots. I’m not sure I could’ve made it back to our camp without them. I definitely couldn’t have waited here in the cold for the military police and helicopters,” Piper insisted. “I can’t wait to crawl in our bed and warm up skin to skin.”

Kenner smiled down at her. “Not only did base camp send you packs of wet wipes to get that fucker’s blood off you, but guess what they sent me?” He reached in his pocket and dangled a strip of condoms. “What we don’t use tonight, we’ll use tomorrow night in a hotel room. Ajax wants us to be rested before we fly back to Indiana.”

She grimaced. “That’s nice for you guys but I don’t know about my team.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” He gave her a quick peck on the lips. “I mentioned the Santa Claus shop in North Pole to your boss. Katlin looked it up online and I believe she made several purchases. She asked Kayla to personally pick it up for her order and deliver it to her next week. Your teammates found a place to go dog sledding in North Pole...at night while watching the northern lights. So that means you’re staying. With me.”

“What if I want to go shopping at Santa’s workshop? And dog sledding? That sounds like fun.” She didn’t have any little kids to buy for, but she might find something interesting for

her mother. Maybe they'd even have something for her brother and father.

“Don't worry, we're all going to visit Santa.”

## CHAPTER 15



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, ALL SEVEN MEN FROM THE HOLT Agency and five Ladies of Black Swan walked into Santa's store in North Pole after taking several selfies outside. Kenner and Piper held hands as they wandered through the store.

They came across Kayla picking out gifts for her nieces and nephews.

"Hey, did you hear anything about the scientists? Where did they take them?" Piper asked her boss.

Kayla shrugged. "That's above my paygrade. But I did hear that we got that expedited escort off base because they were scrambling fighter jets to shoot down the balloon before it left Alaskan airspace. Katlin told me that the thermal satellites found more groups of Chinese positioned across Alaska, most likely waiting for the balloon to download data."

"Holy fuck," Kenner exclaimed. "I wonder if they were sleeper cells already in the U.S.A. or if they were smuggled into Alaska. We have several International ports that get daily shipments from China during the summer, before the shipping lanes freeze closed.

Kayla shrugged again. "Like I said, that's above my paygrade."

They moved on to look at Christmas ornaments and clothing with North Pole, Alaska imprinted across the chest.

"I'm going over here to see if maybe any of these aprons would be a good gift for my mom." Piper squeezed his hand before wandering off.

It had been decades since Kenner had been in the store. It had changed quite a bit, grown by several thousand square feet. The farther back he wandered, the more familiar it became. He stopped and looked over the candy counter at Santa's workshop. That hadn't moved. Santa, all dressed in the traditional red suit with white trim in what he would swear was a real white beard carved a toy train.

He smiled as he remembered Roy sitting on his porch in a rocking chair whittling away. He smiled and once again wondered what happened to the neighbor who had saved him.

Santa looked up and went as white as his beard. He slowly stood and walked out the door, past the candy, and straight to Kenner. Their eyes met and both teared up.

Kenner was the first to speak. "Roy?"

The older man threw his arms around Kenner and hugged him as though he was his long-lost son. "Kenner," he croaked out. "They said you were dead."

They hugged, burying their faces in the other's shoulder.

A woman walked up to him and quietly whispered, "Santa, why don't you take your friend into the break room. It's not good for children to see Santa cry."

"Sure. Sure." He guided Kenner into a back room. They sat at a table where people obviously ate their lunches. "They told us you were dead."

Kenner got control of his emotions, swallowing several times before he could speak. "The U.S. government thought the men on my team were dead. In actuality, we'd been captured and taken as prisoners of war in Ethiopia. All but two of us. Those two, Ajax and Ryker who are now my bosses, but I'll come back to that, they found out the truth and came to Ethiopia and rescued us. We all now work for them at the Holt Agency in Indiana." He lowered his voice even though he couldn't see anyone around. "We do a lot of the same things we did as Navy SEALs."

"They gave your mother your SGLI." Roy took his hand and held it tight.

“Please don’t tell me she drank away half a million dollars.” He squeezed his old friend’s hand.

Roy stared at him. “When were you freed from captivity?”

Kenner gave him the exact date.

Roy grabbed his other hand and pulled Kenner to face him. “I’m sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but your mother passed away a month before you were freed. I guess they never notified you because it happened while you were legally dead.”

“What happened to all that money?” He felt bad that his mother was gone, but as far as he was concerned, she’d been gone from his life for nearly a decade.

“When she heard the news of your death, she went on a bender. A bad one. She was in the hospital when the insurance money came in. A couple years before that, I convinced her to write a will. She wasn’t doing well. She had liver disease and wasn’t going to last long. Of course, she gave everything to you. She was told that you were...” The man now in his sixties got up and poured himself a glass of water then sat down again. “When she was told you were gone, she rewrote her will. She gave me the money and told me to do something good with it.”

Kenner watched tears run down his face and caught a few on his own. He was sure that Roy had done something wonderful with the money. “What did you do with it?”

“Several things. I started a Boys and Girls Club for kids after school and on weekends. More than five thousand local children have graduated or are currently enrolled. The program goes through the summer so no children go home hungry.” They both blinked away tears. “Yes, I knew.”

“You said several things.” With the back of his hand Kenner wiped away the tears from his cheeks. “I have to confess; I paid your mother’s hospital bills and to bury her.”

Through the huge lump in his throat, Kenner promised, “I’ll pay you back.”

“No, you won’t. You already did that as an Ethiopian prisoner of war.”

“Is there more?” Not that what he’d already mentioned wasn’t more than enough.

A huge smile separated his mustache from his full beard. “Yes.” He spread his arms wide. “I bought this place. The owners were getting on in years and their children had no desire to continue, so I bought it. We’ve expanded a little. I have the teachers every year send me a list of the children in need and their sizes. Oh, I forgot to tell you part of it. With what I had left over I invested it and created a trust to forever fund the North Pole Project. It purchases clothes for every child in need at Christmas. We wrap them up here, everyone volunteers from the staff to the teachers to the ladies at my church. On Christmas Eve I drive a sleigh around the neighborhoods in town and my Tahoe to deliver out into the country.”

Roy laughed, a real belly shaker. “Your dying did a lot of good for North Pole, Alaska.”

“I don’t know if you were notified but as part of our agreement with the U.S. government, those people who received SGLI from our reported deaths were allowed to keep the money.” Kenner’s cell phone buzzed. He looked at the text message from Piper. He stood. “Would you like to meet the woman I’m going to marry?”

“Of course. When’s the wedding?”

“I have no idea. I have to first convince her that I love her, then convince her to love me.”

Roy laughed, his big belly shaking again. “Let me meet this woman. I’ll decide if she’s worthy of you.”

They walked out into the store and found Piper standing beside the raised platform holding Santa’s chair.

“You’re here,” Piper said with a huge smile. She pointed to the sign that said he was on break.

Kenner looked around the store filled with children. December was the busiest time of year. “Santa, I’d like you to



meet Piper Knight.”

He leaned over and whispered in her ear, “This is the man who made me a man. This is Roy.”

Piper hugged Santa. “Thank you for making him the best man I know. He loves you.”

“Don’t tell him I sent this, but he loves you, too. Make him happy. He deserves it.” They broke apart with broad smiles on their faces.

Santa turned the sign around to say All Are Welcome. “Step up here, Ms. Piper, and tell Santa what you want for Christmas.”

She took Kenner by the hand and led him to where Santa sat on a large red velvet chair. She looked at the old man and announced, “I want him. Forever.” Kenner thought it had already been a wonderful day, seeing Roy again and learning all the wonderful things he’d done. But Piper’s statement made it the best day ever.

“And I want you. Forever. Will you marry me?” Kenner went down on one knee.

“Yes, yes. I don’t know how this is going to work out with you in Indiana and me stationed in Washington D.C., but we’ll figure it out.”

Kenner stood and took Piper in his arms. The kiss they shared was filled with love and promises.

Clapping broke out along with hoots and hollers and a few whistles. They broke the kiss to find they were surrounded by the men from Holt Agency and the Ladies of Black Swan.

“Piper,” Ajax called to her. “Are you aware that we have an office in Washington?”

She turned to Kenner. “Will you come to work in D.C.?”

“Yes, yes.” He lifted her in his arms and spun her off the platform that had become a stage for their engagement.

“I love you, Kenner Lane.”

“And I love you, Piper Knight.”

The End

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**A Moment Never Forgotten** (Never Forgotten novel #3) ~

The moment he realized she was in serious danger...he couldn't protect her.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KaLyn Cooper is a USA Today Bestselling author whose romances blend fact and fiction with blazing heat and heart-pounding suspense. Life as a military wife has shown KaLyn the world, and thirty years in PR taught her that fact can be stranger than fiction. She leaves it up to the reader to separate truth from imagination. She, her husband, and Little Bear (Alaskan Malamute) live in Tennessee on a micro-plantation filled with gardens, cattle, and quail. When she's not writing, she's at the shooting range or paddling on the river.

For the latest on works in progress and future releases, check out **KaLyn Cooper's website**

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