



Baby Daddy

SEAL

DAKOTA NASH

Baby Daddy SEAL

An Age Gap Enemies to Lovers Romance

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Chapter One

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BRIAN

“**B**rian Grant?”

I swallowed the shot I was contemplating before turning to find a young woman who had approached me. She was dressed for a good time in a short leather skirt that showed off miles of tanned, muscular thighs and a top that made me want to touch her bare midriff. She had my complete attention. I hadn't even planned on coming to the bar to hook up, but I was here.

“You’ve heard of me?” It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened. SEALs tend to attract groupies, probably because there are so few of them because we’re the best of the best.

And fuck it, I might have been in my late forties, but I wasn’t out to get old. If this hot young thing was looking for some fun, I would be happy to oblige.

She leaned closer to me, her fingertips brushing my arm, and I thought about it.

And then she grinned and said, “Of course, we know each other. You recognize me?”

Oh, fuck. I hadn't slept with her before, had I? I wracked my brains—I was sure I would remember.

She laughed. "It's me," she said. "Alison Barrett." Henry's daughter."

"Alison Barrett? What are you doing in a bar? Are you twenty-one yet?" Alison stood up straight and retorted, "I'm twenty-six."

"You're twenty-six?" My jaw dropped.

"It's been a while."

"You can say that again." Alison Barrett was a kid. She wasn't *hot*.

Suddenly, she was. I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering to things I never noticed about her before—the curve of her breasts, for one thing.

That ass—I'd always been an ass guy, but if Henry Barrett knew I was thinking about putting my hands up his daughter's skirt, he would beat me in a hell out of me.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I asked, even though I absolutely knew I should buy Alison Barrett a drink.

But what was the harm? She was of age. And it was just a drink. It would be good to catch up with the kid.

She sat down beside me. "I was hoping you would!"

"You were, huh?" She was definitely flirting with me.

"I haven't talked to you in ages," she groaned. "Not since Dad retired from the SEALs."

I didn't want to sit at the bar with the newly hot Alison and talk about my father. "Tell me what's been going on with you."

"Not much." She moved close so that her knees were touching mine. "I finished my Masters of Finance, and moved back here in June. Got a job at the bank."

She hesitated. "I'm thrilled I ran into you."

"Yeah?"

but no, “Promise not to laugh, but I always had a thing for you when I was young.”
She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you think that’s silly.”

I didn’t. I’d known that actually—but what had been a harmless one-night stand
crush when Alison was a teenager suddenly seemed like it might have been
? There was nothing to stop me now except for the persistent sense that I
probably shouldn’t put my hands on her.

Then again, what Henry didn’t know wasn’t going to hurt him. And I
Except, keep this at an appropriate level—a little harmless flirting in a bar. I
was of age. And she was so hot that my pants were starting to
uncomfortable.

*You cannot fuck Henry Barrett’s daughter. If he ever found out you
he would murder you.*

But would he murder me for sitting here with her like this? For slott
high between hers so we could be closer together?

“Tell me about your job,” I suggested.

I wasn’t fooling anybody, not even myself. Getting her talking
something mundane was just an excuse to lean in closer to her so I could
her over the bar’s noise. I was sure Alison could see right through it but
didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest. She leaned closer to me, and
close that I could feel the warmth of her body and the heat of her breath
she spoke, and yeah, I was going to need to stop drinking right now
probably take a nice long shower when I got home. *Holy shit.*

“Oh, my job’s boring,” Alison chuckled. “Government work. Pushing
around.”

“A job.” “Yeah?”

“Dad is happy. You know he’s always wanted to see me in the
sector.” “I didn’t know that.” And we were talking about Henry again.

unger.”considerations aside, it was impossible to enjoy my fantasies about her into the bathroom and shoving that skirt she was wearing above her head. At the same time, she begged me to fuck her senseless while also trying to think of her as my best friend’s daughter. The two ideas did not go together that I “Tell me about *you*,” Alison suggested.

“Me?”

I could “Are you still with the SEALs?”

I mean, “I am, yeah.” Henry’s early retirement was a move I respected for I could never have chosen for myself. Being a part of the SEALs was

did, he “How’s that been going?”

“Pretty good. What about that drink I was going to buy you?”

ing myShe grinned. “Scotch on the rocks?”

I had to admit; I’d expected her to ask for a screwdriver or something that. Something youthful and girly. Maybe she was trying to improve about Perhaps she didn’t want me thinking of her as a kid.

ld hearMaybe she really *wasn’t* a kid.

. But itTwenty-six was young, but not too young. I would have been putting too—some moves on Alison if she hadn’t been Henry’s daughter.

h whenI flagged down the bartender. “Scotch on the rocks, and another now and these.” I pushed the shot glass in his direction.

“Oh, are we doing shots?” Alison asked.

; papers “I am. You don’t need to be.”

She rolled her eyes. “What are you drinking?”

“Whiskey.”

public “Okay, forget the scotch,” she said to the bartender. “Bring me a Ethical whiskey as well, please.”

pulling “You don’t have to do that.”

er hips. “Of course, I don’t *have to do it*,” she chuckled. “I’m not pledging a s
ying to But it’s fun to do shots with people, don’t you think?”

ether. “You can’t have been doing shots for more than five minutes.”

“I have been doing shots for years now.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Underage drinking?”

“Dad told me stories about the two of you in BUD/S training,” she dis
aim but “And I know you weren’t twenty-one when you did your training l
s who I Dad wasn’t twenty-one when he did his, and he’s two years older than

“You know a lot.”

“I’ve told you” She said placidly, “I’ve had a crush on you for ages.”

“Do you have a crush on me now?”

What the hell was I doing, asking her that? It wasn’t as if I could act
ing like she did.

ess me. But I had to know. I was so fucking attracted to her. Maybe I was jus
to feed my fantasies—there was no doubt that it would be more fun t
about her later if I knew that she was also thinking about me.

ing the And the chemistry between us was like nothing I’d felt in a very long
was surprising that the other people in the bar weren’t picking u
one of somehow and couldn’t see the desire crackling around us.

It was surprising to me that I still hadn’t touched her.

She leaned toward me and bit her lip.

Fuuuuck. She shouldn’t have done that. Watching the way her lip gav
little beneath the pressure of her teeth made me want to bite it myself.

I shifted in my seat. I was hard as hell. It felt like my cock was reach
shot of her. I wanted to grab her by the waist and lift her onto my lap fr
barstool she was seated on. I wanted to push and pull on her hips, gr

against me. Based on her demeanor, I wanted to see if she was as hot a priority as I assumed. I wanted to fuck her.

“Your shots,” the bartender chirped in, interrupting the filthy fantasy going out in my head.

I wanted to thank him, and I also wanted to punch him in the face.

Fuck, I was out of control here.

missed. Alison grinned at me like she knew what was happening in my head because she picked up one of the shot glasses. “What are we drinking to?” she asked you.” eyes lighting up.

Fucking pull yourself together, Brian.

Only years of military discipline enabled me to tear myself out of the moment and focus on the young woman in front of me and the reality of our situation. “To your father,” I suggested.

As much as I hadn’t wanted to think about her father, I thought it probably necessary to do so. It was good for me. I needed to remember to think this was Henry’s daughter because I could not let myself forget that fact.

I wasn’t willing to risk damaging a relationship with my oldest and best friend over this, no matter how badly I wanted her.

Alison grinned. “All right,” she raised the glass. “To Dad.”

We slammed back our shots. Alison’s didn’t go down as quickly as mine, which I thought was to be expected. She didn’t have as many years of drinking experience as I did, no matter what age she’d started drinking. She could hold her own just a little, and I signaled to the bartender, who nodded and appeared a moment later with a glass of seltzer water.

Alison looked at it and shook her head. “I don’t need that.”

“Don’t show off. It’s just a chaser. Drink it.”

I expected her to make a fuss and refuse, but she shrugged and took

and wet drink. Then she set the glass down. “Another,” she announced.

“What are we doing here, Alison?”

I was surprised I’d asked her so bluntly. I had no idea what answer she was looking for.

“Shots,” Alison quipped.

Okay, that was fair enough. It was an answer to my question, after all. She decided to take it at face value. I had asked her what this was meant, and she was telling me that we were just drinking together and nothing more. I could respect that.

It didn’t matter that she was Henry’s daughter. It didn’t matter that she was nearly twice her age.

What mattered was that she had told me she just wanted to drink with me and catch up on the past. She didn’t want to take this any farther than that. That was fair enough.

It wasn’t going to stop me from fantasizing about her later, though. The hottest women I’d ever seen coming up to me and telling me she was my best friend always had a thing for me wasn’t something that happened every day, even for the SEALs. I attracted my share of hot women, but this was different.

A part of me wondered whether I was letting what might be the best thing in my life walk away.

A part of me thought I should try harder to turn this into something meaningful. I’d probably regret it for a long time. I would probably spend weeks or months, maybe—wondering what it might have been like.

Still, having that question in my head was probably preferable to alienating my best friend.

I had a good imagination. And the time Alison had given me tonight was long enough to provide me with fodder for my fantasies for quite a while.

That would have to be good enough.

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That would have to be good enough.

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Chapter Two

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ALISON

“**Y**ou’ll never guess who I saw last night,” I told my father as I sat at the seat opposite him at his favorite restaurant, The Smokehouse.

Dad was already poring over the menu as if we didn’t both know pretty well that he had it memorized. He and I ate dinner here together every Sunday like clockwork. Dad wasn’t like me—I always ordered the linguine, but he switched up his order between four or five dishes. Even Dad wasn’t like he was going to find something on the menu that he didn’t already know about.

“Who’s that?” he asked absently.

“Brian Clark.”

Now I had his attention. He looked up from the menu, his eyebrows raised.

“Really! Brian Clark?”

“When’s the last time you two saw each other?” I asked.

“Oh, a couple of weeks ago,” he said. “We go out for drinks sometimes. Where did you see him?”

“I ran into him at that bar on Donnelly Street.”

“What were you doing at a bar?”

“Having a drink, Dad.” Sometimes he still saw me as a kid.

“You didn’t drive home, did you?”

I sighed. “Dad, I live two blocks from Donnelly Street. Of course, I don’t drink and drive. Do you think I would?”

“I know you know better,” he said. “But you can’t expect me to stop giving you advice just because you’re grown. I’m still your father. I’m always going to try to tell you what to do.”

He grinned at me. I grinned back. “That’s fine,” I snapped. The truth was, I liked the fact that Dad still did this stuff. I liked that he worried about me. Since Mom died, it was just the two of us, and I knew he relied on me as much as I relied on him. Sometimes it felt as if we were alone on an island, us against the world.

“So, how is Brian?”

“He’s good,” I replied almost immediately. “I didn’t realize he was still in the SEALs.”

“You didn’t?”

“I guess I always figured he had retired when you did.”

“Nah, not Brian. They’re going to have to pry him out of that office chair with a crowbar to get him to leave. I loved being a SEAL, but I think it’s my favorite thing about being alive. I’m surprised he didn’t bore you with all his military stories—or did he?”

“No, he didn’t,” I chuckled. “He didn’t tell any military stories.”

“Then what did you two talk about?”

“He mostly wanted to talk about me. What I’m doing these days.”

I wasn’t going to tell Dad the truth—that I could barely remember what we had talked about because when I thought back that evening, I

thing that came to mind was the overwhelming desire I'd felt to take my clothes off. I hadn't been that out-of-control aroused since high school. Seventeen wasn't all that long ago, but I'd believed that such a high schooler's thorniness was a relic of my past.

Apparently not.

That definitely wasn't the subject you could talk to your father about, was going Even I couldn't, and I told Dad just about everything. I was pretty sure he knew about my childhood crush on Brian, although no doubt he had known I was, I thought of it as just a harmless little girl infatuation. I thought about me. To tell the truth, I'd always thought of it that way too. My feelings for Brian had always felt something like a celebrity crush—powerful, bordering on obsession sometimes, but not actionable.

Last night, for the first time, it felt like something I might potentially actually do. I had *wanted* to.

If he had tried to make a move, I knew I would have given in so fast that he would have made his head spin. So maybe it was for the best that he hadn't tried it.

"Did you tell him about your job?"

I laughed. "Not really."

Brian's "Why not? Aren't you proud to be working for the FBI?"

"You know I am. You know that job means the world to me. But to most people, it's probably pretty boring."

"There's nothing boring about being an analyst for the FBI, Allie. You know how impressed with you I am!"

"Yes, but you're my father," I told him. "You'd be impressed if I worked at Brian's convenience store."

He only laughed. "There's some truth to that, I guess," he shrugged. "E"

ake myknow I'm much *more* impressed by what you're doing now than I w
school.by almost anything else. Working for the FBI is something, Allie.
level ofknow how much that job means to you, too."

I drew a deep breath. I wasn't going to get a better opening than that f
I needed to talk to him about. "Actually," I paused and cleared my th
though.need to talk to you about my new assignment."

sure heI noticed how my father's ears shot up, and a broad grin followed t
alwaysnew assignment, eh? That's pretty exciting."

I hope you still think so when I tell you what it is!

r Brian"The FBI Is launching an investigation into possible corruption
ring onmilitary," the words rolled off my tongue slowly.

Dad sighed and rolled his eyes. "Of course, they are," he retorted. "I
ct on. this every few years. They never find anything, of course. They shoul
by now that the United States military is completely beyond reproach.
t that ityou'll be able to help put that matter to bed once and for all, Allie. W
: hadn'tthat be something?"

I frowned. "You know I can't go into an investigation with any preco
assumptions, right, Dad?" "Meaning what, exactly?"

"I can't assume that the military is innocent of wrongdoing."

"Alison," Dad sighed as he scratched his brow with irritation. "The
o otherStates military is entirely responsible for your excellent childhood. Y
aware of this, aren't you? Everything good in your life has been
u knowpossible by the military."

"That's not exactly fair," I frowned.

ked at a "You don't think so?"

"There are plenty of good things you've gotten for me. Or things I've
but youfor myself," I breathed. "It doesn't all come directly from the SEALs."

ould be “So, you’re too good for the SEALs now?”

And I “Dad. *No.*” God, this was going worse than I had imagined it would be. I know I’m proud to be the daughter of a Navy SEAL. I always have been. But that’s not what this is about.”

He roared, “I “Why don’t you tell me what this is about, then? You’re going into a military investigation expecting to uncover corruption?”

His. “A “I’m sure there won’t be any corruption! I’m just saying that I will investigate and say something if I see something. I can’t go into this with the mindset that I will be protecting the military. That’s literally the opposite of what I’m doing in this.”

“I can’t believe my own daughter would sell out the U.S. military.”

They do “Dad. Be serious. You don’t want there to be corruption in the services, do you?” I know “Of course, I don’t. And there isn’t any.”

Maybe “In which case, I don’t know what you’re worried about,” I said. “I’m not going to *create* trouble. I don’t *want* to find anything.”

“Then why are you going to these lengths to have this conversation with me?”

“I just think you deserve to know what’s going on, that’s all,” I told him. “I don’t want you to find out the hard way if, God forbid, I have to turn in a United report of malfeasance in the Air Force or something.”

“You are “Is that where you’ve been assigned? The Air Force?”

I made “I don’t have my assignment yet. It might be. They’re taking a bunch of entry-level analysts and assigning each of us to a different branch.”

“Well, try not to get into the Air Force. You know how airmen can be. They won’t respect you.”

I’d gotten “They’ll respect me,” I spoke these words with every ounce of confidence I could muster. I did know how members of the military, in general, could be

came to young civilian women. But Dad was mistaken if he thought I would be. “You won’t be treated with anything less than complete respect in the workplace. Anyone who has been treated that way knows that. I’ve been thought they could be sexist toward me was going to be in for a long time. I’ll be in for a long time, Air Force or not.”

“Maybe you should ask to be assigned to the SEALs,” Dad suggested.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit of a conflict of interest?” I didn’t want to be assigned to the SEALs as my assignment. That sounded like the worst-case scenario to me. I knew that I was committed to making a thorough and accurate report no matter how my job assignment turned out, but I knew I would feel conflicted if assigned to the SEALs. Without feeling really guilty, I couldn’t give information about the military branch that had helped raise me, the branch that had been my home and family.

I knew that reports of corruption weren’t precisely a betrayal. If anyone was helping the branch I was assigned to by rooting out a corruptive and destructive that was going on.

Still, it wasn’t going to feel good to be a whistle-blower—if that’s what something I ended up having to do.

Dad said, “I would do my best to avoid being assigned to the SEALs.”

“I don’t like this,” Dad said. “I thought when you went to work for the military that we were finally getting someone on the inside who understood the military way of life. You were raised around the military, Alison.”

“I know, Dad. And one thing I learned from that was how much the military values abiding by the law. Come on. You wouldn’t want me to go in there and give them a free pass.”

“I suppose not,” Dad agreed. “I just don’t want to see you make a spectacle out of this.”

“I’m not going to make a spectacle. But it’s my first assignment at the military.”

I'd put I'm a junior analyst. I need to earn my stripes if I'm going to prove I'm the one who FBI was right to take a chance on me. I need to prove that I belong in a real job. I need you to support me."

"You know I'll always support you, no matter what," Dad chided. "All you need to do is belong in the FBI. You're going to be great in that job. They're looking forward to having you, Allie."

to me. I "Thanks, Dad."

know my "I want to see you do well. You know that. You know how long I've waited to see you in a job like this one."

on the "All my life."

father's "Yes. And now it's happening, and I couldn't be prouder of you. So, just focus on what you've got to do to make a success of your first assignment. I know nothing, I won't find any corruption anyway, so there really isn't anything to worry about."

He smiled and picked up his menu again. "I think I'm going to go with what was ribs today," he announced.

"Right," I murmured.

I should have felt better. He'd given me his support, hadn't he? But I couldn't help feeling that his support was conditional. Yes, he wanted me to do well on my assignment—as long as there was nothing under the hood going on for me to report on.

He was so sure that there wouldn't be anything.

Well, I wasn't going to cause a scandal on purpose. I wasn't going to create controversy where there wasn't any.

But I couldn't deny that a part of me was hoping I *would* find evidence of wrongdoing.

After all, how better to make a clear-cut success of my first assignment

that they bringing back a report that contained something? That would prove
in this bosses that I was worth keeping around, and it would lead to bigger and
groundbreaking assignments for me. I wanted that.
and you I could never confess it to my father, but the truth was that I was h
ucky to would catch the military doing something wrong.

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I could never confess it to my father, but the truth was that I was hoping I would catch the military doing something wrong.

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Chapter Three

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ALISON

I continued to hope for the chance to blow the whistle on wrongdoing in the military right up until the next day, when I officially received my assignment.

I couldn't believe my bad luck. Out of all the military branch departments, I had been assigned to investigate the Navy SEALs.

Things went from bad to worse when I walked into the office and met the noncommissioned officer I'd been instructed to meet with and saw that he was Brian Clark.

Fuck.

He looked up at me, his eyes widening. "Alison?"

"Hi," I croaked. Not wanting to sound timid or overwhelmed, I paused to recollect myself.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm the analyst," I managed a quick, professional smile. "You were informed I would be coming?"

"The FBI analyst."

"That's right."

“That’s *you*?” He cocked his brow.

I was a little annoyed. “Who were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Someone older.”

“Okay, well, surprise.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were with the FBI!”

“I told you I was working for the government.”

“You told me you were working with the government to try to make your father proud. What does Henry think of this assignment? Does he know you’re investigating the SEALs?”

“Excuse me?”

coming in

ved my

“This is a damn brotherhood. There was no way he would be okay with it if he knew.”

es and

How could this be the same guy I’d hit on at the bar? He had been so much *fun* the other night.

of the

Of course, I was probably more fun at the bar than I was today.

t it was

And it was for the best. Finding out I would be investigating the SEALs was hard enough, given the conflict of interest with my dad. I didn’t need to think about Brian Clark’s tight butt and muscular thighs while trying to get the job done.

used to

I lifted my chin. “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about Dad.”

“Sure, *now* you say that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

ere not

He sighed. “Nothing. Do you want to come into the conference room?”

“You don’t have an office or something?” The conference room was separated from the rest of the office by a solid glass wall. I would feel like I was on display in there.

Brian gave me a grim smile. “I’m afraid you’re not going to get me t

you right into my office, Alison.”

“It doesn’t matter what room I work out of,” I said. “I will need through the same files regardless.”

He led me into the conference room and closed the door. Then, surprise, he lowered the shades on all the windows.

I had to admit; I was impressed. I guess he did want to grant me some courtesy as I worked, after all.

He knew “Let’s just get this over with,” he announced. His voice was tight. “What do I need to do to get you out of here?”

“I thought we were getting along.”

With that “I don’t get along with government pencil pushers who are investigating people.”

Too much “Fine.” I matched his energy. “If that’s how you want it. We’ll just get it done, and I’ll leave.”

“Good.”

He said “I need a computer and access to the financial reports for the past five years to think.” He stared at me. “The past *five years*?”

For my job “That’s right.”

“What do you need all that for?”

“I have the right to define the scope of my inquiry.”

“What is it you think you’re looking for?”

I had no idea what I was looking for. It was a broad search to see what might not anything stirred my suspicions. “I’m just poking around.”

He said “Well, poke around at something else. I’m not giving you all the financial reports for the past five years. Absolutely not.”

He couldn’t refuse, of course. I was here on instructions from the FBI. Unless I did something unethical or improper, he had no grounds for

me access to anything I wanted to see. I stared up at him, waiting for to look come to that inescapable conclusion himself.

He just stared back.

to my “Brian,” I swallowed. “Come on.”

“Did you know you’ were going to be assigned here when we ran in privacy other the other night?”

“What? No. I didn’t have my assignment yet.”

hat do I “You weren’t hitting on me to get some intel?”

“Jesus, Brian. Is that what you think of me?”

“I don’t know what to think of you. We don’t know each other that we ing my show up at my bar—”

“Your bar? It’s not *your* bar. I live in DC too. I can go to any bar I want get it “You show up at *the bar I always go to* and start talking about how always had a thing for me—”

“Which was true—”

years.” “And you’re dressed like you’re looking to get laid or something—”

“It was Saturday night! I was at a bar! What did you want me to fatigues? And what business is it of yours if I was looking to get laid?”

I couldn’t believe the way this conversation was going.

And I couldn’t believe I was enjoying it as much as I was.

He noticed what I was wearing.

either or Of course, I had put that skirt on, hoping someone would look at me. I dreamed that *someone* would be Brian Clark, of course, but the fact th nancial not only noticed but *remembered*.

“You’re telling me that you weren’t flirting with me for any BI, and professional gain.”

denying “Of *course*, I wasn’t.”

him to “But you *were* flirting with me.”

I bit my lower lip. I couldn’t deny that I had been.

I didn’t want to deny it.

“Why were you flirting with me?”

to eachAnd all of a sudden, I forgot that I technically held all of the power space. I forgot that I was the one who had the right to make demands and that he had to do as I asked.

All I could think about right now was how he looked at me. I Wanting.

ll. YouHis hand flexed on the table, and I thought I might be about to pass out. The fact that he had gone to the trouble to draw the shades took on a new meaning.

you’ve “You should have worn that skirt today,” Brian teased, his voice low and husky. “You might have gotten what you wanted.”

I didn’t even think of arguing that I didn’t need to use my power or seduction to compel his cooperation.

o wear, A moment later—*finally*—his hands were on my body.

’ He pulled me out of my chair and sat me on the conference room table. I knew exactly where this was going and felt powerless to even *want* it. I shouldn’t be doing this. I knew I shouldn’t. But the only thing I manage to say was, “Is that door locked?”

I hadn’t “No,” Brian groaned, lifting me just enough that he could push me up at he’d above my hips.

Even then, I couldn’t tell him to stop.

sort of He grabbed my thighs and pulled me up against him. He was hard already, and I let out a gasp of shock and pleasure.

“You knew,” he murmured. “You knew exactly what you were doing

Alison. Please don't deny it. You wanted me all rabid for you like this you?"

He hitched his hips, grinding against me, and I was suddenly mortifyingly aware that my panties were soaked. I wanted him too, even this badly as he wanted me, and there wouldn't be any getting out of this of him "I have a meeting in five minutes," he whispered.

"I'm going to need you for longer than that."

I'm hungry. "Oh, no, you fucking won't."

He grabbed the waistband of my panties and tugged them down to my ankles in one swift motion. I kicked one leg free and straddled him. "Brian— a wholeHe pressed the palm of his hand between my legs, sending a shock of pleasure through me, and I rolled my hips, grinding against him now and abandon. I couldn't remember the last time I had felt so utterly out of control.

If anyone walked in right now, they'd see the FBI analyst about to get caught by a senior officer.

The thought sent a delicious chill down my spine. I should not be interested in someone finding out I was doing this. I shouldn't be doing this, and I at all.

to stop. But I'd be damned if I was going to stop now.

I could "What do you want?"

"You fucking know what I want."

my skirt "But I want to hear you say it."

It wasn't a demand. It was almost a plea.

"Fuck me, Brian," I said. "I want you to fuck me so hard I forget what I'm doing here."

"That sounds fucking great to me."

to me, He stepped between my legs again. He was naked from the waist down

, didn't—he'd shed his pants at some point when my attention had been focused elsewhere. I felt the heat of his cock pushing up against me, on the very edge of entering me.

very bit "I have three more minutes," he breathed.

t fact. I groaned. "I need to come, Brian."

"Trust me, honey. You're going to."

It was the terribly arrogant thing every man said, and I shouldn't believe it. But I did.

ankles He slid into me then, and I shuddered at the feeling of fullness. I hadn't gotten a perfect look at his cock yet, but I could tell how big he was. I knew then and there that this wasn't going to be a one-and-done thing. I was going to need to find a way to get with him again, and next time, I was going to take as long as I wanted. I was going to get to *fucked* his body.

But this time, we had three minutes, and I felt as if I had been waiting my whole life to be with him.

ing this His hands were under my knees, spreading me wide so he could thrust into me. I was sure the people outside this conference room could hear us. He was trying not to make any noise, but indeed the sounds of our bodies slapping against each other could be heard through the walls. He was *forceful*—

Then he maneuvered his hand between our bodies, his thumb pressed against my clit, and I was gone.

hat I'm I was aware of the hot pressure of his hand over my mouth. He was trying to muffle my cry of pleasure, and I knew I had been making too much noise. It was the only concession he had made so far to the idea of not wanting us to be seen now out.

focused And I was thankful because I couldn't have kept myself quiet for anyone in the world.

I bucked my hips against him, my hands scrabbling desperately for purchase at the edge of the table, as my orgasm ripped through me.

No man had ever given it to me this good in my life. I didn't want to stop. Not for anything.

He slammed into me twice again, grunting audibly, and then he slammed down on the table beside me, and I knew he had just reached his climax too.

I allowed myself to fall backward, so I was lying on my back and staring up at the fluorescent lighting above me.

—fuck, Brian stepped back.

Even now that it was over, I couldn't ignore how hot it was that I was here, so totally satisfied, and anyone could walk in at any moment and find out that their C.O. had had his way with me.

This was definitely going to get in the way of doing my job.

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Chapter Four

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Chapter Four

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ALISON

Sitting at my desk the next day in FBI headquarters, I found it impossible to stop thinking about Brian Grant.

I'd never even known that I had a thing for military men. It hadn't clicked for me in the past. And it wasn't as if I'd never been around them. Growing up as the daughter of a SEAL meant a life around the military.

Every other military man I had ever seen had the trim, neatly combed hair, the clean-shaven face, the ironed clothes, and always seemed a bit different. When I'd gone to college, I had immediately started dating musician friends, artists, men with unkempt appearances, just because they were different. I'd grown up around that stuffed shirt look. I had thought I knew how to spot it about it.

For that matter, I had grown up around Brian Grant.

And yes, I'd always had a crush on him. But what I was feeling now was something altogether different.

Somehow, the perfect look of the military man wore differently on Brian. He didn't have the impression that he had been forced into a certain shape or size. He was dressing to please a higher authority. He looked like *himself* with

hair and well-kept clothes, like this was the way he would have presented himself even if he was selling surf gear on a beach in California. It was who he was, making it sexy to me.

I closed my eyes, reminiscing about the touch of his hands on my body. I had only ever been involved with men my age before, and I'd never had any complaints, but there was something masterful about how Brian handled me. It was like I was an instrument he had been playing all his life.

I was sure that skill came from experience with other women, but for some reason, that fact wasn't bothering me at all.

possible *It's not like I'm into him emotionally.*

That was true. On an emotional level, I wasn't sure how much I even needed him. After all, he was getting in the way of my investigation, and I didn't need that.

growing I was daydreaming about what it would be like to be fucked by the subject of my investigation even as I was working. I was fiercely glad that no one at the FBI headquarters was able to read minds. I would have been the punchline of the century if they knew what I was thinking—if anyone guessed what happened.

it. *He's off-limits, I told myself firmly. I'm just going to have to make sure nothing like that ever happens again.* I didn't want to bungle my very big assignment because I had the hots for my subject, for God's sake.

How was But the idea of never touching him again bothered me more than I could have imagined it would. I wanted to do it again, I realized. If we had been professionally involved the way we were, I would have been pursuing him more aggressively.

or that "Barrett?"

with tidy My eyes flew open.

resented My supervisor, FBI director Kevin Grummond, was standing over me and was just standing looking down at me. “Napping on the job?” he asked.

“No, sir.” I regained my composure. Grummond was always trying to tell me I had been slacking, but I wasn’t doing anything wrong—technically. I had been thinking about my investigation,” I told him, which was sort of true. He eyed me appraisingly. “I think you’d better come into my office, E,” he ordered.

“Is everything all right?” Now he was making me nervous.

“I just want to talk to you about your investigation,” Grummond said. “Something about the way he was looking at me made me even more nervous. I’d like to hear how it’s going directly from the horse’s mouth.”

I didn’t know there was no avoiding it. I stood up, followed him across the floor of the headquarters, and entered the room with his nameplate on the subject of the door.

Grummond was an orderly man in a very different way from the military line of I knew. I had never seen him out of a three-piece suit. His hair, rather than being short and tidily combed, was always kept in an expensive cut that I thought would have looked more at home on a younger man. His office was Spartan, with none of the picture frames featuring family members that every first rest of us kept on our desks, without so much as a stress toy or a cup of pens next to his computer. This office had always creeped me out a little. Grummond pointed to the chair across from his own, and I sat down immediately.

“Have you found any evidence of wrongdoing?” he asked.

“No,” my throat went dry. “But I’ve only been investigating for twenty-four hours. It might take me a little more time than that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you being smart with me?”

my desk I probably had been. I knew I needed to control my tone. It was a real problem. “No, sir.”

to catch He eyed me for a moment, then asked, “How old are you, Barrett?”

“I was He knew the answer to this, of course. My date of birth was in my file. I was trying to make some masculine point by bringing up my age. Barrett,” wasn’t at all sure I liked where this was going.

“I’m twenty-six,” I blinked back, keeping myself in check.

“You’re one of the youngest analysts the FBI has ever hired.”

ted, but I had known that. It was a point of pride for me, for obvious reasons. I worried. I knew that starting this job as young as I had meant plenty of opportunity to grow and build an illustrious career.

in the office “Yes, sir,” I said.

on the “We took a chance hiring someone as young and inexperienced as you.”

Your transcripts were impeccable, and you passed our initiation at the top of the menthe class. Is this your first job out of college?”

er than “No, sir.”

t that I “No? I don’t recall seeing any other professional experience on your resume.”

that the “I was a barista the summer after my undergrad.”

ly full of His eyebrows pulled together, and I immediately regretted what I had said. “I know that’s not the advanced skills job you’re talking about,” I added.

took it “No, it isn’t,” Grummond agreed. “I’m sure you were adept at making coffee with creamer in coffee, Barrett. But this is the big leagues.”

“Yes, sir.”

er about “This assignment means a lot,” he held my gaze. “This is where you earn your stripes. This is where you show the Bureau that we weren’t wrong to hire you.”

cursing “You weren’t wrong,” I told him confidently. “I’m not going to let you
on this investigation, sir. Don’t worry about that.”

Of course, if he knew what I’d done on the first day of my assignment.
file. HeI gritted my teeth. *It doesn’t matter. It’s not going to happen again. I*
, and *I stupid, one-time thing, and nobody’s ever going to know about it, so*
that.

“I want to have faith in you,” Grummond took in a sharp breath. “I
believe you can do it. But I can’t help noticing that you didn’t file a
: I also yesterday.”

ities to “I haven’t found anything yet,” I told him, surprised. “I didn’t have a
to report.”

“You’re still expected to file a report at the end of every working
you are. Grummond stated plainly. “You need to account for every decision
e top of make, Barrett. You need to explain every choice you make in detail.
read your reports, I should feel like I was with you in the room.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Is that degree of detail essential if I haven’t
n your anything yet?”

“Of course, it is,” the creases on his forehead deepened. “It’s critical,
Because I can’t know for sure how acute your powers of investigation
said. “I are, it’s possible—more than *likely*—that you would overlook something
only I would realize was a problem. This is your very first assignment
putting could easily miss things that a more experienced eye would notice.
why you have to report on every single thing you do. *Nothing*
overlooked. That’s of the utmost importance.

u prove I hated that he didn’t trust me. I supposed it did make sense, of course
rong to know I could conduct a thorough investigation, but Grummond didn’t

u downme that well yet. It made sense that he wanted to oversee my invest
and ensure I was doing a good job.

. “All right,” I told him. “I’ll make sure I file those daily reports from r
t was a I’m sorry.”

o *that’s* I did my best to sound contrite, but maybe I laid it on a bit thick even

I understood what he wanted from me and why I wasn’t feeling bad at
want to fact that I hadn’t submitted any reports so far.

a report This wasn’t a high-stakes investigation. I’d been around the SEALs

life. I was sure I wasn’t going to find any serious malfeasance. Wl
nything Grummond so worried about?

“You see that you do that,” he snapped. “I don’t want you to go the sar
g day,” as the last young woman we hired.”

on you I couldn’t help myself. “What do you mean?”

When I “She was just about your age, and we gave her a similar investigation

one you’re on right now, only hers was at the Pentagon. We had
t found expectation that she would do well—she was an impressive candidat

she was hired.”

Barrett. “What happened?”

n really “Well, she failed in her investigation. She gave the Pentagon a clean
nothing and barely a month later, it came out that someone working the

nt. You embezzled some money.”

That’s “An honest mistake?”

can be “Yes, but not one this department can afford. We had to find somethi
for her to do. Something where the stakes weren’t as high.”

ourse. I “You mean... was she fired?”

’t know “No, nobody wanted to fire her for making a mistake, but we also c
put her on any more cases, so she was transferred out. She’s worki

...investigation congressional clerk now.”

A *congressional clerk*? That was an alarming thought. Of course, there was nothing wrong with that job, but it was a far cry from what I hoped to achieve. I swallowed hard. “Are you saying that if I don’t do anything about investigating the SEALs—”

Grummond pointed in an almost dramatic manner. “I’m just suggesting that you make certain you don’t overlook any”

Grummond pointed in an almost dramatic manner. “If you want to work for all my the FBI, this investigation is your chance to show us that you belong. And if things don’t go well, we may come to the conclusion that you’re not fit for the Bureau after all.”

One investigation. One chance. His meaning was clear—this was my only chance, and if I failed here, my career would be derailed. I would be sent off to a desk job with no hope of excitement or advancement. It would all be over for me. I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

And though I knew he was trying to impress upon me the importance of being careful when filing my paperwork, what I took away from the conversation was that I needed to be *much* more careful in my interactions with Brian. If my reports, a few reports could ruin someone’s career prospects at the Bureau, what would happen if it was ever discovered that I’d had sex with someone I was supposed to be investigating?

I was sure the answer to that wasn’t anything good, and I didn’t want to think about it.

“That’s all I wanted to say,” Grummond leaned back in his seat. “I’m excused.”

I stood up and sprinted across the floor, past my desk, and into the bathroom, where I locked myself in a stall and waited for my heart rate to return to normal.

He doesn't know what happened. There's no way he could know.

ere wasBut I couldn't help feeling as though I'd just had a narrow escape.

oped toIt could *never* happen again. Things with Brian would have to be

o wellprofessional from now on, and I would have to give my full attention

investigation.

thing,"I couldn't fail.

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He doesn't know what happened. There's no way he could know.

But I couldn't help feeling as though I'd just had a narrow escape.

It could *never* happen again. Things with Brian would have to be strictly professional from now on, and I would have to give my full attention to my investigation.

I couldn't fail.

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Chapter Five

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Chapter Five

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BRIAN

The last thing I wanted in the world was to have dinner with Barrett tonight.

I would have canceled, but he would have wanted to know why, and think I could come up with a reason that wouldn't sound like an excuse. Henry and I ate dinner together once a month, religiously. We'd done so since his retirement from the SEALs. I couldn't just cancel on that without a good reason.

So we were sitting at our favorite five-star restaurant, sipping cocktails, looking over the menu as if we hadn't seen it a hundred times before. There would somehow be a surprise on it tonight. I was studying the menu so hard because by doing so, I could avoid looking at Henry.

The image of Alison, splayed out naked on the conference room table, was still vivid in my mind, unwilling to leave me alone. Not that I wanted to see her. It was a lovely thing to think about. But it did make it harder to look at Henry in the eyes.

"What's on your mind?" Henry asked, breaking into my thoughts. "You're so distracted tonight."

Do I?

I swallowed my drink, grateful for the fact that I hadn't choked on it. "stuff," I scratched my head lightly. "We're being audited by the feds again."

"Oh, I heard about that," Henry said. "Alison is a part of that sweet grin." I grinned ruefully. "Can you believe my kid is working with the FBI?"

"I really can't."

"It seems like just yesterday that she was playing with dolls."

Well, that wasn't a turn I wanted the conversation to take. "Did Alison she's investigating the SEALs?"

Henry He sighed. "I was afraid that might happen," he said. "But maybe it's best."

I didn't "How could it be for the best?"
excuse. "I don't know—don't you think it's good to have her doir
so ever investigation? I mean, it's Allie. You can have her in and out quick
without a anything, I think it'll benefit both of you. You won't have to put u
some pompous stuffed shirt doing the investigation, digging around
trouble where there isn't any. Allie can impress her supervisors by get
ails and job done quickly because you'll help her find everything she needs."

He said it so confidently. I could tell he was imagining me taking a f
uncle role in the whole thing, guiding Alison through her investigati
making sure she did not have trouble accessing the documents she w
le, was thought about the way I'd dug in my heels about it when Alison had as
it to. It Well, I wasn't going to feel guilty about that. It wasn't my job to h
r father feds find evidence against the SEALs, even if those feds did happe

Henry Barrett's daughter.

How I felt about the fact that I'd fucked her was a little more complica

I couldn't honestly say I regretted it. How long had it been since I'd

off with someone that age? Too long. And to have it happen in the c
“Workwell, that had been extraordinarily hot. I wanted to do it again as s
gain.” possible.

ep.” HeAll of which didn’t make it easier to sit across from her father, my
friend, and look him in the eye. If he knew the truth, he’d be jumpin
the table to rip my head off.

Ah, I could take him.

son tellIt was true, and I probably could take Henry in a fight. He was retir
he’d started to take on the build and fitness of a civilian. In compariso
for thestill in near-peak military shape. I wasn’t where I’d been at twenty, bu
still good in a fight.

But that wasn’t the point.

ig thatI didn’t *want* a fight with Henry.

ckly. If“I might be able to help her,” I said and turned to catch the eye
up withwaitress, who was passing by—anything to derail the current conversa
ind forThe waitress saw me looking and came over. “Are you gentlemen read
ting the“I’m going to start with the whiskey and bacon flight and then the
soup and the prime rib for my main,” I told her, handing over my

friendly“What are you doing for dessert tonight?”

ion and“The chef has a creme brûlée three ways.”

anted. I“Yes, perfect. I’ll try that. And bring out a bottle of the house re
ked. please.”

help theHenry placed his order too, and the waitress went on her way.

n to be“Listen,” I resumed when she was gone. “Dinner is on me tonig
arguments.”

ted. “You do this every time,” Henry protested.

l gotten“That’s because I can afford this place, and you can’t.” It was true. Th

office—my grandfather’s investments in a tech empire, I had never struggled as much with money when I was just a little kid. If anything, it was the opposite. Being wealthy and working for the military was a little uncomfortable some of the time. Even high-ranking SEALs like myself didn’t draw big salaries, so the money I was making overhung around with—like Henry—tended to be high middle-income.

And sometimes we did go to moderately priced restaurants. I wasn’t too picky about that. But I also liked cuisine, and Henry had always been willing to try new things. I used to check out places like this with me, which didn’t stop me from wanting to go, I was foot the bill.

It was “I can afford it.”

“I mean, okay, but if you do, are you going to have to give up something else?”

“You’ve got to stop doing this, Brian. I wouldn’t have agreed to come to this restaurant if I hadn’t been able to handle my bill.”

“I’m paying,” I told him firmly. “You can buy dinner next time we go out.” “Right, when we go to Joe’s crab shack or something.”

“Will you knock it off, please? It’s not as if I’m even paying with the money I earned. This is my inheritance based on my grandfather’s investments. There’s more of it than I’d be able to spend in a lifetime. Let me use it to take my damn friend out to dinner.”

Henry grinned. “Okay, okay,” the creases on his face started to clear.

“You win. Dinner’s on you.”

“Thank you.” At least this would help to assuage my guilt a little, although I knew that Henry wouldn’t consider buying dinner for the rest of my life as adequate compensation for what I had done.

I couldn’t stop picturing her!

Every time I looked down at the table in front of me, it was as if I had

led fornaked right here. Worse, I wasn't just thinking about and reliving even
. Being we'd done—I also imagined the stuff we hadn't done. The thing we
ometimes had time to do because we'd been too busy making sure we didn't get
: guys I What would it have been like to taste her?

I fucking loved going down on women. Some guys might have thought
o good wasn't a very manly thing to do, but the way the ladies squirmed from
o come lick convinced me that those other guys weren't doing it right. They
ating to as adept as I was, so they had to make it seem like there was something
unmanly about the practice.

I'd never think myself too good to give a woman pleasure. Why the
nothing wouldn't I want the woman I was with to have just as good a time as

That was what kept them coming back for more!

to this I let myself close my eyes, just for a moment, and imagine doing this
Alison.

out.” Fuck, it would be good. She had been so responsive to me when we
together. She'd fallen apart at the slightest touch. God, if I ever
money chance to take my time with her, I would take her apart so completely
its, and she'd forget her name.

to take “Brian?”

I opened my eyes. Henry was looking at me with concern. “What is it
ear up. you tonight?” he demanded. “I swear, it's like you're not even here.”

“Nothing.”

though I “Are you worried about the fed's investigation or something?”

fe to be “Of course not. You know as well as I do that they never find anything
a tight ship. There isn't anything for them to find.”

“That's right,” Brian said. “The SEALs would never do anything immediate
had her “That's right.”

rything “And besides, we thrive on adversity,” he added, paraphrasing the motto of the SEALs.

caught. I laughed. “That’s true. With all the shit they’ve put us through over the years, a little investigation is nothing.”

ought it “Will you do me a favor, though?”

om one “Yeah, sure. What do you need?”

weren’t “Take care of Alison.”

nothing My gut clenched. If only he knew the degree to which I had already taken care of Alison.

he hell “What do you mean?” I managed.

s I did? “Oh, she’s a big girl, I know that. She can look after herself. But at the time, this is her first assignment, and I worry. I know how important

at with her to do well. Will you keep an eye on her for me? Help her out if you

You know how they can be over at the FBI. They’ll be looking for her if she’s been. And you know the detailed type of reports they expect from their analysts because you’ve been dealing with them for years.”

ely that “It goes against my instincts to help a fed,” I said. “Usually, I’d be trying to prevent them from digging too deep into our shit.”

“Yeah,” Henry laughed. “So would I. It’s an adjustment having my daughter on the other side of the table.”

Not as much of an adjustment as it was having your daughter on top of the table.

Fucking hell, I needed to stop thinking about that. Or at least, if I was going to be thinking about it—and if I was honest with myself, I knew I would be—I needed to wait until I wasn’t sitting three feet from Henry Barrett.

Somehow, I got through the rest of the dinner. It was agony, though

For a long time, I battled images of Alison in my head and pondered when I would ever get the chance to experience the real thing again. I tried to never persuade myself that it was a bad idea. Still, I knew that if she ever came back, I wouldn't have the strength to say no.

How ironic. I was strong enough to fight the best military men in the world. I was strong enough to go through SEAL training and come out the other side—something very few men could claim. But when faced with the possibility of Alison Barrett, I was afraid my strength would disappear.

No.

I wouldn't allow that to happen. Alison wouldn't get the better of me. It was the investigation of hers, and not physically. She was twenty-six years old. It is, after all, no matter how hot she was. I was the one who knew how the other side worked.

It had to fail. The check came, and I grabbed it before Harry could get any idea of renegotiating our agreement and gave the waitress my credit card, and she smiled at me. They knew me at this restaurant and knew that I was a tipper. I was sure she was looking forward to the number I would write at the bottom of the receipt.

After dinner, I was looking forward to dinner being over. I'd never been so eager to finish with my meal with Harry before.

When I got home that night, I poured myself a scotch and went out on the balcony, something I often did on warm nights.

I couldn't let myself be with Alison again, but nothing in the world could stop me from that. I couldn't enjoy a good fantasy.

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Chapter Six

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Chapter Six

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ALISON

If I'm ever around Brian again, I might go insane. I was afraid of his judgment after he kept trying to hold me back in my investigation, looking at me like I was a sizzling steak. I knew it would be impossible for me to get any work done.

Fortunately, I had devised what I thought would be a reasonable solution. Nothing in my mandate said I had to go through Brian for this investigation. I'd only been talking to him because he was the senior non-commissioned officer, and that had been the natural thing to do. And he'd pump the brakes on my investigation—and got me off track with that rock-hard logic of his.

Nothing prevented me from going in on a Saturday, though.

My dad had been the senior NCO for years. I had enough experience with SEALs to know that the top brass wasn't likely to be in the office today. If I went in now, I would likely end up dealing with some junior officer eager to earn his stripes. Someone who wouldn't be as aware as Brian was that he had the power to say no to me about things.

Definitely, it wouldn't be someone I wanted to fuck, and that could be an improvement.

I was dressed professionally in a three-piece suit with a crisp blazer and pencil skirt. I'd also worn pantyhose, which I hadn't done the last time I'd been here. I didn't usually like them. But I couldn't stop thinking about how easy I had made it for Brian to push up my skirt and take down my panties. *Knock it off. He isn't even going to be there. You could go in command and it wouldn't matter because you're not going to see him today.*

Sure enough, when I arrived, the office was all but empty. I smiled. Things were going perfectly according to plan.

The only person who seemed to be around was a younger guy, maybe five years older than me. He was sitting at a desk and flipping through a binder, but he looked up when I came into the room and smiled.

It was such an un-military thing to do that I couldn't help loosening up a bit and smiling back at him. "Hello," I chirped.

"Hello," the guy replied. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No appointment."

"Oh," he looked relieved. "That's good."

"Is it?"

"Well, I just mean because I'm the only person here," he explained.

"If they were supposed to meet someone, they wouldn't have been around."

"I'm not meeting anybody," I assured him. I was relieved to note that he'd been right. Brian wasn't here. It was just this guy.

Maybe I would be able to talk my way into getting what I wanted from him.

I approached him, and he put away the folder he had been looking at and got to his feet. That was a little more military of him—or maybe just a gentleman. "What can I help you with?" he asked.

only be “My name is Alison Barrett.” I held my breath. Could he have heard me? Did Brian put the word out?

er and aHowever, the guy didn’t seem to have any idea who I was. “Petty time I’d Jack Richards,” he said, reaching out to shake my hand. “You can just put how me Jack, though.”

ities. “Just Jack? That’s okay?”

do, and “Yeah, it’s fine,” he gave a stiff nod. “I don’t need to be addressed for except by other SEALs. I *could* ask you to use my rank, but actually, his was it’s a silly thing to insist on from civilians. Only pompous douche that.”

e about I smiled. I got the exact dim-witted guy I wanted to deal with. Ja rough a different from my father and, I thought, different from Brian. He was serious about the SEALs. He was the type of guy who got into the service a little a point of pride, to show that he was capable of joining one of the most forces in the world—but at heart, I thought, he was probably still regular guy. He didn’t have that bleed-for-the-red-white-and-blue mentality that Dad and Brian possessed.

He would be easier to work with.

Coming here today had been a great idea.

“If you “Jack, I wonder if you might be able to help me,” I cut to the chase, forcing him what I very much hoped was a winning smile.

at I had “Well, I can sure try. What is it you need?” “I’m here from the FBI,” I

“You know about the yearly audit the Bureau does on all the branches him. military, right?” I rolled my eyes to let him know that I thought the thorough thing was a little silly and that I wasn’t approaching this with any degree he was seriousness.

Which was a complete lie, of course. Nothing could have been further

d about the truth. But let him believe that this wasn't something that mattered much.

Officer "Sure," Jake furrowed his brow. "You could set your watch by the rust call investigations."

"Well, it's my first year with the Bureau," I beamed at him. "I want to make a good impression. I'm sure you can understand how that is. I need to make a good impression. And I'm guessing you've been through more of these investigations than I have."

Jack agreed. "I've been through my share of them," Jack agreed.

"Maybe you can help me get the documents I need? My boss is back and he's been down my neck about this, and I need to do a good job."

Jack frowned. "Well, I don't know if I should let you into the files without talking to my CO about it first."

It wasn't a hard no, and I wasn't about to take it as one. I hadn't used a weapon in my arsenal yet.

I wasn't particularly proud of myself for what I was about to do—but I was willing to do it. Anything necessary to get the job done. And if I could get enough information today, I wouldn't have to return. I wouldn't even see Brian Grant again.

That thought definitely shouldn't have made me ache with displeasure.

I moved closer to Jack, arching my back slightly to accentuate my chest. I wasn't sure if it was enough so that what I was doing would be blatantly obvious, I hoped it was enough that he would be forced to notice my figure.

I saw that it worked. His eyes dipped briefly from my face to my breasts. "Listen, I know I'm not doing things by the book. And I'm sorry. I'm not trying to put you in a bad position. It's just that I'm already behind here from

ed veryboss called me into his office yesterday so that he could yell at me and threaten to sack me.”

ose fed“Did he really?”

Not really. That was an overstatement. There had been no yelling. And I had not been threatened with a transfer, not a firing. But Jack didn’t need to know a goodthat.

those“I’m not asking for anything out of the ordinary,” I told him. “Just a copy of last year’s financial records.”

Jack nodded. “I suppose that isn’t such a big deal,” he said. “They’re not using a breathingcomputer. I can’t give you the password, of course.”

“Oh, God no.” I did my best to sound aghast. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that withoutYou could set me up with a computer and log me into the relevant files. I don’t need the password.”

d everyI gave his arm a gentle, playful shove. I was teasing.

He knew I was flirting. It was impossible to ignore. I couldn’t help wondering what Mr. Grummond would make of my particular tactic.

But I was going to use every weapon in my arsenal. I wasn’t too proud to get my way. And it was working because Jack now led me over to an empty desk and even pulled out the chair for me so that I could sit down. “I’ll go and get you a computer,” he announced. “You wait here, okay?” I nodded, but “No problem.” I sat with my hands folded on the desk in front of me. I corrected my posture so that my breasts protruded. Jack was definitely a hot guy. I could tell that he was staring.

He shook his head. I couldn’t tell if he thought I was a little over the top or not. Myenough if he did—I absolutely was.

But it also seemed to be working, so I wasn’t about to stop.

me and Jack returned with the laptop and set it down in front of me. I turned my head away while he entered the password. I would have liked to try to get a peek at him—having access to the files whenever I wanted to get in would have been so convenient—but he was giving me what I wanted right now, so I didn't want to know how to break his trust.

He pushed the laptop toward me. "There you go. You're in the files now. You have a copy of systems now."

"Thanks." I beamed up at him. "I've never done this before, so I don't know if I will be able to figure out exactly what I'm looking at here."

The innocent act was a complete fabrication. I would, of course, be able to read any financial report. I'd been trained for this.

But the indulgent smile on Jack's face told me that my ruse had had the intended effect. "If you need any help decoding those files, you can come and talk to me," he was so kind. "I'll just be right over there at my desk."

"Thanks," I grinned at him. "I can't tell you what a help you've been, but I'm glad of this." "Well, I can't tell *you* what a nice change you make from the usual computer counters the fed sends over," Jack said with a grin. "It's nice to deal with an actual human being for once. Most of them look like the only thought that goes through their heads are numbers."

I laughed. "They are almost robotic, aren't they?"

"Exhaustingly." He leaned against the wall of the cubicle I was sitting in. "Listen, I could hang around and help you go through those files. It might be a booba lot to figure out, and you could probably use a bit of guidance, right?"

Absolutely not. Not only did I know what I was doing and not need his help. Fair but I also didn't want him to see what I was up to. The fact that I might be able to look into the past five years of the SEALs' finances instead of just a few months beyond the scope of a standard investigation. Jack had been cooperating

my headfar, but if he knew how deep a dive I was planning to do, I thought he
it from have decided to stop me.

ve been I giggled. “Don’t be silly. I’m sure you have plenty of work you need
I’t want Jack, and I wouldn’t want to keep you from it! I know how hard you
work.”

nancial “I’m only an NCO,” Jack said, but he was flushed with pride.

“Maybe that’s true,” I leaned forward daringly and covered his hair
I’t know mine. “But even so—”

“What the hell is going on here?”

able to I jumped in my chair. Jack’s head jerked up, an expression of shock and
on his face.

had the I knew the voice, but I still turned to see.

me and Sure enough, Brian Grant was standing behind me, a look of absolute
his face.

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far, but if he knew how deep a dive I was planning to do, I thought he might have decided to stop me.

I giggled. “Don’t be silly. I’m sure you have plenty of work you need to do, Jack, and I wouldn’t want to keep you from it! I know how hard you SEALs work.”

“I’m only an NCO,” Jack said, but he was flushed with pride.

“Maybe that’s true,” I leaned forward daringly and covered his hand with mine. “But even so—”

“What the hell is going on here?”

I jumped in my chair. Jack’s head jerked up, an expression of shock and guilt on his face.

I knew the voice, but I still turned to see.

Sure enough, Brian Grant was standing behind me, a look of absolute fury on his face.

Chapter Seven

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Chapter Seven

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BRIAN

The fucking *audacity!*

She must have decided she wasn't going to get what she wanted from me, so she'd come in on a Saturday, *knowing* I wouldn't be around. Of course, she would have known, Henry had always taken Saturdays off, so that she could deal with a junior officer instead.

It was such a fucking cheap move.

I'd thought I had respect for her, at least, but now I was fucking furious. Seeing her there, it was so transparently obvious what she was trying to do. Why she had come in today, and what she had hoped to achieve by it.

I stepped forward—and that's when I noticed that her hand was on top of his. Fucking hell. I knew that move.

She was hitting on him, flirting with him to get him to cooperate with her. She seemed to realize that she was still touching him at the same moment. She pulled her hand back and got to her feet. "Brian," she called.

"Sir," Jack said. "I'm sorry. I was just trying to—"

"Jack, why don't you get the hell out of here," I thundered.

“Yes, sir.” Jack looked relieved as hell at the suggestion. He left the where Allison was sitting immediately bolted for the door. I guess probably gone out to get some lunch, or maybe he was just knocking the day. Nothing said he had to be here on a Saturday, and if I were wouldn’t have wanted to hang around after getting caught aiding and a a fed.

You better take it easy, Brian. You know he didn’t do anything wrong l
Yeah, I knew that. But my outburst was because I had to point my a someone. Jack was just the most convenient target, with one exception I turned slowly back to Alison. She was looking up at me, a expression on her face.

l out of
ind—of “What are you doing?” I demanded.

off—so “Going through the financial records. Exactly what I told you I was do.”

“Don’t get fucking cute with me, Alison.”

us. Just “Don’t talk to me like you’re my father. You’re not,” she retorted
; to do. might have known me when I was a kid, but I’m not a kid now. I’m do a job, and I will do that job.”

of his. “I’m here to do a job, too,” I reminded her. “You can’t expect me stand back and let you fuck around in the SEALs’ records just be know your father.”

her.
oment I “Whether you know my dad has absolutely nothing to do with any c she was fuming. “And I don’t expect you to *let me fuck around*, Bria expect you to comply with a lawful investigation. And I also expect quit tone-policing me. I’ll get fucking cute with whoever I like.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I snarled.

She got to her feet slowly. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

cubicle “It means, what was going on between you and Jack?”

and he’d “*Going on?* Nothing was going on. He was setting up this computer for

me off for “And loitering around while you used it?”

to him, I “I’m not in charge of him, Brian. What was I supposed to do?”

betting “I’m not naive, *Alison*. If he was hanging around you, it’s because you

made him feel like there was a reason to do that. I know, Jack. I know I

was there. He responds to women.”

anger at She folded her arms across her chest.

“I couldn’t help noticing the way the posture accented her breasts. An

defiant suddenly, I was thinking about how soft and lush they were and how

it felt to have them filling my hands.

That was definitely not what I wanted to be thinking about right now

here to also made me angrier.

“So let me get this straight,” Alison exhaled. “Your contention is that

you and I are having some kind of lurid affair?”

l. “You “I don’t think you’re having an affair.”

here to “Well, good because that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard in my life

“But I do think you were hitting on him.”

just to She blushed, and I knew I was right.

cause I “So that’s what you do,” I cocked a brow, waiting for a plausible re

“What’s what I do?”

of this,” “That’s how you handle your work for the FBI. You’re that over jealo

n, but I of fed. Sleeping your way to the top.”

you to “Fucking—*excuse me?*”

“You were hitting on him to get him to give you information.”

“Okay. First of all, flirting is not the same thing as fucking,” she said

frankly, after what happened the last time you and I were in the same

would have thought you would know that. You acted like a big man then
r me.” don’t know why you’re acting like such a petty boy right now.”

Hot rage surged through me. “Don’t you talk to me like that.”

“And secondly,” she went on, ignoring me, “I can flirt with anyone
u madeWhat business is it of yours?”

how he “It’s my business when the target of your scheme is a member of my
and you’re preying on him to get into the SEALs’ computer system.”

“But I notice you didn’t object to any of this when you hit on me to
id then,distract me from the job I came here to do,” she said.“That’s not
v it hadfucking happened.”

“Oh, please. I may be young, but I’m not a child. I know what happened
, and itShe was wrong. The distraction had been convenient, but that wasn’t
done it. I just hadn’t been able to resist her.

at JackNow I was starting to think that was by design.

“You want to know what I think?” I asked her.

“Not really,” she snapped.

ie.” “I think you seduced me because you wanted to soften me up so I’d go
what you wanted,” I said. “Just like you did to Jack.”

“You think *I* seduced *you*?”

sponse.“You know you did.”

“Who was the person who put the other on the table?”

us type “I wouldn’t have done that if you hadn’t been hitting on me so furiously
the bar.”

“Oh, okay, now I’m not allowed to hit on guys *at bars*?” She shook her head.

“You’re being stupid. I didn’t do anything wrong. If I want, I can go to
l. “Andbars and hit on people.”

room, I “Keep it out of my damn office; that’s all I’m saying. Go to bars and

en, so I whoever you want. That's none of my concern."

"I don't know," Alison quipped. "I think you're jealous."

"Jealous. Really."

I want. I was doing my best to sound mocking because I didn't want her to
how close to home that accusation had hit.

y staff, I was a little jealous. And it had been years, no, decades since
something like that. I couldn't remember feeling jealous over a woman
o try to adult life.

ot what I didn't want an actual relationship with Henry Barrett's daughter
wasn't where the feeling was coming from.

ed." I didn't want to see her with anybody else.

why I'd "Listen, what you do on your own time is your business. But I will not
you disrupting my team at work."

"You can't get rid of me," she folded her arms. "I'm here on assignment
can get rid of you. I can send you back to the FBI and tell them
someone who won't fraternize with the team."

ive you "And I'll tell them you were the one doing all the fraternizing," she said.
I looked at her steadily. "Okay, you tell them that, and let's see which
they believe."

Her jaw dropped. "I can't believe you'd do that. You'd destroy my career
because you can't accept that I got a little flirty with some guy?"

ously at "Stop flirting, and you won't have to worry about such things."

"You're an asshole."

er head. Maybe I was. But I was going to have my way about this. "And what
o out to come to this office," I looked straight into her eyes, "you deal with
the NCO around here. You don't show up on weekends and try to get
I hit on officers to let you into the files."

ked. "Are you afraid of? What do you think is going to happen?"

ou first. To be completely honest, I wasn't sure. I only knew that we were taking
I found by doing what we had been doing and that if anyone found out, we were
in trouble. This shouldn't have mattered to me, given that I was never
let it," I touched her again.

day. I'd "You're not going to come to the office?" I asked her.

7 phone "No, I'm damn well not. You don't tell me where to go."

id back "Fine. Then you'd better get out of here. I *can* tell you to do that."

ve been "You can't, though. I'm conducting an investigation, and I have every
—"

she had "You have to leave because I'm leaving," I interrupted. "And I'm going to
lock the building. You don't have the right to be on military property
unsupervised. Let's go. You can come back on Monday."

y. She knew I was right; I could see it on her face. She grabbed her purse
and ran out to But I *will* be back."

"I can hardly wait."

what I She started toward the door. I was about to let her go, but then I realized
I didn't trust her to leave. Who was to say she wouldn't turn around and
run back into the building.

"Are you following me?" she asked, realizing what I was doing.

"Escorting you out."

"You're a real piece of work," she snapped. "You never pissed me off
Or are this when I was growing up."

ou think "We weren't around each other as much then."

reer? "Hopefully, we'll be able to return to that soon."

We'd reached the door. She reached out and pulled on the handle.
the hell The door jiggled in its frame slightly but didn't budge.

We were locked in.

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Chapter Eight

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Chapter Eight

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BRIAN

“**M**ove,” I said, shouldering her out of the way so I could get the door myself.

“Hey, watch it,” she snapped. “You don’t have to fucking shove me.”

“I didn’t shove you.” I hadn’t. I’d just edged her out of my way. I would have shoved a woman.

I grabbed the door handle myself and tugged at it. I couldn’t get it open either. “What the hell?”

“It’s locked,” Alison said maddeningly.

“Yeah, I can see that it’s locked.

Outside, I heard a clap of thunder. It seemed a storm was on the horizon.

“Open it,” Alison said.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? You’re the NCO, as you’re so fond of reminding me. You must have the keys.”

“It locks from the outside.”

“What?”

“There’s a lock on the inside—” I flipped it back and forth to show
“but the key locks the door from the outside. Jack must have locked
he left.”

“Okay. Great. So how are we supposed to get out? Is there a back exit?”

“No.”

“You’re telling me there’s only one way in or out of this place? Is
against the fire code or something?”

I stared at her in amusement. “What would you know about the fire code?”

“I’m not an imbecile, Brian. There must be another way out of this building.”

“There is, but it’ll be locked too. We don’t unlock the service entrance
weekends.”

“So we’re stuck in here?”

“Of course not. I’ll call maintenance to come and let us out. It’s no big deal.”

“Fine. I’ll go wait at that desk where I was sitting.”

“You absolutely won’t,” I told her firmly. “I’m not leaving you alone
building.”

“Brian, for God’s sake. What do you think I’m going to do, set the building
on fire?”

“No, what you’re going to do is come back to my office and stay where I
keep an eye on you while I call maintenance.”

“*Keep an eye on me?*”

“I don’t care if you are fed,” I told her firmly. “I’m the NCO, and I’m
going to allow any civilian to be unsupervised in this building.”

I could see that she had no actual argument to offer against that. “Fine,”
said at last. “Your office, then.”

Thunder rumbled outside again, and I led her across the floor to my office.

This time, she sat opposite mine without waiting to be asked and furrowed her

her—her purse. After a moment, she pulled out a cell phone.

She made a face. “Do you have a charger? My phone is dying.”

I looked over at it. Her phone was an older model and of a different than mine. “I don’t have that kind,” I said.

“Damn.”

“Why don’t you carry one with you?” “I didn’t realize I was going to be locked in the building, did I? Do you carry a phone charger everywhere?”

“No, but I probably would if I carried a big handbag.”

“Oh, call maintenance, will you? I want to get out of here.”

I wanted out too. Being around her was an ordeal, not just because she couldn’t seem to keep her mouth shut for more than a minute at a time. Her hair was falling out of its neat updo, making me remember what it looked like lying on my conference room table, fucked out and messy. There was no one here. We were locked in.

Maybe I shouldn’t call maintenance.

I watched as the screen light on her phone died.

Her phone was dead. She didn’t know the number for maintenance. If I can make the call, we would be stuck here, and she would be at my mercy. I decided it was time for us to leave.

Then we’d see how she liked it when someone seduced *her*. She wouldn’t be so cocky when she was on the receiving end of that little game. Oh, fuck her until she begged for satisfaction, and then I’d make her swear to me, shedown that I would be the only person on the SEAL team she would ever speak to—

office. “Brian!”

“What?” I blinked and refocused.

“Are you calling for help?” she demanded. “I don’t want to stay here tonight.”

The thunder clapped again rather ominously.

“Right.” As much as I’d liked the fantasy playing out in my head, I knew it was just that—a fantasy. I’d already made this decision. No matter how much I enjoyed thinking about her that way, I wouldn’t let her get under my skin anymore. Our affair could continue, but only within the safe confines of my mind. I wouldn’t touch her.

Except I knew if we were trapped together in this building for much longer, I *would* touch her. I was only a man, after all. There was only so much willpower I was going to be able to muster.

I opened my drawer and pulled out the business card I kept there with Alison’s phone number for maintenance written on it. Then I reached for the phone. The lights flickered.

“What the hell?”

But I got my answer a half second later. A flash of lightning lit up the sky outside, followed by the loudest crash of thunder yet, and the room went dark.

The power was out.

We were both quiet for a moment as our eyes adjusted to the darkness. Alison broke the silence. “Are the phones out too?”

I felt for the receiver, picked it up, and held it to my ear. It was dead. “You have your cell?” “It’s in my car.” I hadn’t brought it in because I meant to be inside for more than a moment. Ironic that I’d come in here and I’d forgotten my charger, but I’d left my phone in the car.

“So you’re telling me,” Alison said, “that we’re stuck here with no way in contact with anyone?”

ere all “I’m sure the power will come back soon,” I told her. “We have to w
out. We’ll be out of here in no time.” My eyes were beginning to adju
and I saw her lean back in her chair and heave a deep sigh. “Great,” s
knew it glumly. “This is just fucking perfect.”

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Two hours later, the power still hadn’t come back on, and Alison and
still stuck inside.

“Do we at least have anything to eat?” Alison groaned. “I’m getting hu

“You didn’t eat before you came here to do espionage?”

“I mean, you don’t need to act like I was skulking around in the bush

said irritably. “This is a legitimate investigation. I’m sorry I came

around when you weren’t here. You don’t like that. I get it. But the

real reason I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I got to my feet. “We may as well go and see what’s

fridge in the lunch room. It’s probably all going to go bad, so we sho

eat it.

I think she nodded. It was hard to tell in the dim light. The only illum

in the building was coming from the windows, and as the sky outside

dark, it was still pretty challenging to make out details.

I led the way to the kitchen with Alison trailing me and opened the fric

The pickings were surprisingly good. One of the junior officers celeb

birthday yesterday. Usually, I wouldn’t say I liked to let the team indu

much, but for some reason, I’d found myself in a good mood, and we’

little party, which had been catered. Now there was leftover Italian

wait this the fridge—a big bowl of salad, trays containing three different types of pasta, some garlic bread, and some cannoli.

she said I started pulling things out. “It’s cold, but it’s good food, at any rate.”

Alison was going through the drawers. A moment later, she returned with a plastic knife and fork, sat at the table, and started eating fettuccine from one of the trays.

“Hungry, huh?”

I were

“I told you I was.”

ingry.”

I rolled my eyes, but the truth was that I couldn’t have said why her behavior was annoying me so much. I’d put the food out for her to eat, and it was just as if there were plates.

es,” she

“Maybe I’ll take some of this into my office.” I picked up the tin of spaghetti and meatballs and grabbed a plastic fork of my own.

re’s no

She looked up. “So now you’re fine leaving me alone? Unsupervised?”

“Well, you’re not going to do anything with the power out,

s in the

It’s not like you can start going through the computer files now.”

uld just

She sighed and put her fork down. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I don’t know why you’re treating me like I’m your enemy. I’m not. I know you’ll have people come to audit the SEALs every year, and I assume they’ll cooperate with them.”

ination

was so

“Why are you looking into five years of records? Every year, the federales review *one* year, the most recent one. I know your higher-ups would order you to do that deep dive.” I drew a breath. “You’re trying to make my bones by digging up dirt on the SEALs.”

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food in

I hadn’t realized I thought that until I’d said it out loud. But now that my words were hanging in the air, I realized I meant them. Alison was s

types often succeed on the first assignment that she *wanted* to find something scandalous.

Alison stood up quickly—so quickly that I was afraid she was going to fall with the pasta.

She said, “You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she snapped, her voice

“And I’m not going to sit here and listen to you talk shit about me and Brian.”

“Well, where the fuck are you going to go? We’re locked in!”

“I’ll eat in the women’s room if it means getting away from you.” This

wasn’t as bad as even worse in here than it had been in his office—there was only

one small window—but I could see that she was shaking with rage. “I’ve

enough of it. I’m trying to do a job, and you’ve been treating me

like—”

” “Like what?”

“I don’t know! Nobody fucking treats me like this! Like you can tell me

to do. Like you have some authority over me.”

“You’re in my office!”

“And I’ll bet you don’t treat anybody else who comes in here like this.

That’s why you don’t because if you were the type of guy who routinely fucked

agents who were just trying to do their jobs, my father would know about

it. She drew a breath. “But you wouldn’t want my father to know about

it, did you?” He was watching me steadily now, and I realized—that was a threat. Make

yourself believe me over her if the story of what had happened between

the two of us were to come out. But Henry would take his daughter’s

word, especially if I did something to cost her her job.

It was a standoff.

“Stay here,” I told her. “Don’t eat in the damn bathroom. I’ll eat

nothing office.” She looked at me.

“Just come and see me if the lights come back on,” I told her. “I’ll get to spill phone to maintenance the minute that happens.”

I grabbed the pan of spaghetti and stalked out of the room.

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“Just come and see me if the lights come back on,” I told her. “I’ll get on the phone to maintenance the minute that happens.”

I grabbed the pan of spaghetti and stalked out of the room.

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Chapter Nine

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Chapter Nine

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ALISON

Four hours later, the lights still hadn't come back on, and I was
to feel anxious.

I'd ducked into the bathroom and taken off my jacket and pantyhose. No power, no AC, it was warm here—or maybe it was just my anxiety making me feel warm. Being in the building in my skirt and shell tank made me feel a little less professional, a little more out of control. And that locked door was not helping matters.

It was spooky being alone in here, weird not knowing what time it was, upsetting that Brian still hadn't come out of his office. I had returned to the desk where I'd been working earlier that day and was sitting in the chair, spinning around slowly, lost in my thoughts.

Every time I spun around, I looked at the door to Brian's office, hoping it would be open and he would come back out. I had no idea why I wanted to see him—I only knew that being with him would be better than being alone. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I got up, went to the office door, and threw it open without knocking. He couldn't keep me out like that—he couldn't just—

It honestly took me a minute to understand what I was seeing in the dark, and what I had walked in on.

And then I realized.

His pants were down around his knees. His hand was on his cock, still gripping it. And for a moment, I felt my hand curl, my fingers curving into the shape to hold that cock myself. I'd never done it, but, fuck, I had felt it inside me. I knew how he would feel in my hand.

He looked up at me at the sound of the door opening.

I expected him to jump out of the chair, turn his back to me, yank his pants up, and curse me out for invading his space.

He did none of that.

Instead, eyes locked to mine in the darkness, he stroked his hand along his length again.

A shiver went down my spine, and I felt myself get wet. I swore inwardly that I had no clean panties to change into after this.

"I was hoping you were going to come in," he croaked, his hand still resting on his cock.

"The door was not locked." My gaze had dropped to his cock, and I couldn't stop staring. I hadn't gotten a good look at him before. Fuck, he was bigger than I

known he was big—I'd felt how big he was—but seeing it was different. And now I was thinking about all kinds of filthy things, like whether I could

fit him in my mouth, like how deep down my throat I would be able to take him. God, if he knew what was going on in my head.

"The locks work with electricity. I couldn't keep you out. Not with the door closed, or, and

his. He "Fuck, Brian... if you wanted me in here, all you had to do was ask."

"I didn't want you," he sighed. "I was pissed off at you."

"And now?" I was still staring at him.

irkness, He shrugged. "Now I'm hard for you."

"For me?"

"What do you think I was thinking about in here?"

roking. "So you're not pissed off at me anymore."

proper "I can fuck you and still be pissed off at you. Look at me."

elt him Unwillingly, I dragged my gaze up from his cock to his face.

"Can't I?" he challenged.

"Can't... what?"

is pants "You're not going to turn me down, are you? You want me as bad as you."

"No," I lied.

slowly He chuckled, and I knew I wasn't fooling anyone. "Okay, Alison. When you close that door?"

ardly. I moved toward the door to close it.

"Close it with you on this side of it," he said firmly.

noving. My heart pounding double-time, I did as he had asked.

ouldn't "Come over here."

big. I'd "What are you going to do?" But he didn't have to answer. I was

nt. moving toward him. He stood up and emerged from the pool of his

I could becoming completely naked below the waist. I quivered.

to take "You can't imagine," he said, his voice dark and husky, "what it's be

for me, being locked in here with you. I've been telling myself I can't
power you all day."

"You can't touch me." I didn't sound nearly as confident as I wanted to

"Can't I?" he asked darkly.

I shivered again. "We have to keep this professional, Brian."

"I don't know if we do. You haven't been doing things very profess

have you? Coming in on a Saturday when you knew I wouldn't be here now, walking into my office without so much as knocking first, you'd be better than to do that."

"I didn't know you would be naked here." Fuck, he was *still* naked, and he was saying these things to me, even as he was scolding me for walking on him. As if I could have known.

"Take your shirt off," he said.

"What?"

"I want to see you."

"We can't—"

"I heard you. We have to keep it professional. The thing is, I can't resist anymore. And I don't think you can resist me either."

"I'm not the one who had my hand down my pants."

"Yeah?" He was in my space, and suddenly, his breath was hot on my neck and I could feel his cock against my hip. *Fuck*, he was hard, and I could help thinking about how hot his skin must be there. "I need to feel you," Brian muttered.

He grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked it up, free of my skirt. I felt his hands on my pants, gasp.

His hand skimmed up my bare torso and cupped my breast. I couldn't help but arch into his touch.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I thought it might be like that," he said, his hand grazing over my nipple through the lace of my bra. "You've been around here just as horny as I am. You want it just as bad as I do."

I met his eyes. I had to lie. "I don't," I breathed.

It didn't sound convincing at all. Only an idiot would have believed me. His other hand had found the zipper of my skirt, and he eased it down

re. Andskirt dropped over my hips and landed on the floor.

I knowHe traced my hip, ran his hand down my thigh, then picked up my
wrapped it around his waist.

even asUnwillingly—it was just instinct—I rocked my hips against him, fee
lking inlength pressing hard against my core, dragging against my clit.

“Oh, you want me,” he said. “I can feel how you want me.”

I was helpless. I rocked again, grinding into him. There was no goir
from this. I knew it was a bad idea, but now that we were here,
pressed up against me, so close to me, all I could think about was havi
inside me.

sist you“Fuck, you’re wet,” he groaned. “Have you been walking around like
day, Alison? You could have told me. You could have said something.

“We can’t do this.” I knew how stupid I sounded. I was practically :
y neck,him standing up and still protesting that I didn’t want it. “It’s going
ouldn’tour ability to—”

l you,”I cut off because he had shifted my panties aside and pressed a fing
me. The heel of his hand ground into my clit.

et out a“Stop talking,” he growled. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

I gave up.

t help it“Yeah.” My voice was ragged. I didn’t sound like myself at all.“The
I’m gonna do to you—” he growled. “And you’re going to like it, aren
thumbTell me you’re gonna like it.”

walking“I’ll like it.” I fucked his hand, riding it hard. “I need it.”

“You sure? You don’t want me to stop? You don’t want to keep
professional?”

e. “No.”

vn. The“Because I’ll stop if you want me to.” He withdrew his fingers.

I grabbed his wrist and shoved his hand back into me. “Don’t you fuck my leg and me.”

He did pull his hand away, but a moment later, his cock was there, thrusting teasing me. “God,” he murmured. “You’re so hot, Alison. Who knew you would grow up to be this fucking hot?”

He eased into me gently, and I shuddered around him, my head lolling back against the wall as he filled me. He lifted my other leg, so they were wedged together around him, and his hands slid up to my lower back, supporting me. “Open your eyes,” he said. “Look at me.”

I pried my eyes open. It was almost impossible to do what he was demanding. Meeting his dark eyes made me feel like I was about to come. And then he held me off the ground, braced against the wall so that there was nowhere I could push or pull against, made me feel completely helpless.

“This is what’s going to happen,” he exhaled. “I am going to help you finish your fucking investigation. Me. Nobody else. Say yes.” “Yes,” I breathed.

“You won’t so much as talk to anyone else in this office without my say.” I contracted around him, aching.

“Say yes, Alison.” “Yes,” I groaned, unaware of what I had agreed to. “If you need anything, you’ll come to me.” “Yes.”

“And that means no more flirting with the damn junior officers.” He thrust into my clit, and an electric spark shot through me. “If you want to fuck me, you’re here, you come to me for that too.”

I was out of my mind with lust. I couldn’t be held responsible for my actions—but I couldn’t say no to him.

“Yes,” I groaned. “Fuck, Brian, just fuck me already.”

ck withHe rocked his hips, moving inside me just enough to make my legs

“Yeah? You’re gonna play by the rules for the rest of the time
ie headhere?”“Whatever you want, fuck.”

ew youHe withdrew a little and slipped back into me, his balls slapping hard

my ass. “I want you to do well,” he murmured, his thumb working me

ig backnow. “I want your investigation to go well. I want to see you succeed

rappedknow that. I’ll help you as much as I can. I’ll give you whatever you

But don’t ever try to circumvent me again.”

“I won’t,” I sobbed with need. “I won’t, Brian, I swear.”

asking.“Good girl.” He set a rhythm, fucking me slowly and steadily. “This

he wayyou need, isn’t it?”

othing I“Yes,” I babbled. “I need you so bad. I’ve wanted you for such a long

“How long?”

ou with“Ages. Years. I’ve always had a thing for you, and I can’t fucking

that I finally have you inside me; I’ve had *dreams* about this.”

He groaned. “You can’t fucking *say* shit like that, Alison; you’re gonna

iy.” me cum.”

“I want it. I want you to come in me.” I was on the pill, so what did

“Fucking do it, Brian.”

His fingers dug into my back, and he fucked me hard, still working

The fire inside me built and built, and I felt myself come, squeezing

numbedhim so hard that I thought I would break or that he would. He let out

k whileand came apart inside me.

Somehow, we found our way to the floor, still wrapped around each

7 wordsrecovering our breath.

For a moment, I thought he would wrap an arm around me and hold me

But he didn’t. He got to his feet instead, not looking at me. He for

shake pants, tugged them on, and then tossed my clothes in my direction.
you're "We should figure out where we're going to sleep tonight," he said, I
still turned away from me. "I'll go look around. Get dressed."
against He had gone from hot to cold so fast that I had whiplash. My face burn
e harder got dressed.
d. You I knew I should never have let myself believe Brian Grant gave a damn
u want me.

But I also knew I would hold to the agreement he'd had me make.

There was no point in trying to keep things professional. Not anymore
is what came for me again, I would be his.

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pants, tugged them on, and then tossed my clothes in my direction.

“We should figure out where we’re going to sleep tonight,” he said, his face still turned away from me. “I’ll go look around. Get dressed.”

He had gone from hot to cold so fast that I had whiplash. My face burned as I got dressed.

I knew I should never have let myself believe Brian Grant gave a damn about me.

But I also knew I would hold to the agreement he’d had me make.

There was no point in trying to keep things professional. Not anymore. If he came for me again, I would be his.

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Chapter Ten

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Chapter Ten

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BRIAN

My office was too small to sleep in. There wasn't enough floor space to stretch out. But some of the conference rooms and meeting rooms had couches, and those would do.

I found some camping gear in one of the supply closets, including a couple sleeping bags. We used this stuff for field exercises, but it would also work for the overnight on the office furniture we were facing. I wasn't going to make Alison sleep without any bedding. I was trained for roughing it, but I wasn't.

I found her in the break room, kicking the vending machine. "What are you doing?"

"I want a candy bar." "And?"

"And I'm trying to make one drop," she gritted her teeth in frustration.

"You can't steal from the military just because the power is off."

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. "*Steal from the military*. You and I both know a third party owns this vending machine. And besides, I'll put ten cents in tomorrow when it's accepting money. I want a damn candy bar."

"Move," I told her.

She didn't look like she was going to, so I shouldered her out of the way and pulled the vending machine away from the wall, tipping it toward me. It fell and let it go. It rocked back into place and hit the ground hard, dislodging several candy bars, a pack of gum, and a bag of chips.

"People die doing that, you know," she muttered, bending down to look at the treats.

"Or you could try, *thank you*."

She didn't try it, but she did hold out one of the candy bars to me. "I like this kind. Do you want it?"

I reached over the candy and took the bag of chips instead. "I have some space to store overnight stuff," I said. "I'll set you up in the conference room if you want a room."

She followed me back into the main office, where the sleeping bags were for us. I picked one up and handed it to her. "These are designed for winter weather so that it might be a little too warm," I said. "I'd recommend unzipping it all the way and using it as a blanket rather than trying to fit inside it."

"Yeah, okay." She hesitated. "Thank you."

"I'll be in the library." I pointed it out. "In case you need anything." "I need anything."

"Great. See you in the morning, then. Hopefully, the power will be back on by then."

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"Will someone be here tomorrow? Opening the door?"

I sighed. "I mean, it's Sunday, so the odds aren't in our favor. If the power doesn't come back, I'd say we're not getting out until Monday morning when people start showing up for work."

way and “Great.”

Then she went off to the conference room, leaving me with my thoughts.

ing two



fish out

I didn't get much sleep that night.

It was hard to think about anything other than Alison. It was hard to

thoughts away from the fact that she was just a short distance away from
'I don't that beautiful body I'd enjoyed so much twice now lying vulnerable in

I was sure she would give herself to me again if I asked her to. It hadn't
e some hard to talk her into it on either occasion. And if she was going to
want.”

easy to persuade, why shouldn't I?
waited Henry would murder me for it, but who was ever going to tell him?

or could believe Alison would, not after the way she had given it up to me
mmend evening. We could both get in trouble professionally, but I'd been told
o sleep when I'd told her I would tell the feds, and she didn't have anyone to
me to.

No, I was pretty sure that—for as long as we wanted to, anyway—we
'I don't get away with this.

And I wanted to.

Jack on A huge part of me wanted to go into the conference room right now
demand to have her again, but I didn't want to push my luck. I didn't

how she would respond to that. I would ask her again later, maybe.
after I'd given her some of the documents she was here for, she would

cooperative mood, and then we'd see what she would be willing to let
power Sounded like a fair trade-off to me. Feeling a little more satisfied with
orning,

thoughts, I could finally drift off to sleep.

I was awakened the following day by light streaming in. For a moment I mistook it for the overhead lights and thought we were saved, but we were still off. We were still locked in.

I went out into the office with breakfast on my mind. Nothing elect going to work, obviously, but if I could get water to boil over a ca something, I'd be able to make pour-over coffee, and I could use a c
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hit today.

Alison was standing in front of a file cabinet.

I'd been wondering if she was going to notice that.

She turned to me. "This is locked," she said, almost accusingly.

"Yeah, it's locked. Do you want some coffee? I was going to try to
pot."

"Yes, and the key to this cabinet, please."

"What do you want in there?" I was more amused than irritated. She
going to wait for the grass to grow.

"I can't get into the computer system, but I bet you have paper copie
SEALs' finances, right?"

"Well, sure."

"And those would be in here?"

"Right in one."

"So."

"Can I make the coffee first?"

"Just let me have the key, and I'll find what I need while you do your
thing."

I chuckled. "Okay, okay."

Her eyebrows lifted. "You're going to give it to me?"

"I told you I was going to help you get whatever you wanted, didn't

ment, I narrowed my eyes. “You know. Last night, while you were begging
o. Theycock.”

She blushed. I was a little embarrassed by how thrilling I found that,
ric was thrill was weightier than the embarrassment. “I thought you might
ndle or saying that.”

caffeine “I don’t just say things. If I told you I was going to help you, it mea
going to help you.” I stepped into my office and twisted the dial on t
built into my wall. When I emerged, it was with the key she had ask
and I tossed it over to her. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” she said, turning back to the cabinet.

make a I went and got the supplies for coffee and a candle. It didn’t take n
long to realize that bringing water to a boil over the tiny flame was g
be impossible, so I went ahead and poured it over the grounds. Then I
wasn’t two cups of room-temperature brew I’d created and brought them bac
file cabinet.

s of the I handed one to Alison. “This is probably going to taste like crap,” I v
“We don’t get gourmet beans here or anything, and I wasn’t able to
either.”

“Caffeine is caffeine.”

“Yeah, that’s how I feel about it too.” I knocked some of mine back
shot, not bothering to let myself taste it. It felt slimy in my mouth.

“I don’t suppose you’d want to help me find my way through all
: coffee Alison asked, waving a hand at the papers.

“You’re looking for financial records?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re in the wrong drawer.” I pushed the one she’d opened closed a
’t I?” I open another one. “These are organized by year. See?”

for myI could tell she was impressed. “You could have just given me this fi
start, and we could have avoided the runaround.”

but the“The runaround was fun.” I leaned against the side of the file cabinet.
just beknow I’m not the only one who thinks so, by the way.”

She groaned. “Have you always been fucking impossible?”
ans I’m“I don’t let teenagers see that side of me.”
:he safe“Yeah, I wonder why that is.” She pulled out a stack of files. “I’m g
ked for,go look through these, okay?”“I’ll help you.”“I don’t need any help.”

“Well, I’m coming with you anyway,” I said.

“Still can’t stand to let me do anything on my own, huh?”
ne very“No reason I should.” I followed her over to the desk she had decid
going tohers. It was unoccupied—no one worked here—so it was a decent
pouredand I thought that was probably why she’d picked it. No one’s person
k to thewas cluttering up the workspace.

She sat down and flipped open the first folder. “So you’d say the
warned.chance I’m going to find anything here that shouldn’t be, right?”

heat it“This is the SEALs,” I reminded her. “We’re the best of the best. Yo
that. We don’t let just anybody in. Everyone who gets into this branch
military is screened within an inch of their life. There are no criminals
k like a“No criminals who’ve ever been caught,” she amended.

“If you think I can’t tell a good seed from a bad one, you don’t know
l this?”well as you think you do.”

“Oh, I already realized that I didn’t know you as well as I thought I di
said, looking up at me. “Believe me, Brian; I’ve been learning all k
things about you since I started this assignment.”

and slidI cleared my throat. “So... what are you looking for in those files?”

“Discrepancies.” She turned her attention back to the papers in front of

from the “You’re not going to find any.” “You said that. And I hope you’re right,” she said. “I don’t want to find anything.” “I thought you wanted to impress the feds by making some big bust on your first assignment.”

“I want to do a good job on my assignment,” she corrected me. “I don’t want to find anything. I want to prove that there’s nothing to find. The feds mean almost as much to me as they do to you, Brian.”

I doubted that was true, but I did want to believe her intentions.

And I wanted to show her a little trust, too. She’d earned it from me by being honest. “I’ll go into my office,” I told her.

“You’re not going to sit here and watch me?” “You said you didn’t need help.”

choice, “That’s right. I don’t.”

“Then you won’t miss me if I step out and catch up on my reading,” she said. “I’m sure I had a novel in one of my desk drawers.”

“All right,” she said, slightly surprised but not displeased. “I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

“Do that,” I told her.

I turned and went into my office, not wanting to be around her any more. “I didn’t think I could take it. Even now, as she was looking through the files and trying to find dirt on the SEALs, all I could think about was how I’d spun her up against the wall on my dick and made her come apart.”

At least I knew I had that power. If she did anything I didn’t like during the remainder of this investigation, I would remind her exactly who was in charge here and make sure she didn’t forget.

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Chapter Eleven

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Chapter Eleven

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BRIAN

“Find anything yet?” I asked Alison.

She yawned and stretched, her shirt lifting to expose a patch of skin at her midriff as her arms reached overhead. “Nothing yet,” she said. “But I thought I wasn’t going to find anything.”

“You aren’t.”

“Because you seem nervous, Brian.”

“Nervous that I’m never going to get rid of you, maybe.”

I wasn’t trying to be rude. I’d said it more by habit than anything. Fortunately, she didn’t seem to take my words to heart. Maybe she would do it by now.

She shrugged. “That’s on you; I’m ready to walk out of here as soon as I get that door open. But you know I can’t do that.”

“I can’t do it either. Not until the power comes back on.”

“Then you’re stuck with me, and I’m stuck with these papers.”

“At least take a break,” I suggested. “You’ve been working for hours, and the sun’s starting to go down. You’re going to strain your eyes if you keep looking up.”

Alison shrugged and got to her feet. “Yeah, all right, we could have d
guess it’s cold spaghetti again.”

“We’re just lucky there was catering in the fridge after all,” I told her
weekends, there wouldn’t have been anything, and we’d have had to a
break that vending machine open.”

She giggled.

I looked at her. “What’s so funny?”

“Just... you. Breaking open a vending machine.”

“You don’t believe I could do it?” I raised my eyebrows. She mus
better than that. Her father was a SEAL. She knew the strength we had

of bare “I know you could do it physically, not sure you could do it mentally.”

ie said. “And what does that mean?”

“You’re so by the book, Brian. Just look at how you reacted when I wa
take a bag of chips from that machine without paying earlier.”

“I like to abide by the law,” I told her. “That doesn’t mean I’m incap
breaking a rule when I need to.”

ig else. “Mmm, yeah,” she said, pushing past me toward the break room. “Y
as used renegade.”

“Hey.” I grabbed her by the wrist and spun her to face me.

as you There was enough light left in the room that I could see the fire in her c
I lost my train of thought. I hadn’t come out here for this. I’d rea
meant to tell her that it was quitting time for the day. But how in the
was I supposed to remain calm when she gave me that look?

and the This girl excelled at pushing my buttons. She couldn’t have always be
sep this this. I would have noticed. Sometime between her high school graduat
running into me at the bar, she turned into a proper vixen.

Fortunately, that was something I knew how to handle.

inner. I ran my hand up her arm to her neck. Carefully measuring what she could take, I wrapped my fingers around her throat, not wanting to push her past her limits.

I was gentle. I didn't want to hurt her. But I did want her to recognize who was in charge here.

"How about now?" I asked her. "Am I a *renegade* now?"

Her eyes were wide. "Brian..."

"Am I by the book?" I steered her into the break room. "I've fucked up over this office. Does that say *law-abiding* to you? Or would you say how to break a rule when the situation calls for it?"

She didn't answer. I could see that she was having trouble finding her words.

"Take off your shirt," I told her, wrapping my hand around her waist. "I want to see those tits."

She fumbled with the hem. I released my hand just long enough to let her pull it over her head.

"And the bra," I told her once her shirt was pooled on the floor. She reached for it and let it fall too.

I drank her in. Fuck, she was hot, standing there all exposed for me, her full breasts begging for my hands. I released her throat and cupped her breasts, feeling their weight.

She moaned and arched into my touch, absolutely wanton, as my fingers grazed her nipples lightly.

"God," I groaned. "Fucking look at you, Alison. An FBI officer, someone who's even like investigate the SEALs, and I've got you with your tits out in my hands and begging me to touch you."

Her eyes closed as I stroked her nipples. "You're making me so fuckin' horny," she whispered.

My cock liked the sound of that, but I didn't want to let her know that she was having on me just yet. "Oh yeah?" I reached down, grabbed her and yanked it up above her hips.

I separated her legs with my knee and pressed my thigh between them. She hoped, she began to grind on me, letting out a little whine that made me want to give up the game and fuck her right then and there.

I'd been right about one thing—she was soaked. She wanted it bad. "Maybe you think I'm such a stickler for the rules because you have no regard for them at all," I suggested.

Alison was too busy riding my leg to form a coherent response. I grabbed her by the waist and stopped her.

She gasped.

A moment later, her eyes cleared a little. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I'm not a toy," I told her. "I'm not going to let you rub yourself off on me." "Then fucking fuck me. Or did you strip me and bring me in here for sex?"

"No, this is what we're going to do." I grabbed her ass and lifted her off the ground, settling her on the break room table. "You're going to give me those legs and give me a fucking taste. I've been wanting my mouth on you for days now. And when I'm good and satisfied with that, if you've got any more, I'll fuck you. Understand?"

She nodded, breathing rapidly. "If you come on my tongue, you don't get fucked. Got it?" "Got it."

"So you'd better keep yourself under control. Can you do it for me?" "I—I think so."

"You're going to have to do better than that."

the effect. In response, she drew her heels onto the table and spread her legs, her skirt, herself on display for me.

This was about to be the best damn thing I'd ever eaten in the break room. As I'd work, that was for sure.

I pulled her panties down and tossed them aside. They were so wet I heard them slap against the floor and laughed. "You're not going to be wearing those again."

"Fuck it. I'll go without."

That was the hottest thing she'd said or done so far, and it was all I could do not to give up on my whole plan and fuck her then and there.

But I was determined. I had been fantasizing about this moment. I was about to let it pass me by.

"I pushed her thighs as far apart as possible and buried my face in her.

The first taste almost did me in. *Fuck*, she was hot and sweet and everything I had imagined, and she was going to pieces beneath me, riding my face for me. A part of me wished I could have stood across the room and watched as she lost it for me. But then I would have missed out on the spreader flooding my face, how her thighs quivered and clenched around me, how her ass lifted right up off the table to bring her closer to me, how her orgasm began to threaten.

I was fucking good at this, and I knew it. I'd made plenty of women satisfied this way.

But Alison, she was something else. It was as if her body had been made for my mouth.

I could have stayed down there for hours. I alternated licking and sucking, sometimes thrusting my tongue deep into her to feel how soft she was there, my cock aching with jealous need.

putting “Brian,” she wailed. “Oh, fuck, Brian, I’m close. I can’t—”

I took pity on her. I knew what she wanted, and I had made her promise to come until I gave it to her. No reason to torture her by dragging this

I stood up, grabbed her ankles, yanked her right to the very edge of the table that I had loomed over her as I undid my pants. “Tell me what you want.”
“I want you to fuck me. I need you to fuck me. I need your fucking dick in me.”

“I told you to *say it*.” I gave her pussy a little smack, not hard enough to hurt. She moaned. “I want you to fuck me. I need you to fuck me. I need your fucking dick in me.”

“America’s finest, aren’t you?” I didn’t give her a chance to answer before I thrust into her hard.

Immediately, I felt her start to come, fluttering around me. She screamed for my release, and I thought—*goddamn, she was waiting for me.* It was just the hottest moment of my entire life so far. And that was all for something.

I lost control. I grabbed the table’s edge to brace myself and fucked her hard and fast, driving animal noises out of her. She was loose-limbed under my head, aftermath of her orgasm, lying beneath me and taking me like a goddamn as her fire was building hotter and higher, and I wasn’t going to last longer—

I groaned as I spilled into her. “Fuck, Alison, you are so fucking good. You’re so good.”

As I withdrew from her, I had to hold myself up on the table. She’d reached a little, and she sat up, wrapped her arms and legs around me, and pulled me very close.

“Listen,” she murmured. “That was fucking amazing.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“I’m not going to pretend I wasn’t into that.”

I leaned my head on her shoulder, still catching my breath.

“And if you try to pretend you weren’t into it, I’m not going to believe you,” she said.

I wanted to deny I’d ever done any such thing, but the fact was, I knew she meant. The last time we had done this, I’d tried to put a wall up afraid to hurt. because I had known we were crossing a line.

Fuck it. The line was well and truly crossed now, and there was no going back.

“I won’t tell anybody if you don’t tell anybody,” Alison said.

I nodded. “Yeah,” I agreed. “I think that’s best.”

“And then maybe we can do it again sometime.”

“Oh, I’d say you can count on that.” I’d utterly given up on the idea of trying to resist her. I knew that I was fighting a losing battle.

She hopped down from the table and collected her clothes. “I think I’ve had enough of work for the day. Shall we see about dinner?”

I had to laugh. A part of me feared that she would find this overwork excessive, but she wouldn’t object to what we were doing.

I should have known better. Alison was made of tougher stuff than I was. I’d earned her credit for.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Let’s see if we can heat some pasta by candle

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lled me

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“Tell you what,” I said. “Let’s see if we can heat some pasta by candlelight.”

Chapter Twelve

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Chapter Twelve

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ALISON

Sleep was impossible.

There was the fact that I'd just had sex with Brian *again*—apparently that wouldn't stop any time soon—but I was equally distracted by the food. The two-day-old Italian food had been borderline inedible, even with the help of the candles, and I hadn't been able to get much of it down.

With a sigh, I sat up and threw off the heavy sleeping bag I'd been using. There was no chance of getting any sleep tonight.

I fumbled my way to the candle, and lighter Brian had left me with the lighter given it to me in case I needed to find the bathroom in the middle of the night, but I was going to use it for another purpose.

As long as I wasn't sleeping, I might as well take another look at my finances.

The quicker I could get through my work here, the sooner I could get home and not come back.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't know if that was what I wanted any more. I had to admit that I was having a good time here, and ending my time with Brian didn't sound nearly as appealing as it had at the start.

But maybe, if I could finish my investigation, we could keep seeing each other without the professional conflict. Perhaps that would make things better for both of us.

That was what I was hoping for, at any rate. And he did seem as though he was willing.

I returned to the little desk I'd been using and set my candle down. I moved the papers toward me, I lowered myself into the seat and bent over them. Trying to see all those numbers by candlelight was hard work, but it was as good as a way to take my mind off my hornier thoughts. For a while I lost myself in adding numbers and comparing line items against sums.

And then something brought me up short.

Apparently, it was in the numbers from the year before last. They weren't adding up properly. In fact, they were many thousands of dollars short of what they should have been.

My heart raced.

This couldn't be right. I had to have made a mistake.

I repeated the arithmetic, taking it slowly and carefully this time, double-checking each number as I added it, moving my finger slowly down the page so that nothing would be missed.

I came up with the exact figure I had before.

Seventy thousand dollars of taxpayer money had been spent and was unaccounted for.

I didn't know how to react to what I was seeing.

I had to admit that a part of me was excited. This was big. I could tell him back to Grummond, and he wouldn't be able to question whether I'd been a good hire. He would have to admit that I was right for the department job.

ing eachI sighed. I hadn't wanted to find anything. And how would I tell Brian easierhis SEALs weren't as squeaky clean as he'd thought they were? I wasn't involved in whatever this was, but people he trusted definitely ought heand he wasn't going to like finding out about it.

I flipped the folder I was holding closed and read the cover. *Automotive Pulling* That told me what I needed to know. Whoever was in charge of automotive spending would be the person responsible for the missing ten thousand. It wasgoing to have to find out who that was.

2, I lost*Maybe it's a mistake. Mistakes happen.*

But a mistake to the tune of ten thousand in taxpayer money? There were consequences for this, even if it had been accidental. It would make pulling upSEALs look bad, and someone Brian trusted and cared about would therefore theyblame.

I had no idea how I was going to tell him.

After that, I definitely couldn't sleep. I sat up the rest of the night, brover what I had found. When the sun started to rise, casting light through the windows, I blew out my candle, feeling no closer to an answer to the own theproblem than I had been when I'd discovered it.

"Hey, have you been up all night?"

Brian had emerged from his makeshift bedroom, and I had to close my eyes and wasfor a moment. He'd slept in nothing but his boxers, and my whole body ached at the sight of his. I wanted to forget what I'd found and go to bed with him, losing myself in his arms and the heat of him.

ake thisBut he stepped into his pants, pulling his shirt over his head. "Morning, been amorning," he reminded me.

and theOf course. How could I have forgotten? Our time in purgatory was over. Someone would be coming soon to let us out, and then the little island

ian that seemed to exist on for the past forty-eight hours would just be gone. I was suddenly very conscious that I wasn't wearing underwear. We came to let us out wouldn't be able to tell, but even so, I was bare-ass in a government building because I'd ruined my panties by having sex with the subject of my investigation. I felt like I practically had it printed on my forehead. "When will they be coming?" I asked Brian.

"Well, I don't know what time it is now," he reminded me. "But they usually start showing up to work at around seven."

I looked out the window at the sunlight. It had to be close to seven. "What have you been doing all night?" he asked me. "Oh, just... looking at the files."

"By candlelight? You're going to strain your eyes."

"Just trying to get the job done." I couldn't tell him. Not when I didn't have all the information myself.

"What are you looking at?"

"Two years ago." I held up the folder and showed it to him. "Automotive department." "Ah. Your boyfriend's department."

"My what?"

He laughed. "I'm just giving you a hard time," he assured me. "There's nothing between you and Jack."

"But—automotive—you're saying that's Jack's department?"

I thought of the young man I'd met just a few days ago. He had offered to help me with my investigation. I'd thought he was being helpful.

Monday What if I'd had that all wrong?

What if he hadn't been trying to help? What if he had offered to help me but he could control what I saw—and keep me from seeing what he didn't want me to see?

And I had very nearly allowed him to do it. If I had handled this investigation the way I'd meant to, I would have missed this.

I was suddenly glad for what I'd found, even though I knew it would come with the problems. My career came first, even ahead of the great sex Brian had given me. And besides, I cared about government integrity, and if Jack was responsible for stealing from American citizens, I did want to stop it.

At least, this means Brian wasn't involved. He didn't even react to seeing this folder, and if he'd known what was in there, he definitely would have had some reaction.

My thoughts were interrupted by a rattling sound that made me spin around the door. It had been so long since I'd heard any sound that wasn't made by one of the two of us that it spooked me a little.

A moment later, the door opened, and Jack stepped in, holding a brass folder. "Jack!" Brian walked toward him, laughing buoyantly. "Damn, kid, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Am I?" Jack was looking at me and at the folder in my hands. I held it tipped it toward my chest, not wanting him to see what I was holding.

"Ms. Barrett and I have been locked in since Saturday," Brian explained. "I know when you left, the door locked behind you. And then the power went out. It's a downed wire," Jack said. "The power's out on the whole block. There are a ton of electric company trucks out there trying to get it back on. I'm sorry, but I didn't you call someone to let you out? I would have come back."

"My phone died," Brian explained. "And Ms. Barrett didn't have hers."

"I should probably be going, actually," I chipped in. "This being Monday so that morning, I'm due at work."

"Right," Brian said.

There was a moment of awkwardness between us. The circumstances

igation to call for more of a goodbye than possible with Jack standing there. I definitely couldn't touch him, nor could we tell the other that we'd touched. I couldn't touch.

had been. But maybe the awkwardness could work in my favor. "I need to go get my briefcase," I told him. "I left it at the desk where I was working."

He stood back out of my way, and I hurried over.

Both men were watching me. I knew that.

But I didn't think either of them was watching me *closely*. And I couldn't do that.

I picked up my briefcase, put it on the desk, and popped it open. The folder inside. I was not, strictly speaking, supposed to take this with me. But I wanted a little more time with it, away from prying eyes. To ensure I was right about what I had.

I went back to the door, briefcase in hand, and nobody tried to stop me. They hadn't noticed what I'd done. They didn't know I was leaving with their files.

Guilt stabbed at me.

This was going to be complicated. This whole thing was going to be hard. "But what else could I do? I couldn't risk the career I'd dreamed of all my life. There was no way out of a desire to avoid upsetting Brian. I liked him—well, I was confused. Why like him—and he'd fucked me better than any guy, and I wanted more of that. But that wasn't more important than my career. It just wasn't.

He would understand in the end. His career meant the world to him too. "Thanks," I said to him. "You know, for the food and everything."

I hoped he understood what I meant by *everything*.

And maybe he did because he smiled at me. "Anytime," he replied. I thought I knew what he meant too.

there. *I hope he's still saying that after I break this.*

I hurried out of the building and toward my car, which was still right where I'd left it on Saturday afternoon. That felt like something out of another movie. So much had happened since I'd decided to come in and try to complete the investigation done on the weekend.

I didn't regret the decision. As much as I felt in turmoil now, I could honestly pretend that I wasn't happy about everything that had happened. I would use the discovery of the evidence I was smuggling out of the building as a distraction. Sex.

Yeah. Both had been amazing—but both now had me wondering what the long-term repercussions would be.

The one thing I hoped for, above all, was that Brian and I would remain on good terms. I didn't want to lose the excellent rapport we had going—no matter how good it was. They were nothing of the potential for future opportunities to get naked together. But, ultimately, I knew I was going to act in my self-interest.

Brian could decide what he wanted to do, but I would be handing over the evidence as soon as I knew what I had.

I started my car and drove off, my mind teeming with thoughts.

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Brian could decide what he wanted to do, but I would be handing in this evidence as soon as I knew what I had.

I started my car and drove off, my mind teeming with thoughts.

Chapter Thirteen

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Chapter Thirteen

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ALISON

Walking into the office, I felt like I was on display. Even though I stopped by my house to change into fresh clothes and comb my hair into some semblance of order, I was aware that I hadn't had time to take a shower. I could still smell Brian on me.

I had no desire for that scent to go away. I was walking around as horny as a teenager because of it. But a part of me wondered if everyone else around here could smell it somehow—if I were giving off a vibe of a person who'd spent the weekend locked in a building with the subject of her investigation and had let him fuck her twice.

If it had been anybody else, I would have been judging them for doing what I had done. I was judging myself for it. But I also had bigger things on my mind. Things like—

“Barrett! I've been trying to get in touch with you all weekend!”

Grummond. He crossed the floor toward me, looking like an angry parent making me want to turn right back around and head out to my car and drive home, but there was one thing I absolutely did not have the energy for today, dealing with my boss.

But I was going to have to face this eventually. I held up my briefcase between us, feeling shielded by the folder I knew was inside. "I didn't have my phone on me," I told him.

"Well, why the hell not? You need to be reachable at all times, especially if you're not working for the DMV, you know. This high level government job requires a real commitment."

"I understand that," I told him. "I was working this weekend."

"Working, but without your phone? You were at the beach, weren't you?" I had to laugh. "It was storming all weekend," I reminded him. "You were at the beach in that? I was working."

"Well, do you have results for me? If you were working all weekend, you ought to have something to hand in by now."

"Not quite yet," I told him.

I knew what I had. But I wasn't ready to tell Grummond about it yet. For one thing, there was the matter of figuring out the details. I was convinced that Jack was responsible for the numbers that weren't adding up, but I wanted to know if anyone else had been involved. Seventy thousand dollars was a significant amount of money, and I couldn't be sure whether this had been a solo crime or a joint heist. If other people were involved, it would be difficult to get that information together before presenting anything to Grummond. The more complete picture I could give him, the better this would go for me. But I had more than just myself to think about.

There was also the matter of my father. The SEALs meant everything to him. And I knew I wasn't taking down the whole institution, but even so, it would be painful for him to have his daughter's name on this investigation. He took such pride in being a SEAL, and now we both have to live with the fact that I'd brought shame to the department.

riefcase wasn't going to be kept quiet. I knew that. It would be in the news. I't have were going to know—and they were going to know that I was Barrett's daughter. I was sure reporters would have a field day with the Barrett. *Well, it isn't my fault*, I told myself firmly. I wasn't the one who had sent job government funds. And I knew Dad, with his firm code of ethics, never have wanted to allow something like that to continue unchecked for the sake of reputation. He would understand. It would just be difficult?" a while.

think II was a lot more worried about what Brian was going to say.

Of course, I'd known Brian all my life, but I would never know him and, you as Dad. That wasn't possible. I knew that what was happening now hurt Dad but that he would eventually recover from it and that he understand why I'd had to do what I had done. But I had no idea at Brian was going to take it.

confident He hadn't given me the impression that he was open to the idea of something it could sketchy being found in the SEALs' files. What would he say when he not an what I'd discovered?

ad been And was there even a possibility he had been involved in it?

best to *He couldn't have been.*

ad. The "I want to see you in my office in twenty minutes," Grummond said.

e. I sighed. It was first thing Monday morning, and he had just scolded about all this on Friday afternoon. What more could he possibly have to tell him. "All right," I said. "Let me just go get my things in order, and then I would talk."

1 of his Grummond turned and walked away toward his office, and I went to my room and sat down.

nt. This It felt like coming home after being on some sort of vacation. I was su

People that a part of me missed being at the desk I'd claimed as my own while Henry was with Brian. I missed knowing that he was the only other person in the room at that fact. And while I'd felt annoyed by how he kept looking over my shoulder while I worked, now I wished he was still here. He was a hell of a lot better than Grummond; that was for sure.

I pulled out the folder and opened it up, staring at the numbers and the notes I had made on sticky tabs.

How could anyone steal seventy thousand dollars from a government account and assume that it wouldn't be noticed?

Of course, that was why Jack was the most likely suspect—he'd taken money from his own department. If anyone else had taken money from the auto section of the SEALs' finances, I would have expected Jack to be the one to catch it. So one of two things had happened here—either he was the one to take it, or else he'd failed in his duty to stop it from being taken.

And there was the fact that he had done his best to be the person helped in my investigation.

Had he honestly just meant to be helpful? Or had he been trying to ensure his eyes didn't land on this folder?

If he didn't want me to look at this folder, he could have taken it when he left the building.

That was true—but also, he couldn't have known when he left that the door would go out. And he probably hadn't known I would be locked in, either. I had left me in the hands of Brian, who was angry at me. He had probably assumed that I was about to leave the building and that there would be no issue with leaving me alone with paper documents that I was unlikely to resort to anyway.

That could be the final piece of evidence I needed. What if some c

le I was digital firewall was set up to keep me out of the electronic version
: office.file?

while itThat was what I needed to know. Because if that security measure did
it better should be easy to figure out who had set it up—and that would tell r
was trying to keep this information a secret. It could be the piece
he little puzzle that would prove Jack's guilt or innocence.

There was nothing to be gained by looking at these numbers anymo
agency was for sure. I put the file away in my briefcase. What I needed was
back into the computer system.

it fromBut first, I was going to have to talk to Brian. And before I could e
omotivethat, I had to deal with Grummond.

one toI had no idea what I was going to say to him. But I knew he would
one tovery detailed progress report, and I wasn't going to get out of here
giving one.

ing meI locked my briefcase in the bottom drawer of my desk. There was no
would risk that file being seen by anyone until I was ready to share
sure mypresent my interpretation of the contents.

I got up and went over to Grummond's office. He had left the door
with himanticipation of seeing me there, and he looked up as I approached.

“Good,” he said. “Sit down, Barrett.”

powerI sat.

her. He“Listen,” he said, without preamble. “You're new here, so I've cut yo
robablyslack.”

l be no“Have you?” I frowned. “I've been on this assignment less than two w
kely to “I don't know how long you think these things are supposed to take,

is a routine job,” he said. “Unless you found something unusual, I
omplexhave expected you to be in and out in forty-eight hours so that we coul

of this on to other things. I know it's your first job, and I don't want to be too hard on you, but I'm giving you one more day to close the book on this thing. It exists, it's done. "One day? Are you serious?"

Someone who said, "We can't afford to spend this much time and energy—not to mention the department resources—on a routine annual investigation," Grummond said. "Wrap it up and file your report by this time tomorrow."

Grummond; that "You can't expect me to finish everything up that quickly," I said. "I need to get loose ends to tie up."

"Well, tie them. You've taken too long already, and we need to move on. I can't even do that," Grummond eyed me. "You know, I did want to believe you would be qualified for this position. I know who your father is—well, everyone knows you want a father, of course. We all wanted to see Henry Barrett's daughter do well without the department. But we need to consider whether this is the right way to do it seriously."

Grummond's way I said, "I haven't even filed my report," I protested. "You can't already be so hard on it and I've failed at my assignment."

"It'll depend on the quality of the report," Grummond said. "For all the time you've taken, I'll need to see something excellent."

"You will," I assured him. For the first time, I felt grateful for what I had found. It might not make Brian or my father happy, but it was going to get me out of the bind I was in here.

But I wished Grummond had been clear about his timeline expectations when I started this assignment—but then, if I had gone any faster, I wouldn't have had time to think. "I found what I had. I'd only found it because I had looked back farther than I should have this current year, and if I had been rushing, I wouldn't have had time to do it. I would have said, *He'll be glad I am thorough when I show him my report.*"

But I couldn't hint at what I had without speaking to Brian first. It would have been a move.

too hard too big a betrayal—and I needed to confirm my suspicion that Jack was
one responsible, too.

I was going to have to be quick about it all.

“All right,” I told Grummond. “You’ll have my report by tomorrow morning
said. But I’ve got to go work on it if I’m going to have it ready.” He was
hand. “Go on,” he said. “Do whatever you need to do.”

“I have I decided to take that at face value. What I needed was to go back to
Brian again.

ve on.” I hurried back to my desk to collect my briefcase.

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I was going to have to be quick about it all.

“All right,” I told Grummond. “You’ll have my report by tomorrow morning. But I’ve got to go work on it if I’m going to have it ready.” He waved his hand. “Go on,” he said. “Do whatever you need to do.”

I decided to take that at face value. What I needed was to go back to talk to Brian again.

I hurried back to my desk to collect my briefcase.

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Chapter Fourteen

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Chapter Fourteen

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BRIAN

I couldn't get Alison out of my head. And unlike the times that happened before this past weekend, I was now enjoying her company. There was no more conflict in my mind about it. It was just fun, thinking about how I'd fucked her all over this office, planning where I might hook up the next time I got the chance. There was a supply closet with a lock— it would be easy to pull her in there and get her clothes off. We'd be quick about it in case anyone came looking for spare pens or envelopes, but quick was fine. I could make her come fast.

That was one of the perks of fucking someone younger. Her body was ready for me. Or maybe it was just the fact she was *that attracted to me*. Because I was sure as fuck, that attracted to her. I hadn't been this horny since I was a teenager, and I was enjoying it. I would have been happy that part of my life was over, and it was nice to have it awoken in me again. I'd been wondering all morning if I would see Alison again today. I knew I wasn't finished with her investigation. And honestly, after the weekend spent together, I thought it would be fun and hot to be forced to fuck her professionally in front of everyone. The subtext was sexy.

So when I saw her enter through the front door, I immediately got up, office, and went over to her, ready to begin the game.

“Ms. Barrett,” I said, doing my best not to grin at her. “I see you’ve back for more.”

Alison looked up at me.

She wasn’t smiling.

“I need to speak to you,” she said. “Privately, please.”

My heart sank. What could this be about? Was it possible she was regretting the things we’d done? Maybe she’d changed her mind about it all again.

What had she had come to tell me that we would have to make another compromise in the name of professionalism.

“My office,” I turned and led the way, and Alison followed.

Once we were there, I closed the door behind us and shut the window for privacy. Alison looked a little startled, and that annoyed me.

“Don’t look at me like that; I’m not going to start ripping your clothes off you.”

“Well, you can’t exactly blame me for wondering,” she shot back.

“You made it pretty clear out there that wasn’t what you were here for.”

She made a face.

“Please, Allison. We might not have been doing this for a very long time, but you do have tells, you know. I can read your face. Something’s bothering you. If you regret the way we spent the weekend, just say so. I don’t lie to you.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh,” she said. “No, it isn’t—that’s not what I came here to say.”

I had to admit, I was surprised. I was pretty sure I’d known what to expect from her here. “All right,” I said. “What, then?”

left my “Maybe you should sit down,” she suggested.

“You’re telling me to sit down in my own office?”

She threw her hands up. “Or don’t. Whatever, Brian. I don’t have the time to play games with you right now.” She put her briefcase on the desk, opened it, and pulled out a file folder.

I looked at it. It was the automotive folder I had seen her looking at. A folder I wasn’t sure why she’d brought it to me.

And then I realized. “Why do you have this?” I asked her. “Did you take it out of the building?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not allowed to do that.”

“I only took it over to my office.”

“You removed a classified document.”

“Okay, we can talk about that if you want, you know I have clearance off.” Brian, you have bigger problems at the moment.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed. “If you know what’s in this folder, now is the time to be honest about it. I’m coming here today to you first as a courtesy. I didn’t expect to come back at all.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I told her coldly. “But it’s better to give me that folder now. I thought I could trust you to conduct an investigation with a modicum of professionalism.”

She just looked at me. “I think you and I both know *professionalism* was a long time ago, Brian, and I can’t turn this folder over to you because it’s evidence now. I have to take possession of it on behalf of the FBI. And I’m going to have to take possession of many more documents well.”

“Evidence of what?” I demanded.

“Do you not know? I promise, if you do, telling me is in your best interest.”
“I have no idea what you’re alluding to.”

In response, she opened the folder and pointed to a line about halfway

“Look at this number.”

“Okay. And?”

“This is the total reported spending by the automotive department two weeks ago.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“The figures in the left-hand column don’t add up to the same total. The sum is missing.”

“Your math is wrong,” I blurted because that was the only plausible explanation.

“No, it’s not. I wish it were. You don’t know how much I wish that were the answer. I did the math more than once and got the same figures every time.”

The numbers show the Navy SEALs billed the American taxpayer about seventy thousand dollars less than you spent the year before last.”

“Bullshit,” I closed the folder and pushed it back across the desk at her.

“Do the math for yourself, then.”

“I don’t need to. I knew something like this might happen from the moment you walked into my office that first day.”

“You knew I was going to find this?”

“I knew you were going to find *something*. And if you couldn’t find anything, you’d make it up.”

She stared at me. “What the fuck? You think I would make up something like this?”

“Of course, you would. You want to make a big splash at your new

suspected it, but I let myself trust you. I knew better than to ever trust
rests.” but I have to say, I’ve never met one as desperate as you to uncover
where there isn’t any.”

7 down.“You’re really going to blame me for one of your men stealing
thousand dollars?”

“None of my men would do anything like that. I know these people.”
10 years“Well, you don’t know Petty Officer Jack Richards as well as you think
do.”

I barked out a laugh—the audacity of her. “You’re trying to frame
there’s a Richards? He’s one of the most upstanding men serving under me. I
believe this of him. You’re insane.”

lausable“Check the computer system,” she suggested.

“And what’s that going to tell me, exactly?”
7ere the“I think you’ll find he’s put up a firewall to prevent any investigati
y time.this file.” She tapped it. “It never occurred to him that the power w
ers for out, and I’d be stuck looking at paper files. It didn’t occur to him to ke
out of my hands. But I’m betting it’s protected six ways from Sunday
: computer system.”

“I’m not going to investigate my men like they’re criminals.”
noment“Well, nobody is asking you to. But if you’re not willing to condu
investigation, you’re going to have to put your faith in the results of m
“Like hell.”

anything,Alison sighed. “Think whatever you want, Brian, but I came here to t
about this as a kindness because I’m going to file a report tomorrow m
ing likeand then you’re going to *have* to deal with it, whether you want to or n

“Unbelievable,” I scoffed. “When I think about the fact that I tried
v job. Iyou—but you were always going to find a way to twist this situation

it a fed, advantage, weren't you? No matter what I did for you, you would play
ever dirt "I don't know how you can think that." She looked genuinely upset,

wasn't going to trick me into feeling sorry for her. "I don't like this an
seventy than you do. Do you know what my father will say when he finds out?

"Don't expect me to believe you care what your father thinks about
barked. "You weren't too worried about his opinion when you begged
ink you dick the other night, were you?"

"For God's sake—" She grabbed the folder and stuffed it back i
Officer briefcase. "I thought you were better than this, Brian."

d never "You thought just because you're Henry's daughter; I would look th
way while you manipulated the system? Or did you think you could f
into submission?"

"You know what?" Alison snapped. "You're an asshole. I shouldn
on into even bothered trying to talk to you about this. I should have turned
ould go information I found without giving you the benefit of a conversation a
eep this I'll know better next time."

y in the "Oh, there's not going to be a next time. This is the last time you
allowed in this building."

"You're not going to even look at the papers?"

ct your "Why should I? You took them out of the building, Alison. Yo
ine." yourself every chance in the world to doctor them up. I have no re
trust that those numbers haven't been modified. All you'd have neede
tell you would be to draw a few extra lines on the page. And then you turn arou
orning, come right back—you've only been gone for an hour. You didn't ha
ot. to find anything real."

to help "I found it before I left! And I'm telling you, your computers will corr
to you everything I'm telling you. I didn't make any changes."

me.” “Except you were in the computer system, too,” I said. “It was Jack but she you in. The poor kid had no idea you would turn around and try more generosity against him. None of us knew. You played him as you play

” I was right to think you were using your looks and your body to get all you,” I shook my head. “I’m sure I’ll find exactly what you said I would for my computer system. I’m sure you left it there while you were fucking when you thought I wouldn’t catch you.”

nto her “All right,” Alison said. “I tried. I’ve had enough of this. If you don’t hear me, I can do nothing about that. And I’ve given you fair warning. I’m going to start my report now. Look into what I’ve said or don’t, fuck me superiors at the FBI will have this by tomorrow. You need to be prepared that. You’re going to have to answer to someone you haven’t fucked. I don’t have to know if you’re capable of that or not.”

I in the She grabbed her things and marched out of the room. I thought about it. I watched her go, my head spinning.

It had to be a lie. It had to be. I knew Jack, and he would never be a person who will be what she was talking about.

But I had thought I knew Alison too.

Well, I’d been wrong about her. It was as simple as that. She had never been the person I had thought she was, and now I was glad she was leaving. Alison to Her bosses would get to the bottom of what she had done. No one was going to do to believe this shit.

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“Except you were in the computer system, too,” I said. “It was Jack who let you in. The poor kid had no idea you would turn around and use his generosity against him. None of us knew. You played him as you played me. I was right to think you were using your looks and your body to get ahead.” I shook my head. “I’m sure I’ll find exactly what you said I would in the computer system. I’m sure you left it there while you were fucking around when you thought I wouldn’t catch you.”

“All right,” Alison said. “I tried. I’ve had enough of this. If you don’t want to hear me, I can do nothing about that. And I’ve given you fair warning. I’m going to start my report now. Look into what I’ve said or don’t, but my superiors at the FBI will have this by tomorrow. You need to be prepared for that. You’re going to have to answer to someone you haven’t fucked. I don’t know if you’re capable of that or not.”

She grabbed her things and marched out of the room.

I watched her go, my head spinning.

It had to be a lie. It had to be. I knew Jack, and he would never be a party to what she was talking about.

But I had thought I knew Alison too.

Well, I’d been wrong about her. It was as simple as that. She had never been the person I had thought she was, and now I was glad she was leaving.

Her bosses would get to the bottom of what she had done. No one was going to believe this shit.

Chapter Fifteen

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Chapter Fifteen

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ALISON

I decided to work from home for the rest of the day. I needed to be focus on what I was doing; if I tried to work in the office, I was g end up obsessing about Grummond looking over my shoulder—or wo about Brian and the way I had left things with him.

What an asshole.

I believed that he had changed. I had thought he was ready to ackno that I wasn't his enemy.

I can't believe I thought we were going to get along. I should have kno to trust him. Of course, he'd never believe that one of the sainted could have done anything wrong, even when I was holding the proo hands. It had to be *me* who was being unethical. I was the liar, the fal of evidence, and Jack was just a poor innocent lamb who my fe trickery had suckered in.

It was unbearable. Wasn't Brian the one who had seduced *me*?

Or was he?

Now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure who had started that.

But that didn't matter. I wasn't the one who was accusing *him* of s around to get ahead, was I? I could easily have told him that he'd only me to try to manipulate my investigation—hell, there was a part of I wondered if that was true. But I hadn't said that to him because I w total bitch. He was the jerk, not me.

It was so hard to focus on my report with these thoughts running thro head, and I knew I needed this report to be really good. It was obvic Brian was going to try to dispute my findings, and I had to make su were absolutely airtight so that he wouldn't get away with it.

able to But I had to admit, I was relieved when the phone rang. I though sending it to voicemail, but I needed the break. I picked it up.

going to Immediately, my stomach plummeted. It was my father.

rise yet, Apart from Brian and Grummond, he was probably the last person world I'd have wanted to talk to right now. Writing this report w enough.

nowledge But it would be worse if he found out I'd been sending his calls to vo right before I'd filed. With a sigh, I picked up the phone. "Dad?"

own not "Hey, Allie." My father's warm voice filled my ear, and I felt a sharp SEALs guilt. He had no idea. "Have you spoken to Brian today?"

f in my "Have I—what?" That was a surprising question. "Why would I have bricator to Brian?" I hedged. Of course, I had spoken to him, but why was Dad eminine *me* looking for Brian?"

"Well, I know you're investigating him." Dad laughed as if my inves Brian was some punch line. It reminded me of the indulgent way he'd me as a kid when I'd said something childishly outlandish, like tha planning to move to Antarctica and study penguins. "Just wondered investigation had taken you in his direction today."

leeping “It’s a serious investigation, Dad.”

fucked “Hey, I know it is.”

me that “Well, what are you laughing at, then?”

wasn’t a “I’m not laughing *at* anything, Al. Don’t get upset. I guess it’s just the
you investigating Brian.”

ugh my “Right. Why is that funny?”

ous that “Oh, it isn’t really. I suppose I still think of you as a little kid.”

re they “I’m not,” I muttered, even though I knew protesting to a parent th
were all grown up now was one of the world’s weakest argume
t about maturity.

“I know that. Don’t worry, Allie. You’ve got to give your old dad tim
used to things.”

in the I sighed. He was going to have to get used to things in a hurry.
as hard speaking of Brian—”

“I’m sure he’s fine; I’m just a little worried about him.”

icemail “What?” I frowned. “Why would you be worried about him?”

“Well, he isn’t answering his phone,” Dad explained. “And that isn’t
pang of The two of us go out to dinner regularly, you know. We were suppose
out tonight. I texted him to find out whether we were still on, and he s
e talked we would have to reschedule. That was all—no explanation, nothing
calling when we would reschedule—and when I tried to call him, he didn’t ar
haven’t been able to reach him all day. Do you know what’s going o
tigating him? I’m guessing you saw him more recently than I did—do you ha
treated idea what his problem might be?”

t I was I was going to have to come clean. In the end, it would all come out a
l if that so there was no point in putting it off.

“The truth is, I saw Brian earlier today,” I told him.

“You did? Did he seem off at all? Do you know what his problem is?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said. “Dad... I’m about to file my report.”

“Oh. Do you want me to call you back later? Is this a bad time?”

idea ofHe didn’t understand me. “I need you to be ready for what my report
to say, Dad.”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a long moment.

“What is your report going to say?” he asked, his voice suddenly tight.

nat you“Dad, you knew this was a possibility, didn’t you? You knew there
nts forchance I was going to find something.”

“Just let me have it, Al.”

e to get“I don’t want you to be angry at me.” I’d been pissed when Brian had
poorly, but Dad was making me feel like crying. “You wanted me to

. “Dad,in this job, remember?”

“How bad is it?”

“It’s not even that bad. I mean, I don’t think it is. It’s just that someone
some money. And you know I have to report that.”

normal.“How much money are we talking about?”

rd to go“Dad, I can’t give you details before I tell my boss,” I told him. “I’ve s
aid thatmuch already. We’re talking about the details of a federal investigati
g aboutthe finances of the Navy SEALs.”

swer. I“But I’m not just some civilian,” Dad reminded me. “I have a person
on within this.”

ave any“I know you do. But I still can’t tell you until I’ve told my boss. I’m
would if I thought I could.”

nyway,“You said you wanted me to be ready,"he reminded me.

“As ready as possible, yes. But there is a limit to what I can say. I kn
understand confidentiality. You understand that better than most peopl

Dad sighed.

I waited. At least he didn't seem angry with me, which gave me hope.

"Listen, Allie," he said, "is there any way you can just let whatever it is go?" "You want me to just ignore it? Pretend I didn't see it? Dad. You can't do that. Come on. You wouldn't even want me to do that. Can you respect me if I did?"

"I know you need to make a good impression," he said. "I know this was a first assignment. But if we're talking about some amount of money that's that significant, mistakes happen."

"I don't think it was a mistake."

He reacted. "And you don't think *you* could be making a mistake?"

I tried to do well. "You don't believe me."

"It isn't a matter of not believing you, Al. I think you need to make sure you're right about this before making accusations. What if you write a report, and it turns out you had your facts wrong? How do you think that would make you look?"

"Are you more worried about how all this will make *you* look?" I asked. He said nothing quietly.

He went on into "Allie, c'mon."

"No, that's it, isn't it? You don't want me to file this report because you're afraid it will look bad coming from the daughter of Henry Barlow, a commanding officer, and you're trying to make me doubt myself." "A little sorry. I wouldn't do that, and you know it. I'm just saying you should think about how you act, that's all."

"And you're assuming I haven't thought about this, right? You're assuming how you're in such a hurry to prove my worth to the bureau that I'm just going through this, filing a report at the first sign of anything being wrong."

“Well, are you?” Dad asked.

I shook my head, even though I knew he couldn't see me. “I can't go?” you're even asking me that. You know how I feel about the SEALs. I know I didn't want to find anything. Some asshole's been stealing from you Dad. That isn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it continue.”

I hung up the phone before he could speak again. I didn't think I could live with hearing any more of this.

Between him and Brian, I would lose my mind if I kept trying to justify my actions. And at the end of the day, I didn't care what either of them thought about what I was doing—I knew this was the right thing.

And they were wrong to suggest that I was trying to create a grand-scheme event to advance my chosen career. I was trying to do that, but I couldn't lie and returned in a clean report just as easily. I would have done that if it had been the truth. I didn't need to fabricate a crime to make my mark.

I was following through with reporting this because it needed to be reported.

Because the Navy SEALs were my childhood heroes, I needed them to be part of a good institution they had always been because the country deserved every bit as much as I did.

And even though it was hard for my father and Brian to admit it, I wanted them to see it right now, this was best for them too. They had always been proud to belong to the SEALs. If people like Jack were allowed to talk about that, it would be something to be ashamed of, not to take pride in.

They might not like it, but I had to ensure the honor of the SEALs remained intact. And I would have to hope that, eventually, they would come to appreciate what I had done and would thank me for it.

Right now, that seemed like a lot to hope for—but I would hope anyway.

I turned my attention back to my report. Somehow, the conversation I had with Dad had motivated me, and now I was eager to work. I started to write. My words flowed out of me like water. It was easy now. I was finished in less than half an hour.

I reread the report twice and made sure I was confident about everything I had handwritten, and when I was sure, I hit send. With a whooshing sound, the email with my report attached flew away to Grummond's inbox. Now there was nothing left but to wait and see what he thought of my report—and to see what the repercussions would be for the SEALs and EOD in particular.

But whatever they were, I was ready to accept them. This had been the plan, and I was glad I'd made it. And now I wasn't going to brood about it anymore.

I closed my computer, got up, and went to draw a bath. I'd been under a lot of stress recently.

It wasn't until I took off my clothes that I realized I still hadn't showered since the last time I'd been with Brian.

His scent was still on my skin.

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Now there was nothing left but to wait and see what he thought of my report—and to see what the repercussions would be for the SEALs and Brian in particular.

But whatever they were, I was ready to accept them. This had been the right move, and I was glad I'd made it. And now I wasn't going to brood over it anymore.

I closed my computer, got up, and went to draw a bath. I'd been through enough stress recently.

It wasn't until I took off my clothes that I realized I still hadn't showered since the last time I'd been with Brian.

His scent was still on my skin.

Chapter Sixteen

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Chapter Sixteen

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BRIAN

I couldn't bring myself to stay in the house. I was too fired-up everything Alison had told me. I thought about heading to the bar but I had just enough restraint to realize that drinking wouldn't be a wise idea now. I needed to find some other way to blow off steam.

As was usual for me, I ended up at the gym.

I always kept some of my things in a locker here. This was the nicest town, and my platinum-level membership was one of my indulgences. I changed and walked out to the track.

I didn't have headphones, unfortunately, so I wasn't able to listen to music during my run. That was a shame because it would have helped me clear my head, and as it was, my thoughts ran around and around as I looped the track. She was going to accuse Jack of stealing money.

She was determined to bury the SEALs in scandal. Depending how this turned out, it could be years before we recovered from this.

And what was I going to do? Stand by and watch Jack be arrested?

It wasn't like I needed to work. I could retire. I could end my career tomorrow and walk away from the SEALs forever, and by the time the

broke, the organization would be in my rearview. I wouldn't be a part of the stories that would follow. No one would say it had happened on my watch. Although it would look suspicious that I was leaving right before the organization broke.

But would that matter? If I was out of the organization, I could just set myself up for retirement and ignore what people said about it. It wouldn't be my problem. And it wasn't like anyone would have anything to say about me leaving for retirement now either. Henry had been urging me to do it for years. I would wish I had, to be honest. If I had gotten out a year ago, I wouldn't be dealing with this now.

Although that would mean that I never would have hooked up with Ali. I ran harder, trying to rid myself of that thought. I didn't want to feel guilty about the fact that she'd come into my life. Not now. I hated that any part of this felt complicated to me.

No, ultimately, I knew that I couldn't leave the SEALs. Even though it wasn't a problem for me, even though I was at a reasonable retirement age, I wouldn't be able to leave right now even if I'd wanted to. I couldn't abandon the SEALs in a moment of crisis. No real man would do such a thing. It would be cowardly, unpatriotic, and completely pathetic. I'd have to stand by the team until this whole thing was sorted out. That meant that I would be part of the scandal that was about to break, and I hated it.

It was for the best. It would probably turn out better for the SEALs if I stayed at the helm. I'd be able to field questions about what actually happened and let people know that the SEALs had just as much integrity as we ever had. Besides, I was no quitter. I wasn't the person who walked away when things got tough, and I never was. I was determined to stick it out.

t of the I couldn't believe I'd let Alison play me the way she had.

atch. She had played me, right? I really wanted to believe that she had, ha
scandal was to accept because the alternative was believing that a SEAL was c

That was my whole life. My career. My identity. She didn't s
ttle into understand how difficult it was for me to watch it come apart.

blem. I sighed. This was getting me nowhere.

taking I veered off the track and paused to stretch for a moment. I finish
Now I miles, but I didn't feel as if I had burned off any energy at all. My mi
dealing still racing and my muscles were still tense.

I moved over to the weight machines. Sometimes this helps me cl
ison... head. I sat down at the fly machine, set my weight, and began my first
rel glad reps.

part of I had set the weight too light. I could tell immediately. This was my
weight, but today I needed something that was more challenging fo
money needed something that was going to hurt so that I could pour all my th
military and energy into it—I wouldn't be stuck thinking about Alison a
ed to. I impending arrest anymore.

ould do I raised the weight and began again.

c. Now it took so much effort to push through the motions that I was dis
Which so I was surprised when I heard my name. "Brian? This isn't your usu
ich as I day.

I looked up. "Hey, Will."

with me Will, one of my lifting buddies, was thirty-five years old, tanned, and
ied and He raised his eyebrows at me. "That's not your usual weight."

lad. "Nah, I'm letting off a bit of steam here."

1 things "Well, you shouldn't do it like that. You know better. Do laps or some

"Already did."

“Bench, then. I’ll spot you, c’mon.”

rd as itHe was right—it was dangerous for me to have this machine set at corrupt.high weight, no matter how badly I wanted it.

eam toI got up and followed him over to the bench press. I sat down and Will weights to the bar for me.

“More,” I grunted.

ed four“No. Not while you’re all pissed off. Do more reps if you need to burn energy.”

“Fine.” I lay back, picked up the bar, and started jacking it up into the ear my“You want to tell me what your problem is today?” Will asked, watch it set ofraise and lower the bar.

“Work stuff.”

normal“Classified?” Will was Air Force, he understood the restrictions military me. I placed on me and didn’t let them interfere with our friendship. It was thoughtsthe reasons he and I had always gotten along so well. I sometimes and thecivilian friendships frustrating because they would tell me all about that at the office and then get irritated when I wasn’t able to reciprocate.

And this stuff was classified. “Afraid so.” Even if I could have talked, the crime, we’d been accused of without breaking the law, I didn’t ial gymwould have wanted to. It would have been difficult to confide in someone else what the SEALs had been accused of doing, especially someone different branch of the military. I knew Will had the same high stocky standards as I did.

But there was something I could talk to him about, I realized—something hadn’t been able to discuss with anyone else. “There’s also a woman.” thing.” He took the bar out of my hands and placed it back on the rack. “dating someone?”

“You don’t need to sound so surprised.”

such a “No, sorry, it’s just...you’re such a terminal bachelor.”

“Well, I’m not dating her,” I admitted. “We’ve just been hooking up.”
I added “But you wouldn’t be this worked up about it if there weren’t I
involved.”

I didn’t like admitting it. I wasn’t someone who had feelings like that
n more And I especially hated that I’d gotten them for someone who clearly
return them. Who had always been more worried about career advan
air. than about anything that might be happening between the two of us
ing me been using me the whole time, and I resent her for that.

But Will was looking at me with a knowing expression on his face, an
to admit that he had a point. If I didn’t care about her, this wouldn
ary life sucked so much.

one of “All right,” I admitted. “Maybe there are more feelings than I initially
s found there to be.”

their day “And that’s a problem because?”

I sighed. “Part of the classified situation.”

d about “Oh, it’s that complicated?”

think I “Wish it wasn’t.”

someone “I’ve never seen you have feelings for anyone before in all the tir
from a known you,” Will said. “I don’t think you can treat that lightly, ever
l moral complicated.”

“You don’t understand.” There was no way he could understand.

ething I “Maybe I don’t,” Will conceded. “And I get that it’s complicated.

what it’s like when military life conflicts with personal life. But I also
‘You’re on some level, this is pretty simple, Brian. You have never cared
woman before. If you care about her, you have to be your most positi

You have to do whatever it takes if you want to be with her. Do you have a relationship with her?”

I didn't answer. The answer that came to mind was a quick and undeniably true feeling. Yes, I wanted to be with Allison.

I wasn't sure if I was glad to know that or not.

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You have to do whatever it takes if you want to be with her. Do you want to have a relationship with her?”

I didn't answer. The answer that came to mind was a quick and undisputed yes. Yes, I wanted to be with Allison.

I wasn't sure if I was glad to know that or not.

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Chapter Seventeen

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Chapter Seventeen

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ALISON

After my bath, I couldn't think about what had happened anymore to get out of the house.

But my options were limited. I couldn't go to my father's house—he was going to want to see me right now. I suppose I could have gone to work, but that wasn't going to help me put all this out of my mind. And as for friends, I didn't have any in Washington yet. I hadn't been here that long, and my life here had been almost entirely devoted to work.

Lacking anything to do to occupy myself, I decided to go to the bar, even though it was only early in the evening.

I didn't bother to get dressed up. Ordinarily, I would have done something special with my hair to ensure I felt sexy. I would have wanted to cut it, to feel free and wild on my night out. But that didn't seem possible in this situation. The best I could hope for was to relax a little bit, and in the service of that, I pulled my hair into a messy bun on top of my head and dressed in my usual jeans and a cotton tank top. The only concession I made to looking nice was to brush on a bit of mascara—I tended to feel naked without that. But I

at myself in the mirror, I knew I was more likely to blend into the
tonight than to stand out.

That was exactly what I wanted.

It was a short walk from my house to the bar, and I made it in record
time. Usually, I would have set a more leisurely pace. I would have taken time
to enjoy the evening air—it was a mild night, suitable for a walk. But I
felt the urge to just get where I was going.

God, what a mess this all was.

I had no idea how I would make things right with my father after what
happened. Of course, I knew he would forgive me—it was Dad,
and he would never stay angry at me forever. But I also knew that he was
not forgiving me, which was definitely painful.

But honestly, I was more worried about Brian, and I hated that fact.

I should *not* be worrying about Brian.

He had tried to stand in the way of my investigation from the start,
and he never wanted me to do well and made that clear. He had always said that
it came down to a choice between helping me or protecting the SEALs,
and he would choose the SEALs.

The fact that we'd slept together didn't change that.

It was stupid of me to have ever thought that it would. He didn't care
about me as a person. It had only ever been about my body.

It wasn't like I'd never had casual sex before. But this was not like the
casual sex with Brian had felt... well, there had been a moment when it felt
like communion. When the hookup was casual, most guys either would
look down on me at all or would act as if they were doing me some favor.

With Brian, it hadn't felt like that.

It had felt like I was the one doing *him* a favor, like having me riding his

crowd was the best thing he could imagine.

It was probably just some odd fetish for him. I was the idiot for thinking I had anything to do with me.

Some time. I found an empty stool at the bar and sat down. The bartender approached me right away. "What can I get for ya, ma'am?"

Today, I'd had every intention of drinking shots, but for some reason, the strong alcohol made my stomach turn. I guessed that was to be expected. I felt pretty sick with guilt over what I had done, even though I knew it had been what had the right thing.

and he "Just a soda," I decided.

Upset at "Just a soda?" he raised his eyebrows. "I don't get many pretty girls to the bar to drink soda."

"First time for everything, I guess," I bit back my irritation.

Ordinarily, I would have liked that he'd called me pretty. Today it wasn't. He'd humiliated me. It made me think of Brian's accusation that I had slept with him. That was what had started my investigation. I'd known I would have a rough road as a young woman. I'd worked for the FBI, but for God's sake, what a rude thing that had been to say.

And besides, he had wanted to sleep with me. I still felt like he had stolen from me. He would say I had because I'd been the one to hit on him in this bar. I thought about that was before I had known the two of us would be working together. I'd backed away off after that. At least I'd meant to.

Others. The bartender brought me a soda. "On the house," he spoke quietly. "I felt like I must be *really* depressed to come to a bar and not even order a drink."

He didn't go. "At least let me give you a tip." I fumbled in my purse. I had a few bills and I passed them over.

He shrugged and accepted, adding them to a class full of bills and coins on his face beside the cash register. "Thanks," he said. "Thoughtful of you."

“You didn’t have to give me the drink for free.”

asking it “Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?”

hed me “Whatever’s got you so sad.”

“Who said I was sad?”

mell of He gestured to the glass of soda.

. I was “Maybe I’m just not in the mood to drink,” I suggested.

ad been “Maybe,” he agreed. “Weird that you came to a bar, in that case.”

“Look, I don’t even know you.”

“Name’s Evan.”

coming “Okay, Evan,” I said. “I still don’t know you. I’m not about to spill my
a guy behind a bar. Does this usually work?”

Evan shrugged. “I’m not trying to pull anything fancy on you here,” I
nnoyed “Most people find it relaxing to talk to their bartender. It’s like free the
to ease “But I’m guessing those people are all a few sheets to the wind.”

oman in “Well, fair enough,” Evan agreed. “Still, you might find it helpful
about it.”

rted it. I sighed. The truth, of course, was that I *couldn’t* talk about the resu
ar. But federal investigation into a branch of the US military. I couldn’t even
her. I’d father precisely what I had found, so I definitely couldn’t confic
bartender I’d just met.

7. “You However, perhaps there was a way for me to discuss my personal s
without going into detail. It *would* be good to get some of this stuff
dollars, chest—and Evan was a safe person to talk to because he didn’t know
care about what I had done.

d coins He was just being nice. And probably trying to earn a bigger tip s
wasn’t going to be selling me any liquor.

“I’m having trouble at work,” I managed to say.

“Oh,” Evan said sympathetically. “Bad boss?”

“Well, actually, but that isn’t really the problem.”

“What’s the problem?”

“My boss has me working on... a project with a guy... from company.”

“Oh, and *that* guy’s the jerk?”

“How did you know that anyone was a jerk?”

“When a woman makes that face, there’s always a jerk involved,” Evan wisely.

My life to “Well, all right, yes, he’s a jerk,” I said.

“What did he do?”

he said. “He’s disrespectful. He tries to block me from completing the therapy.” successfully—I guess he wants to see me fail.” That wasn’t fair—

Brian didn’t just take pleasure in seeing me do badly—but there was no way to talk my way to explain it. Besides, I wasn’t particularly inclined to be fair now. “Every time I think I’m making progress, he pulls the rug out from under me.”

“Yeah, he sounds like an asshole, all right.”

“He definitely is.” It felt great to say these things about Brian and finally get some of my anger out. “I would rather be working with almost anyone else in the world. And then, today, he accused me of trying to use my sex appeal to get ahead, which is so unfair.”

Evan laughed.

“It isn’t funny,” I said hotly.

“No, I know that,” Evan said. “It’s just... you know. That’s what guys do when they’re attracted to a woman and feel like they shouldn’t be. They

never admit that it's their fault for letting themselves look too low
woman in a professional context, so they'll accuse her of being a slut."

"Oh yeah?"

"Done it myself, I'm ashamed to say," Evan said. "We used to have a
another working behind the bar here. I couldn't focus on my job. Kept giving
the wrong change or overpowering the tequila, and when she
confronted me about it, I blamed her. Said she was distracting me."

"You're kind of a dick, then."

Evan said "Yup. I was," Evan agreed. "Biggest mistake of my life. Poor girl quit
over it—she's got a better job now at a luxurious hotel bar across town
have to deal with the fact that I made this a hostile place for her. I regret
the time."

project "You seem pretty aware of what an asshole you were."

I knew "Yeah, one of my buddies called me out when I tried to tell him what
to other done," Evan said. "Sounds to me like someone needs to tell your man
to him not being respectful."

it from "I don't know that he'd listen to that."

"Maybe not. Some guys won't," Evan said. "You sure I can't get you
drink? On me."

ally let "Thanks," I said. "I'm not in the mood, though."

else in "Want to hang around for a while? I get off at eleven. Could take you
up to coffee or something."

I wasn't offended by the fact that he was hitting on me. I could imagine
myself going for it if the circumstances had been different. He was cut
But I knew I'd just start thinking about Brian if I was with any guy right
guys say Evan was good-looking, but he was no Brian."

they can *Fucking Brian*.

ng at aHad he ruined me for men? Was I never going to be able to look at
' guy the same way?

Had I just had the best sex of my life, only to lose it so quickly?
hot girlI hated that I wanted more from him, but I did. I wanted to feel how
peoplecontrol of my body so masterfully as if he knew it better than I did. I
ownerto fall apart when he was inside me, forgetting everything and los
control.

I liked sex. But Brian was in his own league. And now I wondered wh
her jobwould ever find anyone who gave it to me as well as he had.
n. But II finished my drink and got up. "Thanks for the talk," I told Evan.
ret it allshould be getting home."

He nodded. "Another time, maybe."

I didn't think so. "Maybe," I allowed.
/hat I'dI was still feeling a little sick to my stomach. The night out didn't a
an he'smy guilt for turning in the SEALs.

Maybe a good night's sleep would help me.

As soon as I got home, I went straight to bed, not even bothering to
u a realinto pajamas. I just shucked off my jeans and tossed them into a corner
Tomorrow, I will have to try to speak to Dad.

I couldn't stand to have everyone angry with me. It was literally mak
out forsick.

But I didn't think there would be any possibility of making things rig
magineBrian. That had been ruined for good.

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Chapter Eighteen

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Chapter Eighteen

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BRIAN

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BRIAN

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I was sitting at my desk when I was told that there were FBI agents coming to the building. Of course, I knew it was coming, but not at this speed, I suppose I should have. Alison repeatedly demonstrated to me her diligence and dedication to her work. She clearly wasn't bluffing when she told me a month ago that she intended to file that report as soon as possible.

I moved to intercept the agent. "Can I help you, Agent...?"

"Danforth," he said. "I'm here for Petty Officer Jack Richards."

I had to try at least to protect the guy. "Do you have a warrant?"

"We do." Agent Danforth showed it to me. "He's coming with us, but you can come with *him* if you feel it necessary. We prefer to do this the easy way, though."

"I can't just let you walk out with one of my men."

Unfortunately, Jack picked that moment to walk up on us. "What's going on?"

"Are you Petty Officer Jack Richards?"

"Who wants to know?"

I closed my eyes. What a stupid time for Jack to get mouthy. It was a good thing he didn't know who wanted to know, and nothing was going to be gained by giving them a bunch of sass. He should have known better.

Agent Danforth seemed to be thinking the same thing I was. "All right, Petty Officer," he huffed. "We've got a warrant here for your arrest for embezzling funds."

"I haven't done anything," Jack cried out. "You've made a mistake."

"You can explain all that at the detention facility."

"Don't I have the right to speak to a lawyer?"

“We’ll arrange that at the facility for you too.”

“Listen,” I called out. “I’d like to save everyone time and hassle here. But I am aware of the allegations against Officer Richards.”

I was about to go on and explain that he couldn’t have done the things I’d been accused of, that Alison was just a newcomer to the FBI trying to establish her name by busting someone, but Jack interrupted.

“You knew about this?” he demanded, turning to face me. “You knew she was coming?”

“I knew only about the investigation report.”

“You didn’t say anything to me.”

“I didn’t—” I’d been hoping the case would be dropped the moment they were looked at, but he cut me off again.

“Is this something you and that FBI agent drummed up together to screw Alison?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I stared at him.

“I trusted you,” he yelled. “And you *hated* her. I saw the way you treated her when she came in on a Saturday to try to go over your head. You have nothing to do with her.”

“We all hate these investigations.”

“Must not hate them that much! I thought being locked in all week was smart, but I would give you the opportunity to get rid of her for good! I thought I was fighting so much that you’d get her to give up on the whole idea. I mean, God’s sake, did I knock down that power line for nothing?”

He looked insane. His eyes were bugging out, and his hands were flexing like he was about to hit something. I had never seen him look so unhinged.

And then I registered what he was saying. “Hang on,” I repeated.

“You knocked that power line down?”

“Well, I couldn’t leave her locked in here with access to the core network all weekend.”

“So you locked us in the building! It was all you? Why would you do that? He was Jack?”

“Someone had to stop her,” he hissed. “Didn’t you catch on to what she was doing? Looking through the files for the past *five years*. She wasn’t going to stop until she found something. It never mattered to her if we were guilty or innocent. She just wanted to have something to turn in. And you were going to stop her! I knew the only way was to make you hate her so much that you would send her away and demand another investigator who wouldn’t just look at the usual documents and leave the past alone.”

I shook my head. “Jack... did you know she was going to find something that would sabotage me? I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t want to consider it.”

“She wouldn’t have left until she found something. It didn’t matter to her if it was real or not. You said it yourself. She just wanted to look good to the feds.”

I remembered I’d commented something to that effect just the other day, not knowing Alison would file this report.

“Jack, if there was nothing to find, why were you so intent on getting her out of here that you were willing to vandalize the power lines?” I asked. “If you’d stop talking if I were you. That’s a crime in itself,” Agent Dean added. “And you’ve just confessed to it.”

I wished he would be quiet. He wasn’t helping matters. Jack was only making me more belligerent.

“I was trying to protect the SEALs,” Jack snapped. “Something you can’t do slowly, soft to do yourself.”

“But protect us from what?” I asked. “I wasn’t afraid of letting Ms.

computerpoke around because I was sure there wasn't anything for her to find. I was sure that none of us would have done anything worth getting worked up about. And yes, when she told me she had found something, I thought she might have fabricated it for appearances. But now, you're not acting like an innocent man, Jack. You're acting like someone who knew he had something to hide. Did you know what she'd find if she looked in the automotive records? "I don't have to answer this shit," Jack growled.

"You may not have to answer these questions here, Officer Riccio," Danforth cut in. "But you *will* have to answer them down at the detention center." He looked up at me. "We will be taking all related files from your computers as well. I assume you have no further objections?"

I felt sick. Jack was someone I had taken under my wing, and I couldn't believe I was going to let this happen to him, but he did seem to deserve it. "Take him," I swallowed hard.

"You're going to fucking regret this," Jack snarled. "I can't believe you would turn on one of your own like this. What happened to the brotherhood?" I turned my back on him and listened to the sound of the handcuffs clinking around his wrists.

I didn't want to believe that Jack could have done what he'd been accused of. But if you had asked me this morning, I would have said he wasn't capable of sabotaging the power lines either—and he had just come right out and admitted to that.

I would have to allow for the possibility that I didn't know him as well as I thought I did. And if that was true?

Maybe Alison had been right all along. Perhaps he *was* guilty.

I hadn't even been willing to look at her evidence.

Well, I was going to look at it now. As the other agents gathered

l. I was Jack's office, I went into my office. Ignoring the stares coming at me, I looked up over everyone who had just witnessed Jack's arrest. I was sure they had questions, but I wasn't going to answer them right now.

Instead, I quickly sat down at my computer and pulled up the last automotive file.

"My heart sank. It was just as Alison had suggested. Someone had set an extra layer of security around it. My clearance got me in with no problems, but an outsider wouldn't have been able to access it without an attention password.

I didn't know who had put this extra security in place—but I could

And though I wanted to be wrong, I suspected that a more thorough examination would reveal Jack's technological fingerprints all over it. Like he had been done at a computer he was signed into, he was cooked.

There was no question of not turning in this evidence. If Jack had embezzled your funds, loyalty to the SEALs demanded that I turn him in for it.

"I opened the file, dreading what I might find, and started to review the closing numbers Alison had indicated weren't adding up.

Right away, I could see that she was right. Still, I pulled out my calculator and carefully added everything up twice. Then I copied the data from the spreadsheet and had the spreadsheet do the math for me.

The result was the same every time.

Alison had been telling the truth—seventy thousand dollars was unaccounted for.

It was beyond belief.

We were supposed to be above this bad behavior. Now the reputation of the SEALs was tarnished. And though I still felt bad about letting Jack's files in

ie from dragged out of here in handcuffs, I couldn't deny that he had deserved
estions, longer.

Even though I probably should have stayed at my desk, ready to de
year's whatever the rest of the day would bring now that this had been unlea
couldn't stand it. I needed to do something physical to get my m
t up an things. I decided to hit the gym for a few hours—I had to work
em, but conditioning anyway. The fact that I wasn't on active duty was no ex
ditional let myself go.

I had my workout clothes in a locker at the gym, and I changed into th
l guess. settled into an easy run around the track, letting myself warm up. I
rofound into the familiar feeling of my muscles working, which was simple an
it. If it for a great distraction. After a while, I opened it up and ran a bit
straining myself, letting the pain of the workout clear my head.

bezzled It wasn't until afterward, when I left the track and went to the free v
that I wondered what Alison was doing today.

ew the She would know that this arrest was happening.

And with a pang of guilt, I recalled our last conversation and how av
lculator been to her.

into a She was just doing her job, and I had accused her of underhanded tact
fabricating information to make herself look good at my expense.

*What an absolute dick move that was. I wouldn't blame her if she
counted wanted to speak to me again.*

It was too much to hope that we'd be able to continue our p
relationship, and that thought was a gut punch. I had never had such g
1 of them in my life. And it wasn't just that she was hot, either—she was *fun*. S
lack be the girl you'd want to wake up next to and keep hanging out with, not
see if you could score twice.

d it anyBut I'd never have the chance to do that now. She wouldn't want any
do with me after the way I behaved, and I couldn't blame her.

al withStill, I did want to apologize. I owed her that much.

ashed, IBut I had no idea how to go about it. Call her up and tell her I was so
ind offaccused her of falsifying information. Yeah, that would be pleasant.

on myWith a sigh, I turned my attention to the weights. At least when it c
:cuse tothem, I knew what to do.

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But I'd never have the chance to do that now. She wouldn't want anything to do with me after the way I behaved, and I couldn't blame her.

Still, I did want to apologize. I owed her that much.

But I had no idea how to go about it. Call her up and tell her I was sorry I'd accused her of falsifying information. Yeah, that would be pleasant.

With a sigh, I turned my attention to the weights. At least when it came to them, I knew what to do.

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Chapter Nineteen

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Chapter Nineteen

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ALISON

Three weeks later, I was forced to acknowledge that guilt might not have anything to do with the fact that I was always feeling sick.

I'd spoken to Dad, and we had more or less settled things between us. He didn't love the fact that I'd turned in the evidence I had found, but he would admit that he wouldn't be able to claim the nobility of the SEALs if he liked to hang his hat on it if he had been willing to sweep corruption under the rug.

"I have to hand it to you, I guess," he told me one night. I'd come over to his house to watch old sci-fi movies on TV, and we were snacking on buttered popcorn, though I hadn't touched mine due to my constantly churning stomach. "I don't know if I could have done what you did."

"You could have," I told him, stirring my soda with my straw. "If someone was stealing money from the SEALs? You would have acted. You know you would have. I don't know why you think otherwise."

"Well, maybe so," he said. "I guess I never thought about it happening because it just didn't seem like a possibility that someone could do that to the SEALs. I thought we were all above this."

“You are,” I told him. “But not all SEALs are as morally upstanding are.”

I was thinking about Brian, of course. How could I not?

By now, I had hoped that he would no longer be on my mind, but that happened at all. As the days went on, I found myself thinking about him more than ever, and I hated it. I hated how his face appeared in my thoughts whenever I closed my eyes. I despised the habit my mind had developed of conjuring up images and sensations of his body on mine in my dreams. In my subconscious, we’d fucked a dozen times by now, and I felt as if I were walking around in a state of permanent arousal, the way I had when I was seventeen years old. If he were to walk into this room right now, I’d probably jump on him and start humping him, even though my father was right there, even though I fucking hated him so much.

Dad switched off the TV.

“What?” I asked. “The movie’s at the best part.”

“Are we going to talk about what’s going on with you?”

“Nothing’s going on with me.”

“You hardly eat, Allie.”

I sighed. “I’m just feeling weird about making that report. It was a bit of a conflict of interest for me.”

“You’re not upset about that anymore,” Dad countered. “I know you are.”

“What do you mean? I’m very upset about it.”

“Okay, maybe you are, but you also know that you did the right thing.”

You’ve defended it to me a dozen times, Allie. I should never have made you do that—but it’s obvious that you know you were in the right.

“I understand why you’re still so worked up. You’ve never lacked confidence.”

“Did something happen during that investigation?”

as you *Oh, something happened, all right.* “I’m just not feeling very well,”
him.

“Maybe you should stay here tonight,” Dad suggested. “Let me ma
had not some soup and take care of you.” He reached over and laid a hand
out him forehead. “You don’t have a fever... but you look pale.”

thoughts “That would be nice, actually,” I admitted.

oped of “Do you have what you need? Or do you need to run home and pick u
. In my things?”

I was “I should get something to wear to work tomorrow,” I said.

and I was “You do that. I’ll make up your old bed, and when you get back, yo
robably can pajama down and finish this movie. I’ll even make some of my
ht here, chicken soup; how does that sound?”

I had to smile. “That sounds awesome, Dad.” I had to admit that havi
fuss over me made me feel a bit better. No matter what had happen
my investigation, he still loved me. It couldn’t change the way he fel
me.

If only I could have said the same about Brian.



such a

ren’t.” Back at home, I packed some of my things up quickly. My ou
tomorrow was already laid out, so it was just a matter of folding it nea
wouldn’t wrinkle. I picked my most comfortable pajamas and grabl
t thing. favorite pillow—my dad had taken to using down pillows that off
ade you support at all, and I always woke up with my neck hurting when I
I don’t sleep on one of them.
viction.

' I told
In the bathroom, I stuffed a few toiletries in my travel bag. I wasn't g
need much—basic makeup for tomorrow and my skincare routine.

I paused, my hand hovering over a box of tampons.

There had been so much else going on lately that I simply hadn't
about my period. But standing here with this box in front of m
triggering memories of the last time I had reached for it.

And now I was doing math.

Had that really been *seven weeks ago*?

It had. It had been right around the time I'd started working at the FBI
and I was at least eight weeks ago. I'd have to look at the calendar to be sure
famous *Fuck*. Suddenly the weird, nauseous way I'd been feeling since turning
report was making a lot more sense.

It wasn't guilt at all.

But, *no*. I couldn't be *pregnant*, could I?

*Brian and I weren't always safe. When we were locked in together, it
like we had condoms.*

No, we hadn't, but I was on birth control!

Birth control can fail.

My hand was shaking.

I had a pregnancy test. I always kept one on hand, even though my fri
college had made fun of me for it. I had always said it was a better t
have and not need than to not have and have to make a frantic tr
drugstore and buy one from some bored teenager.

Fuck, was I ever glad for that policy now.

I unwrapped the test. I had a strong feeling I knew what it was going
but I tried to take deep breaths and control my anxiety as I went thro
familiar steps and then laid it on the edge of the sink.

going to I couldn't wait to watch for the results come up, so I left the bathroom and went into the kitchen.

What was I going to do if the test was positive?

The test was going to be positive. It explained everything I had been going through lately.

I opened the freezer and let the ice-cold air blast against my face, but it did nothing to relax me. I watched the clock over the stove as the minutes ticked by—the last minutes before, I was sure, my life would inevitably end, which was forever.

And then I went back into the bathroom and looked at the little plus sign in my test stick.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I rested my hand on my stomach.

I had always wanted children. Of course, I had never imagined it going to be like this.

A part of me, even considering the weird circumstances, was happy about this. Glad that I was going to walk away with something positive.

At that moment, I knew I was going to keep this baby, even though I had a desire to welcome Brian back into my life after the way he had treated me. Even though I knew my wild attraction to him made it very advisable to keep him at a distance.

And I was going to have to tell him, of course. I couldn't give birth to a child without him finding out about it. We lived in the same city. My father—the baby's grandfather—was his best friend. If I had a child, Brian would eventually know about it, and he was no idiot. He was capable of doing just as much as I was.

He'd know it was his.

om and Feeling like I was on autopilot, I finished packing my things and returned the car to return to my father's place. I left the pregnancy test in the bathroom sink. I had a feeling I was going to need to see it again tomorrow. I was going to reassure myself that I hadn't dreamed all this.

Dad was standing over a pot of chicken soup when I arrived, but he had a double-take when he saw me. "Jesus, Al," he said. "You look like you've just seen a ghost." "I do?"

"You're bone white. Shit, sit down. The soup is nearly ready." I took a seat at the table.

"Beer?" he asked.

"Um." I couldn't have a beer, I realized. "Maybe just some water."

He shrugged and pulled out a bottle of water. I took it and gulped it down. "You didn't have a bad incident with the car, did you?"

"What?"

"I don't know, and it's dark out there. I worry about you driving in the

"Nothing happened," I said. "I'm wonderful, Dad."

I would have to tell him the truth eventually, but I wasn't ready for that. One thing, he was going to want to know who the father was immediately. Just that was going to open up a whole other can of worms. I didn't have a way of lying to him, although I probably would have if I thought I could get away with it. It would have been much easier to tell him I'd just had a one-night stand.

But fucking my dad's best friend was coming back to bite me. The morning after the two of them compared notes—as I was sure they would—they would find out exactly what had happened.

I'd come clean, of course. I would have to. But I had a few weeks to

turned to tell him what I wanted to say.

When I ate Dad's soup, which made me feel better. When I'd finished, we returned to the den and turned the old movie back on.

I couldn't focus on it. But I was comforted by being in a room with my father, listening to the sounds of monsters mutilating people, and sipping your drink. It felt like I had been through something traumatic, and now I was being wrapped in a familiar and comforting blanket.

When the movie was over, Dad stood up and stretched. "Think I'll go to bed," he said. "You going to bed too?"

"I might stay up and watch TV for a little bit," I told him. "Would that be okay?"

"Hey, fine with me. Just make sure you get enough rest before tomorrow."

"You know I will." He still acted as if I sometimes couldn't look after myself.

Then again, maybe I wasn't. Just look at the predicament I'd gotten into! I had no idea what I would do about talking to Brian. I wished that in some way just to avoid it altogether.

Immediately, I couldn't do that to him, though. As much of an asshole as he had become, I couldn't match that energy. I couldn't be an asshole back to him. He'd deserved to know that he was going to have a child.

I'd tell him.

Our lives would be linked together forever.

But that didn't mean we'd have to see each other. Maybe he wouldn't know anything to do with this kid. After all, he was a selfish jerk.

It was hard to hope my baby's father wouldn't want to be involved. But I had to admit, that would make things much easier.

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Chapter Twenty

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Chapter Twenty

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BRIAN

“Is this a bad time?” Henry Barrett asked me.

I pressed the phone against my ear with my shoulder and moved to close my office door. “Not a bad time,” I assured him. “Not very much going on here today—for once. I thought things were never going to die down here, but there are actually no feds in the office today, so we might be able to get some work done.”

“Yeah,” Henry said. “That’s why I’m calling. I wanted to check in with you after everything that’s happened.”

“I assume you’ve been talking to Alison.”

“That’s part of why I wanted to talk to you. The poor kid is a wreck.”

I felt a stab of guilt. I had a feeling I knew what had left Alison in such a state. The things I had said to her the last time we met face to face were cruel, and I couldn’t blame her for being messed up about it.

And if Henry had any idea that I was the reason his daughter was having a hard time right now, he would reach through the phone and throttle me.

A part of me felt the urge to confess, to unburden myself. But even if I were willing to face Henry’s wrath, I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t let Henry

I'd fucked his daughter. It wouldn't be fair to her to tell her father that God knew I had done enough to her already.

I had to say something, though.

"I think it might be my fault she's upset," I managed after a few moments of silence.

"Your fault? What did you do?" He sounded a little ominous, threatening.

"I wasn't that nice to her when she told me what she had found. I was downplaying that, but it was technically the truth. "I resented the fact that she'd gotten dirt on the SEALs. I might have accused her of *wanting* something against us."

"Brian."

"I know, I shouldn't have."

He sighed. "I can't be too hard on you," he said. "I gave her hell about it at some point. I've apologized since then, of course. I can see now how hard it was on you to find that shit and she had to report it. Allison hated doing it, Brian. She hated it."

"Yeah. I believe that."

"If you were rough on her, you should tell her you didn't mean it. You should give her your phone number, don't you?"

"I do, but I don't think she's going to want to hear from me," I said.

"You could be right, for all I know. I don't know. I've never seen her do anything like this," Henry said. "I would have expected her to be at least *sort of* happy that her first big assignment went so well."

"Did it go well? It must have, right?"

"She says her bosses are very pleased. I know they were threatening her with a transfer to some paper-pushing job if she didn't have a good first out-

at, and there's no question of them letting her go now."

"That's good." I leaned back in my chair. At least something good had come out of all this. I was glad Alison was going to see benefits at work.

ments of "You know, I wanted to talk to you about what she found," Henry said

I groaned. "You're not going to tell me I should have known Jake was a little good, are you?"

"No, I wasn't. I'm willing to bet you've been telling yourself that plenty of times. I was "You're not wrong." I'd been beating myself up since the arrest, wondering how I could have misjudged him so seriously.

to find "These things happen," Henry said. "Remember when you and I first met our stripes? Remember Murray?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "I haven't thought of that guy in years."

"He thought he could coast through SEAL training," Henry said, laughing at it too. "Remember how he used to short his push-ups when the drill sergeant was looking the other way?"

I mean, "He'd get up and say he'd done the full hundred when we all knew he really only gotten through about sixty-five."

"Yeah, and nobody wanted to be the weasel who turned him in, but you have hated it. We all thought he was a stain on the whole group."

I was quiet for a moment. "It's rough, having to be the person who has to do something."

ner like "What Allie did was brave," Henry declared.

py after "I was too hard on her."

"We both were. We need to let her know that. But you're right; maybe the best if you give her some time."

ner with "Yeah."

ing, but "In the meantime, you need to stop beating yourself up for not realizing

guy was committing crimes.”

“Right under my nose, Henry.”

“Yeah, I know that. But how long did Sergeant Bracco realize that I wasn’t doing all the push-ups he was supposed to do? And that was just training, not criminal activity. Of course, your people were hesitant to blow the whistle on this, even if they thought something suspicious was happening.” And you wouldn’t have wanted to see it.”

“It’s my job to see it. I should have seen it.”

“I’m just saying, cut yourself a little slack. It got noticed in the end, everything is going to be straightened out now. That’s what matters, is

“I suppose it is.”

“All right. Don’t make me come over there and make soup for you too.”

“Are you making soup for Alison?”

“She’s been staying with me, yeah.”

Fuck. I hadn’t realized it was so bad that she’d needed to go home and see her father. I must have really hurt her. She must be fucked up.

A phone call wasn’t going to be enough to make this right. I felt sick about the way I’d treated her. She had come into my office trying to do a job and gotten locked in here by one of my men—she didn’t even know yet that she hadn’t been the fluke we’d thought it was. I had persisted in hitting on her and could acknowledge now that I’d been the one making most of the overtures. And when she’d given in to my advances, I had slut-shamed her for it.

Maybe it’s God, what a dick I’d been.

And the worst part was that I’d done it to someone I liked. She had never been a hot young thing to me. It had always been more. She challenged me in a way that I’d liked matching wits with her, even when I’d thought of her as my enemy.

How would it have been if we had ever gotten to the point of admitting we actually liked each other?

Murray It could have been the best relationship of my life. I would never have expected a relationship with Alison Barrett, but now, hell, I didn't think I would ever find another woman like her. Not if I searched the entire world. I was opening. And I had fucked it up because I hadn't been willing to see the truth about the corruption in my department.

"I'll tell you what," I told Henry. "Will you let me know when she gets home, and when she's home?"

"Not it?" "Why?"

I wanted to visit her at her house, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "I don't know how I'll know she's ready to hear from me," I said. "If she's staying at her house, she probably isn't going to want to hear anything I have to say at least, not right now."

Henry said, "She accepted my apology pretty easily. I'm sure she'll accept yours."

"Well, I hope so."

Henry said, "Just make sure you handle that quickly," Henry said warningly. "I don't want Alison moping around for the next month. She needs to know that that didn't do anything wrong here. We were the ones in the wrong for treating her—I we reacted."

"You're right," I agreed. "I'll speak to Alison soon."

But honestly, I didn't know whether or not that was true. The idea of trying to reach out to Alison after everything that had happened was extremely intimidating. She deserved it—but it would be a hell of a lot easier to just walk away.

That's what I'd always done in the past when things had gotten complicated with women.

ting we Was it just the fact that she was my best friend's daughter that had me differently this time?

er have I didn't think so, somehow.

think I'd I left the office early that day, something I seldom did. My big George home had always been a refuge in the past, but today it felt impossible. What had I thought when I bought this place? This was a home for a not for one lonely guy. Most days, I didn't even enter most of the rooms. I'd had to spend my money somehow—but now I was wishing I'd bought boats or gotten a helicopter or something. My house just highlighted how very alone I was, and I found myself hating it.

“That's *Just call Alison*.

at your No, I couldn't do that. Not yet. I had to respect whatever she was say. At through. I had to give her time.

Besides, I had no idea what I was going to say to her when we eventually talked. How could I possibly make up for the way I had treated her?

All night, I went back and forth. To call or not to call?

I don't I didn't sleep a wink.

hat she As the sun was coming up, I finally made my decision. I couldn't put it off any more. I had to speak to her as soon as possible.

It was torture to make myself wait until a reasonable hour. I decided to go to work. By the time I got there, it would be late enough to make the conversation to then I could finally tell her everything that had been on my mind.

tremely It was too much to hope that she would want to spend time with me again. I probably ruined that.

And that was what was on my mind as I drove into the office. All the scents, how she felt around me when I took her, and the sounds she made when she was midst of pleasure were gone.

feeling *It could never have lasted anyway. You always knew it was temporary. Could it have been anything else with Henry's daughter?*

I parked my car and went inside.

getown Everyone was quiet, clearly still a little shell-shocked by the arrest. I had to fill in the aftermath, the follow-up investigations that had come at us over the past few days. Nothing else had turned up, but I got the feeling a lot of people were anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop.

collected I went into my office and closed the door. I'd been keeping the door locked for as long as I could. I'd been pretty much all the time these days. They could knock if they wanted to.

I pulled out my phone and dug around for the business card Alison had given me on her first day here. I'd shoved it into a drawer at the time, thinking it was no way I would ever want to call a federal agent and that I especially wouldn't be trying to call Henry's daughter.

eventually God, I really had no idea.

I dialed Alison's number and leaned back in my chair, trying to think of what I would say when she answered.

The phone rang and rang. No one picked up.

this off She couldn't be screening my call. She didn't know this was my number. I had never spoken on the phone before.

to go in Except—

all, and She was at Henry's house. And if she showed Henry the phone, he would know it was me.

gain. I'd I could only conclude that she was ignoring my call on purpose.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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Chapter Twenty-One

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ALISON

I turned my phone off. I didn't know if Brian would try to call me again if that was the only one I would get, but I didn't want to spend the day fielding these phone calls.

"Maybe you should talk to him," Dad suggested gently. "I'm so sorry."

"What makes you think he's sorry?" I had detailed the confrontation between myself and Brian to my father, but I'd left out the part where Brian accused me of fucking him for career advancement. My father didn't hear that shit.

"Well, I talked to him," Dad admitted.

I gasped. "Did you tell him what I told you?"

"Of course, I didn't, Al. You know I'm on your side and no one else told *me* about it. He feels bad. I'm sure he's calling you to apologize."

Could that be true? I wondered.

But no—of course, Brian would act like he felt bad when he was talking to Dad. Dad was his friend. He wouldn't have that same energy when it was he was talking to.

“I don’t want to talk to him,” I told my father.

“Well, it’s up to you,” Dad said. “But you can’t keep your phone off for you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m just saying, eventually, he’s going to get through.”

“I can keep declining his calls.”

No, you can’t. You do have to talk to him eventually.

Oh, this was maddening. Maybe I should have just taken that call—news I had to relate wasn’t the type of subject you wanted to say in front of your father. Or over the phone, for that matter.

“I have to get to work,” I told Dad.

“Will I see you again tonight?”

I bit my lip. “It’s probably time I went home, I can’t keep crashing in my childhood bedroom.”

“You can, you know, this is your home, Allie. You can stay here as long as you’d like.”

“Thanks, Dad. But I need to move on. And I will not do that as long as you’re around here and let you baby me.”

“Listen, Al, whatever Brian said to you—don’t take it too seriously. You know how we military guys can be. A little too gruff. Not good at expressing ourselves.”

“I think he expressed himself just fine.”

“Give the guy a break. I know he didn’t mean the things he said to you. I was just taken aback. I was too, and you forgave me.”

“That is completely different,” I informed him.

“All right,” Dad allowed. “It’s your decision. Get off to work. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“I’ll call you tonight,” I told him.

forever, “There you go. Good girl.”

I got in my car and started to drive in the direction of my office, but I found it impossible to keep my mind on what I was doing. Again and again, my thoughts strayed to the phone lying in the passenger seat. Its screen was still dark. *I do need to talk to him. Especially if he’s going to keep calling me. I can’t put this off.*

but then I sighed, steered my car into an illegal U-turn, and set a new course.

front of Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling out outside Brian’s building.

Am I doing this?

I pulled down the car mirror and checked out my reflection. Fortunately, I was no longer deathly pale, the way I had been the day I found out I was pregnant. I’d noticed increased color in my cheeks lately. It felt to me that pregnancy agreed with me.

long as Not that Brian would even notice my looks once he discovered what I was doing here.

; I hang Fuck, this was going to be complicated.

I flipped the mirror back up and forced myself to get out of the car. I’d come this far. I would have to bite the bullet and do what I had come here to do. Whatever he said, I could leave within a few minutes. I wasn’t planning to hang around and try to sort out our future. I was going to tell him what I needed to know.

you. He I went inside.

Everyone looked up the moment I entered the room. A buzz of conversation traveled around, and I thought I heard someone say *more feds*.

you in Right. Of course. I had forgotten that they would know who I was seeing me here during my investigation. They probably thought I was

today to open another investigation.

I held my head high and walked past them all. I had no idea who found it thought of the report I'd filed. Maybe they all hated me for turning my gaze friend in. If they did, I wasn't here to hear about that.

k. I walked to Brian's office. The door was closed, and the shade in the window was drawn.

I knocked.

There was no answer.

I frowned. He couldn't know it was me. This wasn't about avoiding me personally unless someone had texted him to let him know I was at the building or something.

I was being completely paranoid. There was no grand conspiracy here involving me as Brian avoided me.

I knocked on the door again, but there was still no answer.

"He isn't here," said a voice behind me.

I turned and saw a young guy.

"He's not here?" I repeated.

The guy shook his head. "Not in the office today," he clarified.

"Where is he?"

"I'm not sure."

"When will he be back?"

"Is he in trouble?"

The guy looked spooked, and I realized that this could probably be my whisper. I'd put fear in all of these people. I'd made them think they were all likely to be arrested at any moment.

I raised my voice so that anyone who was eavesdropping could hear me as here. "No one is in trouble," I said. "We have no evidence of any

wrongdoing here. The FBI is closing its investigation. Nobody else has anything to worry about.”

I could practically feel the sigh of relief all around me.

If Grummond had been here, he probably would have taken that as evidence of guilt. But I got it. Of course, they all felt relieved.

Watching someone they knew well—a brother—be taken into custody was sure half of them were worrying about whether someone they had trusted they could trust was committing federal crimes.

I’d seen how corruption in the SEALs had broken my father’s heart. I knew what it would do to these men and women far better than Grummond could understand.

The young guy in front of me still looked a little bit doubtful. “If there’s anything else, why do you need to see the Chief?”

“I just need to have a quick follow-up conversation with him.”

“He’s not in trouble either?”

I had to respect loyalty. “No one is in trouble,” I repeated. “Honestly, I’ll have a conversation.”

“He isn’t here,” the guy repeated. “And I don’t know when he’ll be back. He tore out of here twenty minutes ago without saying anything to anyone about what he was doing.”

My heart dropped.

I wanted to think that Brian had been upset for reasons that had nothing to do with me, but the fact that he had tried to call me and I’d refused his call the morning before suggested otherwise.

“Maybe you can tell him I came by,” I said.

The guy nodded. “We can do that. Should I give him contact information?” “He’s already got it. And he doesn’t need to call me.” I still couldn’t

use hasmy news over the phone. I was going to have to find another way to touch with him.

I would think of something, I was sure.

relief asIn the meantime, there was nothing more to be done here. I nodded f
They'dto the man and the rest of his compatriots and returned to my car. T
7. I was thing that made sense now was just going to work and trying to get t
thoughtthe day. I'd have to figure out a plan for catching up with Brian later.

I guess I could visit him at his house—but that was an intimidating th
I knewhad only been there once before, for dinner with my father when I
d couldhigh school, and I remembered a massive, imposing mansion. I had no
to walk up to that front door and knock on it to tell the man inside
re isn'tpregnant with his baby. That conversation was going to be hard enough

How weird that I felt like we were on even footing here, of all place
guess it did make sense. I'd fucked him here. My whole body was ting
I walked through the office, flush with memories of times he'd push
it's justskirt up to find me wet and waiting underneath.

God, I'd have liked to fuck him right now.

ack. HeI tore my thoughts away from those memories. The last thing I neede
e aboutnow was to get lost in fantasies about something I was never going
again.

It had been bad enough that we'd fallen off the ledge so often when w
ig to dosupposed to keep things professional. But the stakes would be in
im thishigher now that a child would be involved. I couldn't let my baby be
between parents who couldn't keep their pants on around each other ar
always either fucking or fighting. We were going to have to learn to ge
on?" like civilized adults.

tell himI left the building and crossed to my car, lost in these thoughts, until—

to get in “What the *fuck!*”

I jumped out of the way as a car ripped into the parking lot like it was chased. I stared after it as it whipped haphazardly into a parking spot. How would a sort of maniac drive like that on government property?

He only Then the door opened, and Brian stepped out.

through Oh. That kind of maniac.

His eyes blazed as he crossed the lot to my side. “Alison! My lieutenant brought me here. I called and told me you were here. What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I was in I gaped. “How did you get here so fast? I thought you were out for the day to desire.” “I was on my way to your office.”

He I was “My office? At the FBI?” “You wouldn’t answer my call.”

He “Well, no, I wanted to speak to you in person... you’re telling me you’re not in your office because I wasn’t answering the phone?”

He “I had to see you.”

He “But why?”

“I had to apologize,” he said earnestly. “God, Alison, the things I said to you... I fucking didn’t mean any of that. And there’s no excuse.”

He “You were just upset.” I was shaking.

He “That doesn’t matter,” he said. “There was no reason to take it out on you.”

He “I know we’re not going to see so much of each other now, but I want to know that you can forgive me.” I nodded. “I forgive you.”

He “Just like that?” I bit my lip. “We need to have a longer conversation.”

He “So, not just like that.”

He “No, it’s... I have something I need to discuss with you. In private, please.”

I was sure he would push back and ask me what was so important, but he didn’t.

He just nodded. "My house?"

is being "Um, okay."

t. What "Do you know how to get there?"

"I'm not sure I remember."

"You can follow me, then."

He lingered, giving me a long look that made me feel like my skin was just lighting up, and then he returned to his car.

Why?" I returned to my own, trembling, wishing I could throw cold water on my face or something before we got there.

You cannot have sex with him.

This was going to be hard.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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BRIAN

I could hardly keep my car on the road as I drove back home. I times, I caught myself breaking speed limits.

All I could think about was Alison. Alison's body. The way she moaned in response to my touch. The way it felt to kiss her. The way she tasted. The way she smelled.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was rock-hard, and getting out of the car was going to be an ordeal. For a moment, I considered taking care of myself quickly right here in the car—I was sure I wouldn't have to worry about getting it up for her again.

Then I thought, *fuck it*.

Let her see what she'd done to me. Let her see how horny and out of control I got around her. I wanted her to know.

She hadn't said anything about wanting to fuck.

But she had asked for a *longer conversation*, one she wanted to be kept private, which could be code for anything. Maybe she did want sex.

Or maybe I could persuade her.

I got out of the car and unlocked the front door, aching in my jeans, wanting badly to change into sweatpants but knowing I couldn't do that. She was right behind me, following me inside.

If she noticed my state, she didn't say anything. She looked around the kitchen like she was thinking of buying the place. "Have you remodeled here since I was here last?"

"Four years ago." I'd forgotten she wouldn't have seen that yet.

"It looks good."

"Yeah... do you want something to drink? Beer?"

Several She shook her head. "No thanks," she said. "We need to talk, Brian. Somewhere we can sit down?"

oved in I indicated the kitchen table, and she pulled a chair and sank into it.

ed. The "You're sure I can't get you anything?"

"Will you sit, please? I want to get this over with."

it of the For the first time, I noticed how fidgety and anxious she looked. "Are you okay?" I asked. "Is something wrong?"

care of "Well..." she hesitated. "Yes, I'm all right. But there's something you need to know."

trouble "Tell me, then." What could this be about? Was she about to tell me that someone else was guilty of criminal activity? Maybe the FBI's investigation had found more stolen money.

ontrol I I was surprised to find at that moment that the only thing I cared about was Alison. Whatever she had to tell me, we would deal with it. I didn't want to put herself through any more grief over this.

have in She took a breath and nodded. "I'm pregnant, Brian."

For a moment, it simply didn't compute. What did this have to do with the FBI's investigation? Why was she telling me?

ans andAnd then it clicked. “You’re pregnant?”

it. “You don’t have to do anything,” she said quickly. “I’m not asking anything. I just thought you had the right to know.”

and my“Oh, my God.” I was on my feet in seconds, rounding the table and d sinceher up and into my arms.

She resisted for only a moment, then melted into me as if it was what she had wanted to be the whole time.

I held her at arm’s length and examined her. “You’re sure you’re all right?”
“Yes, I’m fine,” she said, blushing.

Is there“The baby’s all right?”

“I haven’t been to the doctor yet, but—”

“When are you going?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“Can I come?”

Are you“Really? You want to?”

“Of course, I want to, Alison.” I held her face gently between my hands. “You need me.”
“I’ve been a real dick to you. I know that. And I’m so sorry. But of course I want to be a part of this.”

me thatShe sighed and closed her eyes. “Thank God.” “You want me to?”

negotiation“I was hoping you would. I didn’t dare admit it to myself.”

I stared into her eyes for several minutes, feeling as if we were communicating without speaking.

want her“I missed you,” she said, her voice low.

I nodded. “I missed you too.”

“Take me to bed now.”

with the

you for



pulling It was different than it had ever been between us. Different—and somehow.

ere she I lifted her in my arms and carried her to bed. Ordinarily, I would have wanted to toss her on the bed and rip her clothes off, but the news she had given me made me feel like being careful with her, and the fact that I had almost lost her made me want to take my time.

I pulled her shoes off and tossed them over my shoulder. Then I craved her body and traced the button of her pants with my thumb.

She shivered. “What are you waiting for?”

“You in a hurry?”

“Somewhat. I’ve been missing you.”

“Well, I’m not going to rush this.” I popped the button open and unzipped the zipper down slowly. “I feel like savoring you today.”

hands. “God, Brian...”

course, I “Tell me this isn’t the last time we’re going to be together.”

“Of course, it’s not.” “Because I thought I had lost you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

we were “You can’t.”

“I mean, really.”

“We’re stuck together forever now.” Her hand rested on her belly, which was still flat, but I sensed the promise there.

“It’s not enough to be co-parents together,” I said. “I don’t want to trade the kid back and forth on alternate weekends.”

“What do you want?” she asked breathlessly.

“You. I want to be with you for real. I want you to move in here so we can have each other whenever we want.”

“My apartment...”

better, “You can keep your apartment. I don’t care. We can afford for you to have an apartment on the side. We can buy the thing, so you don’t have to worry about paying rent anymore.”

e’d just “We?”

knew I I hooked my fingers into the waistband of her pants and eased them over her hips. I sat back on my heels and removed her legs, one by one.

wled up “I want us to be a *we*,” I murmured. “I’m in love with you, Alison.”

She inhaled sharply, her gaze fixed on me.

I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. I stood up so I could get off my pants—fucking hell, I was still so hard—and then I crawled on my hands and knees, body and settled between her legs, slowly unbuttoning her shirt without breaking eye contact.

She was hot and wet against me, her hips rocking up into me, and I could feel her need was just as great as mine. But I was going to get this settled before we did anything. I was going to say what I needed to say.

fucking “I never meant to fall in love with you,” I whispered. “I know exactly how crazy that is. But it happened. You charmed me completely, Alison. I want to be yours.”

“Brian,” she breathed.

ich was “What do you say?”

“You need to fuck me right now, or I might lose it.”

ade this I could tell. Alison was panting hungrily, grinding against my cock. It would have been so, so easy to change the angle just a little bit and slide her. I wanted it, too—more than anything.

we canBut I resisted. I finished unbuttoning her shirt and laid it open. I slipped my hand behind her back to unfasten her bra. It came loose, and she gave a pleasing little shimmy to get herself out of it.

have anNow the bra and the shirt fell to the floor, and we were both fully naked. I rolled off her and onto my side. She let out a soft groan, but I pulled her with me, hitching her leg up over my hip, and then we were pressed together again.

n down“Please,” she said, her voice breaking beautifully. “Please, Brian, I need you inside me so bad it hurts.”

“Say you’ll move in with me.”

“I will. Fuck. Anything.”

d shuck“Say you’re mine.”

up her“You know I am.”

, neverI moved against her slowly, and she made a noise like a little sob. “I need you to say it,” I told her.

ould tell“I’m yours, Brian. All yours. Always.”

l beforeThat was all I’d been waiting to hear.

I slid into her and immediately felt like I was losing my mind, carried away by how on an ocean of pleasure.

want toNobody felt like Alison. Nobody was so hot and tight and silky and wonderful. I didn’t even want to move right away. I just lay there, basking in her heat and clutching her to me, determined that she would never get away from me again and always be mine.

She shivered, her core tightening around me, her legs shaking.

, and it“Are you going to come already?” I breathed.

ide into“I—”

God, this was unbearably hot. “Just having me inside you is going to

ped mythere?”

æ did a “I’ve needed you *so much*—”

I felt myself throb with anticipation, and I guess she felt that too because she let out a cry and dug her heel into my ass, shaking harder than ever.

lled her “I want to feel you come,” I told her.

ogether “Oh my God—say it again.”

“I want to feel you come on my cock, Alison. Could you do it for me?”
æd you And, incredibly, she did.

As soon as I felt her orgasm, I lost control of myself. I couldn’t keep going anymore. I thrust into her hard and set a quick, hungry rhythm, my hands digging into her hips to pull her down onto me as I fucked her, chasing her to orgasm.

She shuddered through the aftershocks, clinging to me, gasping for
“I want pleasure, and *fucking hell*, she was the hottest thing I had ever seen in my life, and I had the absolute privilege to be inside her and to call her mine.”
I fell apart, groaning as I came inside her.

We were slick with sweat and exhausted, and we lay together, wrapped up in each other, for several long minutes. I could tell that she was as reluctant as I was to let go.

ky and Finally, she pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes, not unworried in her legs from around me. “That was amazing,” she breathed.

æt away “I’ll fucking say it was.”

“Did you mean all that about me moving in?”

“Of course I did. You will, won’t you?” It occurred to me that she might have only agreed in the heat of passion—maybe she would change her mind once that her head was clear.

get you “Of course, I will,” she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“But I can’t believe you want me to,” she added. “I never thought... use shebelieved this was something you’d want to make real.”

“You didn’t want to make it real,” I pointed out.

She flushed a little. “Well, no, I didn’t,” she acknowledged.

“But you’ve changed your mind.”

Now.” “God, Brian, I... I can’t believe I fell in love with *Brian Grant*.”

I laughed. “What’s wrong with *Brian Grant*?”

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“Which just shows that we can surprise ourselves sometimes, doesn’t g withasked.

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“Which just shows that we can surprise ourselves sometimes, doesn’t it?” I asked.

Alison grinned.

“I mean, if I’d know that Alison Barrett would be having my baby—” It was the first time I had said this out loud, and I was surprised by how good it felt.

“I would have thought it was insane. But now you’re making me happier than I’ve ever been.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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ALISON

Waking up in Brian's bed was like a fantasy made real. He had already gotten up, so I had the bed to myself, but it was still full of his smell, and I closed my eyes and luxuriated in that scent. It felt like being surrounded by him and being in his arms.

And I closed my eyes and thought back to how it had felt to fall asleep nestled in his arms, my head pillowed on his chest. I had never felt so comfortable and safe and utterly taken care of in all my life. It had been the best night's sleep I'd ever had.

How had I possibly gotten this lucky? It wasn't just that he wanted to be with me, which was more than I had dared to hope for. He also wanted *me*. He wanted us to be together—to be a family.

That was beyond anything I had dreamed of.

He *loved* me.

I sighed happily at the thought and rolled over just as the bedroom door opened, and the smell of bacon came wafting in.

"Nice bedhead," Brian said, sounding amused.

I reached up and felt my hair—sure enough, it was in total disarray. “It’s not my fault I have sex hair.” “It is half your fault.”

“Okay, it’s not *entirely* my fault.”

He held up the tray he was carrying. “Want breakfast? I made scrambled eggs, bacon, and waffles.”

“Wow.” I sat up so that he could settle the tray over my lap. In addition to everything he had named, there was a little bowl of blackberries, glass of ice water, and orange juice. “This is some five-star service.”

“Anything for the mother of my child. Anyway, you ought to know that SEALs don’t do things halfway.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true.” I picked up a blackberry and popped it into my mouth. “Damn, these are good.”

“I always keep them in the house.”

“I can’t eat all this food. Come help me.”

He settled next to me, his back against the pillows and an arm around my shoulders. “Happy to be of service, ma’am.” “I didn’t even know you could cook,” I told him.

“I live alone,” he reminded me. “I had to learn, or I would have starved.”

“I live alone, and I can’t cook.”

“You’re not even thirty yet. You would have figured it out eventually, but now you won’t have to because you’ll have me to cook for you.”

“Oh, is that going to be part of our arrangement?”

“Yep. I cook, and you carry the baby. That’s the deal.”

I grinned. “That seems more than fair to me.”

“So what would you say to taking the day off work?” he asked.

“And hanging out here?”

“Yeah, I’m not ready for you to leave just yet. And you and I have

hey, it's things to talk about."

I nodded. "I can call in," I said. "My boss is obsessed with me at the moment because of... well, you know."

ambled "The SEAL bust."

"We're not *calling* it that. But yes." "Hey, if it means you can take the time to and spend it with me, it was worth it," he said.

issues of "Do you mean that?"

"I was blind to what Jack was," he said. "It's good that you turned him out at Navy had to be done, and now we can get back to what we're good at. I would never have been angry with you, Alison. I really should have thanked you. You protected the integrity of the SEALs, and I owe you for that."

"You don't owe me anything."

"Well, I'm still going to spend the rest of our lives making it up to you for how I acted," he said. "You didn't deserve that." I texted Grunwald and my Predictably, he was happy to let me take the day off. He would have said anything these days. It was pleasant to watch him realize he had been wrong about me, and I'd been having fun stretching my legs a little more in my role now that he knew what a valuable addition to the Bureau I was.

While I sent that text, Brian made the arrangements he needed to notify the others to stay home too. Since he didn't report to anyone on a day-to-day basis, it was simpler for him, but he did want to let the others in his office know he wouldn't be there and that they could reach him at home if they needed him. "But I told them not to call unless it was an emergency," he added, setting his phone on the nightstand. "So unless more FBI raids are planned, I don't think we'll be hearing from them."

"No more raids," I assured him. "The FBI is finished with the SEALs for a while. You won't hear from us again until next year's audit."

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s hope that one is nice and quiet. No nomentdramatics.”

“I’ll hope for that, too,” I said. “But we went through all those docum seized and didn’t find anything else suspicious, so I would say day offnothing to be worried about when it comes to future audits.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Brian raised the glass of orange juice and knocked in one swallow.

m in. ItThen he looked at me somewhat guiltily. “Did you want that? I shouldmore.”“Don’t go anywhere.” I leaned into him. “I want you more than ed you.juice. Water is fine for me.”

He nodded and pulled me close. “So,” he said. “When can you move in

“Did you mean what you said about me keeping my apartment?”

you for“I have plenty of money. I’ve been looking for something to do with nmond.don’t need to give up your apartment if it means something to you.”

e givenBut even though I had been uncertain last night—it had all happened id been—I found that I did want to. I didn’t want to keep a foot in my old lif e in mytrying to start this new one.

“I’m ready to let the apartment go. “If you’re sure you really want me. nake to “I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.”

, it was “You’re not going to get sick of me and want me to move out?”

that he “Never.”

I to. “I’ll probably have to pay the penalty to break my lease early.”

ting his “I’ll pay for that. I’d pay it ten times over if it meant getting you her ’t thinkquickly.” I shrugged. “In that case, I can start moving my things ov weekend.”

for this “I’ll hire a moving company,” he added with glee.

I was a little blown away. “You don’t need to pay for everything.”

more “I’ve got the money,” he said. “So much more than I need. And you’re starting. Besides, paying for things for you is quite hot.”

ents we I laughed. It *was* hot being taken care of like this, not having to worry there’s anything.

“Instead of keeping an apartment we don’t need in the city, why don’t you turn it back a vacation property?” I suggested. “Somewhere by the sea. We can take the baby for trips once it’s born.”

can get “That does sound nice,” Brian agreed. “Do you want to pick a place?”

I want “You want me to pick it?”

“See what you can find.”

1?” “All right,” I agreed. “I will.”

We spent the rest of the morning sharing fantasies about our future. You talking about the plans we wanted to make, and it was all delightful. It wasn’t until mid-afternoon that the topic I knew we had both had in the back of our so fast minds was finally broached.

while Brian was the one to bring it up. “How much does your father know?”

” “He doesn’t know anything,” I said. “He doesn’t know anything has happened between us. He doesn’t even know I’m pregnant at all.”

“We’re going to have to tell him.”

“I know we are.” I sighed. “I have no idea how he’s going to take it. I’ve been putting off telling him anything until I talked to you, but now I’m out of excuses.” “We’ll talk to him together,” Brian said.

re more “Really?” “Of course. I’m not going to let you do that by yourself.”

ver this “Because I can handle it. I don’t want you to have to deal with Dad.

you two are friends, but I feel he might be a little pissed about this when he finds out. And more at you than me.”

“No,” Brian said firmly. “We do it together. From now on, I’m by your side.”

‘re just for everything, Alison, and that’s a promise.”

God, that felt good to hear. I’d been willing to deal with Dad alone, but I couldn’t deny it would be easier to do it together. I loved him for stepping

I kept discovering new reasons I love him even more than I already had. “We get it done together.” “Okay,” I agreed. “We’ll tell him together, then.”

“When?” “Tomorrow? So it will be out of the way before the doctor”

And we need to ensure it’s done before I move in here.” Brian was

hesitant. “Is something wrong?” I asked him.

“It’s just that I should go in to work tomorrow after taking today off.” “And I think you should too.”

“Are you telling me what to do?” I laughed.

“Maybe a little bit. Do you have a problem with it?”

To a degree, I liked it, though that would change in a hurry if he ever told me to do something I objected to. But it was going to be fun as our relationship progressed, learning these new ways to relate to one another. I wouldn’t have guessed I would enjoy being bossed around by an older man, but there was something hot about Brian taking me in hand like that.

“All right,” I said. “So we can’t talk to Dad tomorrow. When are we going to do it. I’ll do it, then?”

He hesitated. “I think we’d better go today, Alison.”

“Today?” An anxious feeling erupted in the pit of my stomach. “Like now?”

“Nothing to be gained by waiting around.”

“Oh, I know, but... I closed my eyes. “I just managed to tell *you*. Tell me when he will be just as hard, if not more so.”

“Well, telling me went all right, didn’t it?”

I managed a laugh. “A lot better than *all right*.”

“So maybe your father will surprise you too,” Brian said. “Maybe he’ll be, but I better than you think he will.”

“That would be a surprise.” I couldn’t imagine Dad reacting well to the fact that his daughter was pregnant with his best friend’s baby.

“Listen, there’s only one way we’re going to find out, right?” Brian asked. “And at least we get to tell him we’re serious about each other. He looked like that if nothing else.”

He did have a point. It was better than if I’d had to go to Dad and tell him Brian had knocked me up and then abandoned me. At least, this was a relief, “I’ll be off,” he says.

I just hoped my father would be able to see it that way.

We left the warm confines of the bed for the first time in hours and got dressed in our clothes on. It felt strange to be dressing to go out and face the real world again, as if we were leaving our little fantasy bubble, and I had to reassure myself that we would be able to return to it.

There was just one more obstacle for us to overcome.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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BRIAN

Henry was suspicious when he saw the two of us arriving together at his house. He could tell something was going on, and I could see that too, but I didn't think he had the slightest idea of what it was. There was a part of me that he could have guessed this.

Henry was going to be shocked, and badly. As a result, I felt uncomfortable. But at the same time, I knew what I wanted, and it would be mine. Henry was going to have to deal with that.

"I didn't think I'd see you two together," he said, letting us into the house. "I guess this means you've made up?"

"Yeah, we have," Alison said. She sounded wary and anxious, making me want to put my arms around her, but I didn't want to touch her before Henry. I had to tell Henry the truth about what was going on. That was no way for him to take it out.

"What do you have going on today, Henry?" It was easier to start with small talk than to jump right in.

"Not much," Henry said. "Thought I'd do a little yard work... should you two of you be at work?" "We took the day off. We needed to see you,"

said.

Now the suspicion was growing in Henry's eyes. "You both took the time to talk to me, together? Is something going on here?"

"Maybe we should go talk in the den," Alison suggested.

We had agreed that she would take the lead here—she knew her father better even though he was my best friend, and I knew that he would take the lead better coming from her than from me.

Alison led the way into the den and took a seat. I'd been here enough times to know which chair was usually Henry's, so I avoided that one, but that meant I sat on the couch next to Alison. Of course, it was the seat I would have chosen for myself, but I was mindful that it looked like the two of us were on the same side of this conversation, and Henry was on the other.

Of course, that's pretty true.

We just had to be careful, that was all. This revelation was a delicate situation. Henry looked from one of us to the other. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "Well, nothing's wrong, exactly," Alison said.

"But you wouldn't have come here together if there wasn't *something* going on, is it? Are there going to be more arrests? Did the FBI investigate something else?"

"Oh, no, Dad, there's nothing like that," Alison said quickly. "We're wrapping up the investigation. You don't have to worry about any more bad stuff regarding the FBI. That's over."

"Well... that's good," Henry said. "But I don't understand what the hell you are doing here in that case. If the investigation is closed, why are you even together?"

Alison glanced at me.

"Do you want me to do it?" I murmured. I would take over for her if I had to.

lost her nerve.

day off But she shook her head and steeled herself. “Dad... the thing is... Brian and Alison are sort of together.” “What does that mean?”

“We’re in a relationship.” She tensed a little and glanced at me, unsure if her best friend would approve of the terminology.

is news But I liked it. *A relationship*. It wasn’t something I’d ever expected to reach this stage in my life—I had thought I was just a single guy forever, and I’d been okay with that. But Alison had changed everything for me.

t sitting “You’re not in a relationship,” Henry objected. “You can’t be.”

chosen “We are,” Alison said. “We settled everything last night. We’ve had feelings for each other for a while, Dad.”

“He’s nearly twice your age!” “I’m an adult, though.”

“An adult,” Henry scoffed. “You’re barely out of grad school, Alison. You’re almost old enough to retire. What are you talking about?” She sighed. “I know you were going to take it like this.”

“And *you!*” He rounded on me. “What the hell do you mean by that? What *daughter?* Are you kidding me, Brian? I knew you were a player, but you’ve gone beyond the pale!”

He suddenly realized that we were sitting just a few inches apart. “Get up and close the couch!” he exclaimed.

surprises I started to stand up, but Alison grabbed my arm and pulled me back down.

“Don’t be an asshole about this, Dad,” she said. “It’s happening whether you like it or not, but you can be decent about it. You don’t have to act like a cartoon version of an overprotective father.”

“Alison, be quiet,” Henry snapped. “You have no idea what you’re doing here.”

she had “Yes, I do,” she said sharply. “You can’t get away with treating me like this.”

child anymore, Dad. Didn't you notice that I'm twenty-six years old, and I'm an FBI agent?"

"Twenty-six—that's nothing! He's in his forties! You think you can ensure a relationship with each other?" He scoffed and shook his head. "What do you imagine that's going to look like? You don't even have any common interests!"

"We do, actually," Alison said. "But that's something for us to figure out together. And if your only objection to this is that you don't think I'm going to be willing to watch reality TV with me—"

"I'll watch reality TV with you," I cut in. It was fair to say I'd never had any feelings about that nonsense type of program before, but if Alison did, I was all in. I'd make her dinner, and she could explain all the petty dramas. That sounded like a nice evening from where I was sitting.

"No, that damn well is not my only objection," Henry said. "The two of you are at different stages in your lives, Alison. You'll want to find something to settle down with before long. Maybe start a family. And that's not what Brian is. That's not *who* Brian is. He's exactly the type of guy in a girl's bed every night."

"Hey," I protested.

"Don't fucking start, Brian. You know it's the truth."

"Dad," Alison said. "Brian and I aren't as far apart in our life plans as you think."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She drew a deep breath. "I'm pregnant, Dad."

Henry froze. He looked positively shell-shocked.

"It's okay," Alison said quickly. "This is a good thing, I promise. Everyone's okay? Don't start yelling again."

and I'm "You're pregnant?" His voice was low and ominous.

Then he turned and looked at me. "What the fuck did you do?"
be in a "Don't talk to Brian, Dad. Talk to me. I'm your daughter. And it tak
do you you know. I did this every bit as much as he did."

ommon "You're just a kid. You don't know what you're doing."

"Oh, yes, I do," Alison said hotly. "And if you're going to be like thi
ure outit, Dad, I'm not going to stay here and try to talk to you about things.
Brian's the only one who's behaving like a child. So, calm down and accept
what it is, or else Brian and I will leave until you're ready to have a
r cared conversation."

I in. I'd "You're lecturing me about being an adult?"

ounded "Well, you aren't acting like one," she said. "I'm sorry this has come
a shock, but nothing shady has happened here. Nobody has done a
of you wrong. We just discovered that we were interested in each other, r
eone to acted on it."

t where Henry's jaw worked. I could tell he was struggling not to start yelling
ifferent and I appreciated the effort. I felt like I understood, more than Alison
to, just how hard this was for him to accept.

"Henry," I started.

Henry didn't answer.

as you "Look, I know this raises red flags for you. I know I haven't always b
most respectful person in the world regarding women."

"Understatement." "All right, fine. You're right. I've been a dog. And
you're upset about how I treated Alison when I found out she was tur
evidence on the SEALs. I'm upset about that too."

3 breathe, "I forgave you," Alison told me.

"I know you did. That doesn't make it okay, the way I acted. Understa

your father would be defensive. And I appreciate that Henry, because her to have as many defenders as possible. If I ever make a mistake, mistreat her, I want her to have people on her side. I love her.”

Henry glowered. “What do you mean you love her?” “I mean what I said. “Why do you think I was so upset when I realized my reactions about investigation hurt her?”

You’re “I thought you just felt guilty.” “I did feel guilty because I care about this for Because I’m in love with her, and I don’t want to be the person who is an adulter.” Henry looked from me to Alison and back.

I could see that he was genuinely considering that.

“You’d better treat her well,” he said gruffly after a moment. as such “I will. Of course, I will.” nothing “I might be retired, but I can still put you on your back if the situation and we for it.”

He couldn’t. He had never been able to get the upper hand on me ; again, when we’d sparred. But now wasn’t the time to make an argument seemed which of us was stronger.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I wouldn’t dream of doing anything to hurt Henry looked at us for a moment longer. He seemed to struggle to figure what he wanted to say next.

been the “You’re pregnant?” he asked Alison at last.

She nodded, and I saw tears in her eyes. “You’re going to be a grandpa I know told him, her voice cracking a little. “It’s good news.”

ming in “Oh, Allie...” He stood up and came over to us, and she got to her feet went into his arms. He held her tightly, then looked at me over her shoulder

“I guess I can make peace with this,” he said. “Alison could be with me indubitably, guys than you.”

I want “That’s the spirit,” Alison said, laughing a little against her father’s shoulder and “You just treat her well, so I don’t have to clean your clock.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing anything else,” I assured him. “You don’t say,” I worry about that, Henry. I mean, if there’s one thing you don’t have to do to the about, it is me treating her like anything other than the princess she is.’

“I’m not a princess,” Alison objected.
I told her. “You are to me,” I told her. “You’re *my* princess.”
“All right, all right,” Henry quipped. “That’s enough of that. Save it for when you’re on your own.”

Then he released Alison and looked at me. “How about a couple of drinks and a soda for the mother-to-be?”

“That sounds great,” I said gratefully, relieved to see that we had common ground where we could view this as good news and celebrate together.

Henry started toward the kitchen. I got to my feet, and Alison came over to me.

“You see?” I told her. “That wasn’t so bad.”

She laughed shakily. “It was rough for a minute there. But I think I’m coming around to the idea of us being together.”

“I think he is, too,” I chipped in, relieved. “This is going to be good, Alison. You can feel it.”

I kept my arm around her as we went into the kitchen. I saw Henry do a double tap at the sight of me holding her like that, but to his credit, he didn’t say anything about it.

This was the way things were now, and thankfully, he seemed like he was going to be able to accept that.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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ALISON

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “This place is gorgeous.” “The whole place is ours,” Brian said happily. “For the next three weeks.” “I don’t believe we were both able to take that much time off.”

“Your boss still thinks you hung the moon, though, so it isn’t a problem.” “Yeah, he does. Did I tell you he’s already talking about a second assignment for me?” I asked. “I think he wants to get as much as possible out of you before my maternity leave starts, so I’m expecting the next few months to be packed.”

“Just tell me you’re not investigating the SEALs again.”

I laughed. “No, I’ve asked to be removed permanently from that department and I’m looking into corporate espionage now.”

“Well, that ought to be interesting.”

“I hope so. And more to the point, I won’t feel like a bitch if I have to take some CEO in for doing something underhanded. It’ll feel like they’re getting away with it.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’d feel the same way.”

“But that’s enough shop talk,” I said. “This is our vacation. I want to e
Come on. Let’s check this villa out. And then I’m going to want a
didn’t sleep on the flight, which was a long one.”“At least we were
go, first class. Did you enjoy that?”

“Oh, yeah, that was amazing. I’ve never flown first class before.”

“I have, but only for business. I’ve got to admit that traveling with
much more fun than traveling with the SEALs.”

I walked through the spacious, open first floor of the villa. I could s
double doors at the back of the kitchen led out directly onto the ho
beach, and I couldn’t wait to get into my bikini and lie in the sand fo
hours. But maybe a nap would come first, and then I’d spend the even
there when the sun was a bit lower. It was ungodly hot here in Fiji, an
though I knew I would enjoy it, I had to take care not to let myself del
Everything mattered so much more now that I was pregnant. I had t
mindful of my health.

Brian seemed to be thinking along the same lines because he went
refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. He handed it to me. "Dri
he said. “You didn’t have enough to drink on the plane.”

“I didn’t want to have to pee a hundred times,” I told him.

“Right, understandable, but now we’re here, so you can pee all yo
Drink the water.”

“I’m surprised there’s water in the fridge.”

“I had the place stocked. We’ve got everything we need.” He h
refrigerator door open so that I would be able to see what was inside.

“Whoa.” I came over for a better look. There were fresh fruits and veg
plenty of drinks, milk, and eggs—everything we could have wanted. ‘
great. How did you do this?”

enjoy it. “The people I rented the villa from did it,” Brian explained. “I sent a little extra money to stock us up. Wouldn’t want my girl to go hungry while we’re trying to have a nice relaxing vacation.”

“Maybe you’ll teach me how to cook while we’re here since you’re pro at that,” I suggested.

“That’s possible. I’ll have you making eggs five ways by the time home,” Brian promised. “Now, let’s go check out the bedroom.”

He slapped my ass as we went up the stairs, making me squeal and run a bit ahead of him. “You’re bad!”

“You like it, though.”

I couldn’t deny that. I’d been drained and exhausted when the plane had landed, but now that I was in this beautiful place with him, my body was starting to wake up. The fact that we had the next three weeks to do whatever we wanted was highly tantalizing. I couldn’t wait to get him naked.

We reached the top of the stairs, and I gasped. “Oh—Brian!”

He hadn’t let me look at pictures of the place he had chosen for us to stay, insisting that he wanted me to be surprised. It had worked. I was in awe of what I was seeing. “How on earth did you find such a beautiful place?”

The top floor was all one room, except for a little door that I imagined would lead to the bathroom. Right in the center was a massive bed—it had been bigger than a king-size, but I didn’t even know they made such large beds. I ran to it, threw myself onto it, then rolled over and reached for Brian. “Let’s christen this.”

He laughed. “Don’t you want to look at the rest of the place first? There’s a pool out on the balcony.”

“This is what?” That was enough to get me back on my feet. I popped up and ran over to the French doors that led out to the balcony.

them a Brian laughed. "I'm never going to get tired of your energy," he told
y while haven't been that energetic in years." "Holy shit, Brian!" I was starin
infinity pool that looked out over the mountains. "I can't believe this.
such a most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "Y
we goit?" "Oh my God, are you kidding? I love it. If it weren't for our jobs
asking you if we could move here."

a little "You don't want to move to Fiji." He laughed.

"I do. I mean it. If it weren't going to mean leaving the FBI behind,
asking you to pull the trigger on that right now."

ouched "Well, we have plenty of time here," he planted a kiss on my cheek.

dy was "Can we go for a swim?"

hatever He laughed. "I thought you wanted to christen the bed."

His voice was low and husky and was a perfect reminder that I very m
want that.

online, "I'm gross from the plane," I groaned.

awe at "I have a solution for that."

"Pool?"

l had to He laughed. "Shower," he said. "You haven't seen the bathroom ye
d to be You're going to love it."

beds. I He grabbed my hand and pulled me back inside to the door I'd spot
"Comeled to the bathroom. He pushed it open, revealing a mosaic tile floor,
free-standing bathtub, and a rain shower.

ere's a "Come on," he said, pulling me over to the shower. "Let's get you
and clean."

oped up He reached in and turned on the tap. The water cascaded down, and he
off his shirt. "Get in." I grinned. "You don't need to ask me twice."

l me. “I stripped down and got into the shower. The water was warm and soft
g at an skin, and I immediately felt myself start to relax.

It’s the Brian stepped in behind me. His arms wrapped around me, and I leaned
against his chest and closed my eyes.

ou like He ran his hands up and down my torso, then cupped my breasts and
, I’d be my nipples gently, making me moan with pleasure. “You feel so
good,” he murmured. “I could spend the next three weeks inside you.”
make promises you can’t keep.”

, I’d be “Fuck, girl...” His hand found the middle of my shoulder blades and
bending me at the waist, and then he ground his cock against my ass.
water rained down on us. “You drive me crazy.”

“Fuck me.”

He brought a hand between my legs and toyed with my clit. “That’s what
uch did want?”

“Why do you play these games? You fucking know what I want?”

“But it’s so damn sweet to hear you beg for my cock. It’s the hottest thing
the world. Go on, babe, tell me how bad you want it.” I groaned. “You
me so wet I feel like I’m going to die,” I said. “I need you inside me.
t, babe. you to fill me up. No one’s ever done it like you do. I just want to ride
for hours.”

ted that “You don’t want to go to the beach?”

a deep “No, screw the beach. I want your dick in me. Unless we can do that
beach.” With a satisfied growl, he slid into me.

all nice I sighed at the sudden fullness, panting like an animal, pressing my
against the shower wall to push back and fuck myself on him.

he pulled “There you go,” he groaned. “Fucking use that dick.”

I did, rocking back and forth on it with abandon. Brian held my hips,

t on my me, but he didn't move at all. He let me do all the work, and I loved it.

“Fuck, babe, you ride me like it's your fucking job,” he sighed. “I need back. Keep going.”

“Tell me you'll fuck me on the beach while we're here.” I wanted to stroke him talking. I loved those dirty words coming out of his mouth. It was fucking intoxicating.

“Don't worry, I'll fuck you anywhere you want.” His fingers dug into my thighs, started to match my thrusts, his hips slapping against my ass hard. “You pushed, to go out on the beach and ride me naked in front of everyone in Fiji as they do it. Let them see what I've got. Let them all see the most stunning woman in the world sitting on my dick. The jealousy will kill them. I just wish my pregnancy was showing so everyone could see that too. Fuck, I love sex that you can't get off.”

I felt weak. This exchange was so hot it was burning me up from within. I wasn't going to last much longer.

“When you're nice and big, I'm going to take you somewhere fancy. You make me groan, rubbing my clit now, his other hand moving to cup my breast. I need you to dress up real nice, so everyone can see how beautiful my girl is. And then I'm going to sit beside you and pull up your skirt and touch you under the table, finger you until you come all over my hand, and then I'm going to taste you on my fingers while we're surrounded by people who have no idea. You're just going to be nice and quiet so no one can let anyone see what a slut you are for me.”

Fucking hell, I couldn't take this anymore. My orgasm broke over me and I let out a scream, slamming back onto him with such force that the door shook.

As I clenched around him, Brian let out a cry and pulled me back on

hard, and I felt him come inside me.

Take it. It was so intense that I lost track of where I was. Maybe I blacked out, but I couldn't be sure.

The next thing I was aware of was sitting on the shower floor, the water was raining down around me, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath.

"You know," I murmured into Brian's shoulder, "I came here to get clean, and he said, 'And instead, you got dirty.'" He chuckled. "Come on, let's scrub down, then we can swim before dinner."

He helped me to my feet. My legs were shaky, and I had to lean against him for support while he soaped up my skin and his own. The water rinsed us clean, and we stepped out.

I reached for a towel.

"Don't bother." He scooped me up in his arms. "Straight into the pool, and you."

"I'm not wearing anything!"

"It's a private balcony. And I like you this way." He strode across the bedroom, leaving wet footprints behind him.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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EPILOGUE ONE YEAR LATER

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EPILOGUE ONE YEAR LATER

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ALISON

I let myself out of the nursery, pulling the door slowly so it wouldn't make any noise when it latched.

Brian was waiting for me in the hallway. "Is she sleeping?"

"Yeah." I yawned and stretched. These three a.m. feedings were a slog. I loved that Brian got up with me every time. "It's all right if you stay when I do this," I told him. "I like that you wake up with me, but you have to stand in the hall."

"Well, I need to practice getting up, too," he said. "When we switch to formula, I'll be doing half the feedings in the middle of the night, so I'll be ready for that. I'd just come into the room with you, but you know how having extra people there wakes her up."

I nodded. Our daughter was only a few months old, but she was already so alert and curious about the world that it was usually tough to get her to sleep. When trying to put her down, it was always best to limit the number of people present. I had to stay with her as long as she was fastened to my breasts, which unfortunately meant that Brian was forced to wait outside the room.

"You tired?" Brian asked. "Want to go back to bed?"

"Oh, I probably should," I said. "I know I'm supposed to sleep when she's sleeping."

"But?"

"I'm a bit hungry."

"Well, you're supposed to listen to your body more than anything," he said. Brian frowned. "You have to take care of yourself to take care of her, right? Let's go get you something to eat."

I followed him into the kitchen. The big mansion looked considerably brighter since I'd moved in. I immediately began redecorating. The decorative lighting had been significantly updated. Brian had even let me paint the majority of the walls while I was in the nesting stage of my pregnancy. Despite his claim that it would happen, what I hadn't done was learn to cook. We'd fallen into a pattern in this room, and we knew our roles. Brian was to sit at the table and wait to be served, and I took my seat now. Brian opened the fridge. "Juice or water?" "I'd murder you for a Diet Coke." "Not until you're done with breastfeeding."

"I know, I know." It was a decision I would have made for myself, but having him order me into it was comforting. "Grapefruit juice, then?" He poured out a glass and put it on the table. "What do you want to eat?" "Potatoes? With cheese? Do we have something like that?"

"As it happens, we do." He pulled out some cut-up potatoes. "I got up while you were napping yesterday. Want to hand me the grater?" It was hanging on a peg on the wall beside me. I pulled it down and gave it to him, and he began to grate cheddar cheese into a bowl.

"You're amazing," I murmured, sipping my juice. "Getting up and cooking for me in the middle of the night like this. I don't know how I would have handled parenthood without you."

"You'd have done fine," he said. "You do great at everything you touch. Look at how well you're doing at work."

It was true. I'd been promoted just three months ago, which had come as a surprise since it had been right before the start of my maternity leave. Even though I knew Grummond liked me and valued my work, I hadn't expected to be promoted right before taking a long hiatus. Apparently, he appreciated

derably more than I'd realized because when he promoted me, he told me that his intention was to make sure I had a reason to return.

I hadn't bothered telling him that that was never in question. I loved my job and wouldn't have given it up for anything.

At my father's urging, Brian, meanwhile, had decided to retire. It was a tremendous relief to me to know that when I eventually did have to go back to work, he'd be able to be here with Kylie. And until then, the two of us would be able to spend her first few months at home bonding with her and getting to know the shape of our new family.

Anyway, Brian sprinkled the cheese over the potatoes and put the pan in the oven. He poured a second glass of juice—he'd given up alcohol in solidarity with me while I was pregnant, though I had told him he didn't have to do that. He sat next to me at the table. He grabbed my feet and pulled them up to the table, and I sighed as he began to massage them. "That feels amazing," I said. "You have no idea."

"You work so hard. I know the last few months have been rough on you. Being so pregnant and going to work every day, then the birth, and then taking care of Kylie at all hours, you deserve a little pampering." "Well, I won't say no to that." I sipped my juice.

"So I've been thinking, you know, the house we stayed in when we were in Fiji. Just Fiji?"

"Sure," I said eagerly, wondering if he was thinking of suggesting that we go back. Those weeks had been magical.

Even "You liked that place, right?"

"I loved it. It was one of my favorite places I've ever been."

"Okay," Brian said. "That's good. I'm glad to hear it."

"You are? Why?"

hat part “Because I bought it.”

My jaw dropped. I wasn’t sure I had heard right. “You bought... that house?”
“You said we ought to have a vacation home.” “Yeah, I did, but I didn’t think I’d
thought it would happen so soon.”

“You said that if it weren’t for our jobs, you’d want to live there full time.”
“It was a fantasy,” I said weakly. “I didn’t expect you to take me seriously.”
“Well, we can’t live there full time because you still want to work—after all,
if you ever decided you wanted to stop, you know that would be all right for
me.”

I shook my head. We had discussed this. “I like my job,” I said. “I love my job.
I’m not going to give it up just because we don’t need the money.”
“That’s fine,” Brian said. “But there are still vacations to think about, like
Fijian vacations.” I grinned. “I can’t believe you bought that house!”
“Well, I thought you deserved a gift,” he said.

“For what?”

“For giving me a beautiful daughter. I saw everything you went through
and now bringing her into this world, and you ought to have a gift from me to
thank you for all that.”

“Oh, Brian... you didn’t have to. You know she’s a gift to me too.”

But I liked the gesture. It was romantic—he was honoring me for carrying
a child, which was very sweet. And I couldn’t deny that I was also very
excited about the house. The infinity pool and the giant bed were ours now,
and we could stay there any time we wanted. It couldn’t have been any better.

“When can we go?” I asked eagerly.

He laughed. “Kylie’s still a bit young to have her first Fijian vacation.
In a few months, we’ll go check the place out. And now that it’s ours,
remodel it if you want to. Get new furniture.”

“As long as we don’t replace the master bed,” I said. “But we should have a room for Kylie, maybe?”

“Or just add another wing onto the house,” Brian said.

That hadn’t even occurred to me. “Can we do that?”

“Sure we can. It’s our house. We can do whatever we want.”

Even though I had been living with Brian for nearly a year, it still surprised me sometimes that we had the means to do whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted it. I had always known he was wealthy, but living with him was something else.

I had to admit. It was pretty nice.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” I said. “I can’t tell you how excited I am. Our very own Fijian villa! And Kylie will grow up playing on the beach and maybe we’ll have another baby in a few years.” I could see a beautiful future unfolding before me, a beautiful future with my beloved family. How have I gotten so lucky?”

“I bought you something else, too.”

“Oh, my God. What are you doing? I only gave birth to one of your children. This surprise had better not be another house.”

He laughed. “It isn’t a house,” he swallowed hard. “It’s something better. Well, I think it is, anyway. I’m not sure if you’re going to like it or not.”

He reached into his bathrobe pocket and drew out a small, square box.

I gasped. I recognized the shape of that box. “Brian,” I breathed.

“This is a long time coming,” he said. “And before I do this—I want you to know that I spoke to your father, and he’s given us his blessing. He’s as happy about it as I am.”

Dad had come a long way. I wanted to say something, to ask ab

wall off conversation the two most important men in my life had had, but I couldn't find words. I felt tears start to come to my eyes. I couldn't believe it was happening.

Brian opened the ring box to reveal a beautiful square-cut diamond solitaire. "Alison Barrett, will you please marry me?"

Surprised "I thought you didn't want to get married," I managed. "I thought you'd be happy with the arrangement we had."

money "Yeah, I thought that too," he said. "But I want to know you're mine in the same way a woman can belong to a man. I want us to be a real, official family. I want to share the same last name. I want Kylie to grow up with parents who are excited to be married to each other. I love all of it. Say yes, Alison, please."

On the beach, "Of course, it's yes," I breathed. "Of course. What else could I possibly say?" He took my hand, pulled the ring from the box, and slid it onto my finger. It fit perfectly, like magic—he must have taken one of the rings from his jewelry collection to the jeweler to measure.

"Do you like it?" he asked. "I hoped you would, but if it isn't to your liking, we can always have it redesigned, add more stones, make it something you like better—"

Not even "No, stop." I held up my hand so I could admire my new ring. "Don't say another word. It's perfect, Brian. And so are you."

"And so are we," he added.

Brian stood up, pulled me to my feet, wrapped his arms around me, and kissed me.

It was you to me. I would never have believed it, but standing there in my stained t-shirt and nearly-sweatpants, in the arms of my dad's best friend, his hands big and firm on my back and his mouth on mine, I felt more beautiful than I ever had in my life. I curled my fingers into my palm, feeling the weight of the ring that I

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DID YOU LIKE THIS BOOK?

**Then you'll LOVE "Baby Daddy BOSS", and "Baby Daddy Billio
Both will be out very soon.
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Aldric

I'm done here.

“Waiter,” I called, and my date blinked, surprised. As the waiter approached our table with half-finished meals, I sighed.

“Yes, sir?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“May I have the check?” My voice was flat and bored as I inquired.

“Is there a problem, sir?” He appeared to be genuinely concerned.

“My date is a bore,” I said, waving my hand. “However, the food was fantastic.”

I smiled and dropped a wad of cash that was more than enough to cover the bill plus an overly generous tip on the table, no longer willing to wait for the check. While she sat there stunned, I grabbed my coat. I forced a smile through my pursed lips.

There is something about the women I have met recently. They were shallow, and greedy. I have more money than I need. One look convinces these women that I have the means to spoil them. I am convinced this is why the woman who sat across from me, with all her sparkly and pretty makeup, looked at me as if I were a fish and she was a shark.

“Close your mouth. It’s not a good look. I wish you a good evening.” I walked out the door without looking back, eager to get in my car.

As soon as

I’d rather go home and imagine myself on the podium of the Club Med Hotel, than waste time on an airhead woman who would rather cling to status. I’ll be in San Francisco in two days for the International Conference on Biochemical Engineering, and I always love to give a great speech.



As I approached All these lectures were the same. This was nothing new, and I had to fight boredom tugging at my mind. I was determined to get to the exciting part of my speech to show these people how important this research was.

My gaze scanned the crowd, a mix of older and younger people. And there she sat, an outlier among them all. Her strawberry blond curls stood out among the brown, black, and platinum blond hair of the crowd. I felt

It was difficult to look elsewhere at this point. She was lovely, enough to make my blood boil as I droned on about science and biology.

Over the I just knew I needed to talk to her. Aside from her beauty, she was a hit for a woman. Young women in this field were uncommon, which heightened a smile of excitement. I drew myself up taller, afraid that everyone watching would notice my excitement. Like a rooster preening before a hen. I noticed her face dull, under my steady gaze, but I couldn't stop staring. It's incredible that I managed to get through the critical part of my speech.

Convinced When I saw her at the after-party, my heart skipped a beat. I decided to concentrate on those who were exchanging pleasantries and business.

This distraction lasted only a few seconds because I found myself watching her again. I noticed her struggle to fit into this stuffy crowd that marginalized youths. I smiled, a wave of nostalgia washing over me because I had never been in her shoes. I remembered how painful it had been to be brushed aside; to my She would have to earn their respect.

Reference Now that I was off the stage, I took her in completely. I took in her curves, soft face, and plump lips. My eyes were mesmerized by her freckles that dotted her nose, pale green eyes, and hair that was more than two shades. Her hair color was complex, filled with coppery browns and reds. It was impossible to ignore her. The aura she presented was captivating even though she was in a world that didn't welcome her. She pushed her way into conversations, laughed beautifully, and shook hands. I would be a part of it. I said I wasn't captivated.

"Dr. Haile!" an older woman called. Suddenly, my attention was directed there to someone I had met before rather than the breathtaking young woman. I nodded out. The smile plastered to my lips lingered as my thoughts stayed on the sound of her name I'd left behind in the crowd.

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Do you like FREEBIE
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**My ex-lover billionaire schemed to match my "most eligible" tick
charity event. I tried hard to ditch him.**

Even as I shield myself, the power he still holds over my heart is intoxicating.
The plan was to merge our lives and our companies.

Our boardroom-to-bedroom obsession was intense.

My beautiful billionaire media magnate is fighting for our love, but
I can't trust him now.

My psycho-jealous sister shattered our dream life two years ago in a
betrayal.

I know what I saw.

I pushed him away.

With one devastating lie, I could lose both the love of my life and the business we were building together.

Until Xavier made a soul-grabbing proposal that even I dare not refuse.

Will the truth expose a trap or a battle for a second chance?



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