



CODE NAME:

GHOST

JANSON FORCE
SECURITY
Noble Founder

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SAWYER BENNETT

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By

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Kindle Edition

Published by Big Dog Books

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Epilogue

About the Author

CHAPTER 1

Malik

PULLING THE BLANKET around me a little tighter, I try to suppress a shiver. I can tell by the bluish tint around me that night has fallen, although I have no clue of the actual time. I gave up knowing dates and time of day a long time ago.

All I know is I've been in this wooden hut, which has mud slathered over the joints, for months. Of that, I'm confident, but I'm not sure how many.

The hut is no more than the shell of a structure placed on the desert floor. It's a geological phenomenon called desert pavement—where closely packed rock fragments and pebbles make an almost pavement-like surface. It's one of the reasons I suspect I might be deep in the Syrian desert, but that's not saying much since over fifty-five percent of the country is, in fact, desert.

Regardless, my captors aren't content with just keeping me in this hole. At some point prior to my arrival, they dug out a hole roughly ten-by-ten feet inside the hut, embedded a spike deep into the bottom of it, and chained me to it. When standing, my head barely reaches the top. Even on tiptoes, I can't see anything but the roof of the hut. There's no door and no window without glass or wooden shutters. They have me chained like a dog. I often wonder why they feel the need to put me in a hole, but the only answer I can figure is it's part of their torture plan. I have to say it sucks not seeing the sky or the sun, nor being able to feel its warmth.

The nights are getting pretty cold, which makes me think of approaching the winter months in Syria. If I had to guess, it's getting into the forties at night. The two scratchy woolen blankets they've given me are no match against the cold temperatures. I can't sleep at night, too shivering and being miserable, so most of my rest comes during the day when it warms up a bit.

I rise from my bed—which is nothing more than one of the wool b

doubled up and laid as far from my waste bucket as possible. Not really matters. I lost my sense of smell a long time ago, which is a good thing. I can't even imagine what I smell like. I'm wearing the same clothes I was captured in—minus my boots, which they took off my feet. Black pants, long-sleeve black thermal shirt, and cotton socks. They're stiff and unyielding, having been soaked with my sweat, blood, and urine over the months of my captivity.

hiever. I Never my tears, though.

have no Not once since I was captured have they gotten my tears.

ng time I move stiffly around the small area of my hole in the ground, holding a thick chain tied to one ankle up so I don't trip over it. Standing on my

red into I try to spot anything, but it's futile. There was a time when I could easily pulled myself out of this hole, but these days, I don't have the strength

ny. It's been beaten and starved out of me. Besides that... there's the chain-around-my-ankle thing.

packed where ent-like When I was first captured, there was no sense of relief that I was alive. I knew being held in the hands of the enemy—presumably ISIS—was probably on a swift path to death by route of torture. On top of that, I was beyond grief-stricken over the teammates I'd lost.

hut. At I was quickly zip-tied, hooded, and driven for what seemed like ten feet away from the brief firefight we had engaged in. In my ears, I could still hear the anguished moans of the men who had been shot.

ned me ptoes, I What came next was expected. I was Special Forces in the Marine Corps before joining the private sector with Jameson Force Security. I went through SERE school.

a dog. I thing I Survival. Evasion. Resistance. Escape.

ing the I had no chance to test out my survival and evasion skills. They took me right to the resistance portion when the hood was pulled off my head.

we're was launched straight into their torture efforts to get me to spill my guts.

g down I'd like to say I withstood the torture for days on end, but that's not the reality. The human body can only take so much, but when it boiled down to it, I just didn't have the information they wanted. I wasn't active in the military. Once they finally believed I was a private security contractor, they took me into enemy hands, my use to them changed.

blankets Just before they moved me, I was told I'd be very useful in a spy operation with another country or they might just use me in a good old-fashioned

that it beheading that was sure to go viral, as most of those videos often did. I was hooded once again, driven for hours, and dumped into the desert where I've now been for God knows how long. It's hard for me to tell you how fatigued I am here, especially the last several weeks since I've become weaker and more stiff and I tend to sleep a lot. That means I'm often comatose at sunrise or sunset. The passage of time is too fluid for me to understand.

My good health is not important to them. I get fed, but not consistently. My ribs stick out, and my knees are bony. Most meals are rice, some stale and dried out ka'ak, and once in a blue moon, goat meat. We're drinking plentiful but tastes like rust. I have to force myself to drink it. My urine is brown as the water, and I'm pretty sure it means I'm slowly dying.

It's something I've come to accept. Lowering back down to my blanket, I lean against the cold dirt wall and pull the other blanket more tightly around me. I close my eyes, thinking about my family. My parents and siblings are working every angle they can think of. I bet. I'm positive my boss, Kynan McGrath, is working every angle—that I'm the only government contact doing the same. There's not a doubt in my mind that they've given up on me the way I have. They'll never rest until they have me. That makes my heart hurt for them, because I'm like a needle stuck in a haystack, stuck in a hole in the middle of the Syrian desert. I'm unable to hear anything. I hear voices outside the hut, but I can't understand Arabic at all. I could I even begin to distinguish the dialect.

As best I can tell, there are always two guards and they rotate every few days. One is usually awake while the other will sleep on the floor of the tent. Sometimes, a vehicle will approach, then leave again, presumably to check out guards and drop off supplies.

They never talk to me, and I don't necessarily think it's because I don't speak English so much as I'm a non-entity to them. Just a prisoner. They must assure I stay in the hole in the ground. They don't consider me a threat, so we just mutually ignore each other. I think they can tell from looking at me that I gave up trying to figure out an escape plan a long time ago.

Footsteps scuff over the desert pavement as someone comes into the tent and a man's face appears above me.

Bill peers down at me.

Well, not really. I don't know their names, but as I've come to see

men over and over again, I've given them monikers myself.

Bill is actually the nicest of my captors, but that's not saying all the time. Instead of dropping the bucket that holds my food down on me, he waits at the edge and hands it to me so it doesn't spill. He's also the only one who ever lets me out of the hole, but I don't think it's because he has a heart.

He only takes me out so I can shit or piss on the desert floor rather than my bucket, which he eventually has to clean out.

He has no food in his hands, but he makes a motioning with his hand wordlessly asking if I'd like to go outside to relieve myself.

I never miss the chance, whether I have to go or not, so I nod quickly.

Bill is a big man, and he knows I'm no match to take him anywhere. He swivels the rifle hanging from a strap to his back, then drops to his side at the edge of the hole. When he issues an order—even though I'm not exactly sure what he's saying—I know he wants me to put my hands up so he can tie them. I step to the edge, hold my hands up, and lace my fingers so he can diligently work rope around them.

When they're secure, he hops down into the hole and releases the latch that secures the bracket around my ankle that hooks to the thick chain.

Without a sound, he stoops, puts his hands together, and—as I've done on many other occasions—I put my foot in them so he can hoist me out of the hole. He's strong, so he manages to launch me right out. I land

knocking the breath out of me. Bill is as spry as he is large, and he vaults out of the hole behind me.

He roughly grabs my arm, then hoists me to my feet. Giving me a shove, he propels me out the doorway into the night air. It's freezing,

refreshing at the same time. I have a brief moment of clarity and a surge of strength. Should I turn and attack him? Try to wrestle his gunner who

My gaze lands on his partner—my other captor whom I've never met. Mortimer. He sits next to a small fire, chewing on some sort of bone just by gristly meat. Most likely goat. I'd kill for a bite, but I know it won't be offered.

Unexpectedly, Bill shoves me again. My head whips back and I fall forward, going down on one knee. I'm past the humiliation of not being able to fight back. I long ago stopped caring that I don't even have the strength to stay on my feet when I get pushed.

Yelling something in Arabic, Bill hauls me up until I'm standing

Mortimer calls out, and they laugh.

much. I just stare at Bill, wondering if he has a family and why he does all the things he does. Is he being paid good money? Does he believe in weapons because my captors are pursuing?

He says something else to me... something I'll never understand in a million years. Just as I don't understand when I hear a slight *zinging* and then his head bursts apart in a spray of blood, bone, and brains.

Mortimer gives a sharp curse—at least I think that's what it is, then that *zinging* noise again and Mortimer's head explodes, too.

Both men slump to the desert pavement, Bill right at me. Mesmerized, I watch as blood seeps out of what's left of his head, forming a large puddle that starts sliding toward my socked feet. It sparkles in the moonlight, actually looking quite beautiful.

And then it hits me... I'm free.

I glance around, peering into the dusky night, but the glow from Mortimer's fire makes it impossible to see much.

"Hands up," an American voice orders from the perimeter of darkness. I don't hesitate in putting my roped hands high in the air as I search for a lone one.

And then... they all seem to step forward out of melted shadows. Teammates from Jameson. Tank and Merritt, along with a handful of easily named men, all dressed to the hilt in camo with guns and grenades.

Tank and Merritt were with me back in June on a hostage rescue mission, but it's a rough when we were ambushed. Until this moment, I had no clue if they survived, but it's a slight up all hope of this ever happening.

Suddenly, my friend, Cage Murdock, is standing in front of me and my legs give way. His arms come around me, holding me upright. Tank and Merritt move in closer to get a good look at me while the others don't bother to check on what remains of Bill and Mortimer.

"I got you, buddy," Cage reassures me. "No one else guarding the stumbler, right?"

I shake my head. "I don't think so. I only ever see two at any given length to Tank glances around, nodding over at the building where I was standing.

"We've been watching for several days now. We didn't see anyone standing either, but we need to make sure we're secure."

“We’re secure,” I mumble, although I’m not really sure of anyone at this point.

“That’s good,” Cage replies with a smile, giving me a not-too-rough pat on my shoulder. “That means we can get your ass home. Bet you’d like to go home, huh?”

I grit my teeth together, knowing my words will never be sufficient to answer that question.

Instead, I give the desert something I’ve withheld all these months. I let my tears finally flow free.

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“We’re secure,” I mumble, although I’m not really sure of anything at this point.

“That’s good,” Cage replies with a smile, giving me a not-too-rough slap on my shoulder. “That means we can get your ass home. Bet you’d like that, huh?”

I grit my teeth together, knowing my words will never be sufficient to answer that question.

Instead, I give the desert something I’ve withheld all these months.

I let my tears finally flow free.

CHAPTER 2

Anna

IT'S AMAZING HOW efficient I've become at getting Avery and myself ready for the morning. Not that getting a four-and-a-half-month-old baby ready is a lot. I give her a bath at night, so mornings are mostly about changing her diaper, putting on the cutest of outfits I can't stop myself from buying, and breastfeeding her. The last is the longest part of the process, but it's also the most fulfilling. Almost meditative as I can get lost just watching my daughter take her life's nourishment from me.

After that, it's a quick shower for me while I watch Avery in her portable bassinet through the shower door. A quick dry of my hair, a splash of water on some makeup, and I'm out the door in an hour and a half from the time I finish to drop her off at my mother's house before heading in to work.

I can't help but wonder how different our morning routine would be if our circumstances were just a bit different.

For example, how much easier would it be if I'd just give up my mother's harassing and move into her house so she can "take care of me" and I can take care of both? She's having the hardest time understanding how important my independence is to me.

Or rather, how much easier it would be to care for Avery if I had Jimmy here with me? My husband was killed on a mission gone bad in Syria six months ago. Jimmy was the type who would have been very hands-on with Avery. He would have insisted on being the one to change her diaper and get her dressed in the morning since I would be the one to feed her. He'd be involved in that, too, though. He'd sit beside me on the couch, pulling her into his strong arms, and would stare down at her the same way I do with a dreamy expression because she's our little miracle.

At least, I think that's what he'd do.

The passage of time has a way of fucking with people's minds, and becoming a widow while pregnant with a first child can do the same

be told, Jimmy and I had only known each other about two years before he died. We'd met while we were both in the Army, stationed down in Bragg, North Carolina. It had been a whirlwind romance, an accidental pregnancy, and a quick marriage. Some might say I could never have predicted who Jimmy would have been as a father when I hardly knew a man and a husband, but they'd be wrong.

Jimmy was the type who would have doted on Avery and me for the ready in days of our lives. Just because he was taken from us before he could take a breath that doesn't mean I don't know the truth of it.

Regardless, the one thing I'm determined to do is be the independent woman Jimmy so admired. The type of woman he sought, and also the one who attracted him from the very start. While he would never have an issue with me leaning on my mother—and I most certainly did for a while after his death—he'd also expect me to be a role model for Avery and teach her that a girl can overcome any hardship in this life. That's what I'm trying to do by taking one foot in front of the other and moving forward.

Every day, I tell myself, *You got this, Anna.*

This morning, however, as I'm putting Avery's carrier in the back of the car, buckling her in, I have my moment. That one time each day I succumb to grief, pity, and tears. I haven't figured out how to make these go away, and they often don't last long.

Sometimes, it's a mere dull ache in the center of my chest and a stinging of tears as I think about Jimmy.

Other days, like this morning, I can't hold back. As Avery coos to Jimmy, holding a plastic rattle in her tiny fist, the tears start falling down my cheeks like warm rivers. It's actually painful trying to hold back the wracking sobs I want to tear free. Sagging against the doorjamb, I take in a ragged breath and curse the heavens for taking my husband from me and leaving me without a father. I succumb to that moment of feeling sorry for myself because fuck if this isn't hard as hell living life as a young widow and a single mother. I don't deserve this.

Then my gaze falls to Avery, and she just stares so thoughtfully. Her eyes bore into mine, and I think she knows her mother is having a moment. I just as the wetness from my face with the back of my hand, suck in air through my nose, and level a smile at my little girl. She responds, the tiny pucker of her mouth curving into a gummy grin. She shakes the plastic toy and emits

re he'd screech, which I think will become an amazing giggle one day.

in Ft. And just like that, my moment is over.

cidental Leaning over, I kiss Avery on the forehead, tug on the straps to make her harness buckle in tight and repeat my mantra.

him as "You can do this, Anna."

all the



d prove

strong, BYPASSING THE SECOND floor where my office is, I move up to the corner kitchen on the fourth. That's where the best coffee is, and there are pastries someone brings in.

aid had I've been working at Jameson Force Security for only a few months, but I was Jimmy's gig originally, and I was just the wife. His former experience with an Army ranger made him a prime candidate as one of their top specialists for the private contracting work they were hired for. He was on a job the company was hired for by our own government—to go in and rescue some aid workers who were taken hostage.

eat and My role is far less glamorous, but one I'm cut out for. I did administrative services during my enlistment with the Army, which translated well into becoming the owner's secretary. Kynan McGrath and his wife, Joslyn, were so supportive after Jimmy died. They were constantly reaching out to me, checking on me, and making assurances they would help with the care of my daughter and me forever.

herself, That's not something I actually wanted, but Kynan didn't hesitate to agree when I asked for a job. I needed something that made me feel like I was still a soldier. Strangely, going to work for the company in whose service my husband was killed was exactly what I needed.

breath Avery Jameson is an interesting company. It was started in Vegas by her best friend, Jerico Jameson. He sold out to Kynan a few years back. She moved the headquarters to Pittsburgh, wanting to be on the East Coast closer to his government contacts in D.C.

er eyes The company handles a wide variety of security services. We have teams that can do something as simple as in-home installations of high-tech alarm systems to mission groups that covertly go into hostile countries to rescue people. We do a surprising amount of that kind of work because the government's metaphorical hands are often tied as to where they can send

troops. In those instances when they need something done—and it has to be done in a hurry, like black-ops and off the books—they will hire a private security firm. It's like suremoderate amount of pride they most often turn to Jameson.

My mom doesn't understand how I can work for the company that Jimmy killed. I've tried to explain it to her, but she'll never get it. He wasn't able to complete his mission. He gave up his life for something extremely important—saving innocents. If there is any way I can help the company achieve their directives, I feel like I'm helping Jimmy accomplish his.

Moreover, Jimmy wasn't the only one who was lost. His teammate Mezzina, was also killed. Perhaps even worse, their other teammate Fournier, was captured and held as a prisoner for months.

Malik has been rescued, though—just over two weeks ago—and I'm sure I can explain what a burden that knowledge has lifted from my shoulders.

For some reason, I became heavily invested in the search for Malik. For months, Jameson put forth hundreds of thousands of dollars into covering up our activities in Syria. We paid off informants, went against our government's wishes to stay out of any rescue attempts, and scoured the country for Malik. It was only after Kynan offered a million-dollar reward for credible information leading to Malik's whereabouts—dead or alive—that we got solid evidence to take him into imprisonment.

Kynan made the bold decision to send our own team in, eschewing the usual military route—or some might say hindrance—from our government, which has to follow certain rules—and rescued Malik from his captors.

The news made me happier than I can remember being in a long time. I truly felt Jimmy and Sal had guiding hands in our team successfully bringing Malik home.

Kynan has been in Montreal for the last two weeks, recuperating at his family's home. He enjoys dual citizenship between the United States and Canada with his mother being an American and his father a French-Canadian. I expect anyone in his position would want to be home for a while after the sh-level he's endured. Kynan says he'll be coming back to work soon, and I can't help but try to lay eyes on him. I need to assure myself that miracles can occur, perhaps Jimmy's death wasn't all in vain.

True to my expectations, there's a box of donuts on the counter

as to belarge kitchen that bleeds into a living area. This floor of the Jameson b
s with aholds a handful of personal apartments, which some of the single guys
the kitchen where we have large team meals and get-togethers, and
hat gotliving area complete with comfy couches, recliners, and a big-screen T
Jimmyheard Kynan throws a hell of a Super Bowl party here.

nething Glancing at my watch, I see I have another fifteen minutes before
elp thisto be downstairs for my morning meeting with Kynan, where we'll
omplishhis schedule and my duties for the day. I make myself a cup of coffee
maple donut, and sit at the kitchen island, surfing my phone. Th
ate, Salalready three texted pictures of Avery from my mom, and I examin
, Malikwith a grin for a few moments while I nibble at my donut.

The refurbished freight elevator arrives on the fourth floor, and t
I'm notslides open. I don't even bother glancing up from my phone, figur
om myKynan coming up for a donut and some coffee.

“Hey, Kynan,” I say as I flip back to the first photograph of
lik. Forblowing a little spit bubble. “Check this out.”

ert trips I lift my head, turn the phone to hold it outward, and gape in choc
expressman who just came off the elevator. He's carrying a large military duf
him. Ithis shoulder.

rmation Malik Fournier.

e of his We'd only met once before—the night before he and the team
their mission—but the changes between that man and the one standing
ng helpme now are significant.

play by Malik was a big man, and he's still incredibly tall. But he was
when I'd met him before. Packed solid with muscle he'd appeared to
time. Ihow to use. The man before me is much thinner, although I imagi
ringinggained some weight back over the last almost two weeks he's beer
parents. His cheeks are slightly sunken in, and his eyes have dark
; at hisunder them. Perhaps it takes longer than two weeks to catch up on th
tes andhe surely missed while being held prisoner.

nadian. I know it was bad for him there since I had asked Cage to give me
er whatgory details when he returned to Pittsburgh after the rescue. He'd ba
n't waitfirst, but he'd finally caved. That's because Cage has become an inc
ur, andclose friend over the last several months, and he knows more than

how much I've tied this rescue of Malik to the final peace I need to
: of thepast Jimmy's death.

uilding Cage had told me all the details. After he'd finished, I'd wis
live in, hadn't. I just can't imagine how anyone survived that type of experien
a plush And yet... seeing him standing before me now—not back to non
'V. I've still so very strong in his own right for surviving captivity—and it aff
the way I knew it would.

I need It's a balm to my soul, knowing what an absolute miracle he is
go oversurvived. While it doesn't make Jimmy's death any easier to ac
e, nab a definitely replaces a portion of my grief with a genuine happiness tha
ere are has overcome practically the impossible.

ie them We stare at each other for a long moment, then Malik's gaze drop
phone. "Cute kid."

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Cage had told me all the details. After he'd finished, I'd wished he hadn't. I just can't imagine how anyone survived that type of experience.

And yet... seeing him standing before me now—not back to normal but still so very strong in his own right for surviving captivity—and it affects me the way I knew it would.

It's a balm to my soul, knowing what an absolute miracle he is to have survived. While it doesn't make Jimmy's death any easier to accept, it definitely replaces a portion of my grief with a genuine happiness that Malik has overcome practically the impossible.

We stare at each other for a long moment, then Malik's gaze drops to my phone. "Cute kid."

CHAPTER 3

Malik

OF COURSE SHE'S a cute kid. She's a product of Jimmy and Anna, and they were an extraordinarily good-looking couple. I'd only met Anna once before the mission, and that was at a Jameson get-together for drinks the night before we flew out. I'd been working and training with Jimmy for a month, but I'd never met his wife before that night.

I know all about the little girl facing me on the screen of Anna's laptop. From the moment I'd been rescued by my Jameson teammates, I stopped asking questions about everything. I made Cage recount to me in painstaking detail everything he knew about Jimmy and Sal's deaths, and I could compare it to my own recollection. How they died and how their bodies were recovered. Sal bled out from a bullet wound to his femora while Jimmy died from a shot to the neck.

The guilt for those two deaths is crushing to me, and there's nothing I can do to assuage it. Perhaps that's why I'm overly curious about Anna's baby, Avery. How does a woman survive losing her husband and bearing a baby all within a matter of weeks? As I stand before her right now, seeing her easygoing, welcoming smile on her face, I have to think it must be somewhat of an act.

It makes it a bit awkward for me.

Over the last two weeks, I've been doing a lot of thinking. At first I was mostly resting. Then a hell of a lot of eating, trying to nourish myself. Spending time at home with my parents in Montreal was exactly what I needed as I come from an incredibly close-knit family that knows me inside and out. There was no hovering or overcompensating. I can't even imagine the pain and grief my parents and siblings have been through, but they don't fuss over me as they knew I would have hated it.

My siblings came in at separate times to check in on me. Max and Ben both play professional hockey, so they snuck in for a visit when they

Ottawa. My sister Simone and her husband Van—a retired hockey player—the Cold Fury—came in for an entire week, but, like my brother weren't in my face bemoaning the fact I'd been a prisoner in the Middle East for five months. Van and I played a lot of Xbox together, and Simone ate all of my favorite foods. My parents stared at me a lot, but I couldn't blame them. I'm sure they're having as hard a time as I am believing I was actually rescued.

and they But then, it was time to return to Pittsburgh.

before To my job.

the night It was the only time my parents got vocal, expressing their concerns. While they hedged it in terms of “maybe you should stay and resettle more,” I know they're scared I'm going to go back out on a dangerous mission and die.

couldn't I totally get it, but they also know one thing about me. I never run from fears, and I don't hide from “what if's”. I confront things head-on, and the only way I know how to put Syria behind me is to put Pittsburgh and my family right in front of me.

my artery I made a slight detour though, flying to New York to visit Sal's parents. He wasn't married and didn't have kids, so it was a somber visit with his aging parents who were incredibly stoic about his death. They weren't surprised to see me on their doorstep, but they welcomed me in. We spent the afternoon talking about Sal. I didn't know him all that well, but I would have given my life for him. They never asked me what happened the night I was taken prisoner, which is a good thing. I haven't been debriefed and I wouldn't have been able to give them any details. I'm glad I didn't tell them it was my fault he died along with Jimmy.

but, I was And as I stare at the picture of Jimmy's daughter, Avery, I wonder there will come a time in her life where she'll know my role in her death. Anna may or may not choose to tell her the details, and I have no idea exactly what Anna knows yet. She's a little bit different seeing as how she works here and would presumably be privy to some details.

she didn't Regardless, until I get my official debrief with Kynan, I can't tell her what I did or didn't do out there in the desert. I can only hold my guilt in tight for now.

played My gaze lifts from the photo of Avery to Anna. She's an incredibly lovely woman with golden hair and unusual blue-gray eyes that s

ayer forchange depending on the lighting. In the bar the night we all had d
s, theythought they were a dark cornflower color, but under the fluorescent
lle Eastlights, they seem almost silvery with a hint of sky blue.

cooked “So... you work here now, huh?” I ask, which is about as lame a g
t reallyas there could ever be. I know she works here because I asked Cag
g I washer, needing to reassure myself that I hadn’t destroyed her when I
husband die.

“Yeah,” she says with a light laugh, tucking a stray lock of hair
her ear and setting her phone down. Her expression turns a bit sad, a
ncerns.drops her gaze for a moment. “I just had to be a part of all this after...’
st some Her words hang heavy in the air, and a knot forms at the base
rgerousthroat.

“I bet that sounds silly, huh?” she replies, eyes coming back to m
in froman attempt at an easy smile.

and the “Not at all,” I reassure her, then figure this is as good a time as any
my jobthe most important thing that needs to be said. I give a cough to cl
throat. “Um... listen... I’m really sorry about Jimmy. I can’t imagi
family.hard it’s been on you.”

with his I brace, thinking tears might be coming, but I’m surprised wh
e quiteexpression softens, her fingers playing along the edge of her phone
pent anaverts her eyes. “It’s been tough on you, too. I’m really happy you’re
ld have sort of makes all of this a little more...”

he died Again, her words trail off as if she’s not quite sure what any
fed yet,means. I know the feeling...the loss of direction and wondering what
i’t have fate was thinking when it cooked up these circumstances.

After what seems like an eternity, she lifts her head and meets m
nder ifagain. I don’t know this woman at all, yet, because of what happenec
father’sdesert, she and I have a thread tying us together. It seems like a mon
no clue moment, and I have no clue how to acknowledge that.

ow she Instead of saying something vague or trying to redirect the conve
into safer territory, I have a moment of brutal candor. “It’s hard to
tell heryou.”

rief and Anna blinks in surprise before she frowns.

I shake my head, holding a hand up to explain. “It’s just... I’m al
redibly Jimmy’s not. I hope you know that given the chance to do any of
eem toagain, I would have traded places with Jimmy in a heartbeat.”

inks, I Straightening, Anna regards me with alarm. “I’d never ask that of anyone for that matter. And you can’t be thinking like that. Be grateful alive. You have to celebrate that, Malik. I know I do.”

greeting Yeah... that’s easier said than done. Poor Anna, who’s struggling about the death of her husband and raising a baby on her own, won’t let her understand how I’ll never be able to get past Jimmy’s death.

Managing to pull off a smile acknowledging her words, I punctuate behind with a dip of my head, hoping it’s enough to put her off the scent of guilt and she.

I nod down the hallway past the kitchen to where the entrance of my apartments are located. “I’m going to be staying in one of the apartments for a while. Kynan just gave me the key, so I thought I’d get settled in.”

There’s a bit of finality in my tone, indicating the conversation is over.

Nodding, Anna grabs her coffee. “Yeah... sure. I didn’t mean to hold you up. I have to get down to work. Demanding boss and all.”

I watch as Anna grabs her purse, another donut, and her cup of coffee. Another smile, to which I lift my chin, and she’s gone.

And weirdly, even as difficult as it was to talk to her, it was then her honest conversation I’ve had since my rescue. A part of me wants more as she goes back. It



of this GETTING SETTLED IN my new apartment took all of five minutes. I’d only the hell dump my clothes in the drawers and poke around the kitchen cabinets to see how well supplied it was. When I first came to Pittsburgh to start at Jay’s gaze I had not had time to find permanent lodging. I was sleeping on the floor in the Marine buddy’s couch who lived on the outskirts of the city. And the mental chosen to go directly to Syria for the hostage rescue attempt. It didn’t seem like a fast transition to me, having left 2nd Recon in the Marines to rejoin an ex-fil in the Middle East. To be honest, it seemed like old hat to me.

talk to Now I have no clue what the future holds, but for the immediate being, it’s Jameson, which makes this offer of an apartment nice and helpful. I could have stayed with the same buddy as before, but honestly... I want some privacy and alone time.

ive and it over Regardless, I’m here to get back on that metaphorical horse and be a valued asset to this company. It’s essential I succeed here because all I

you. Or so far is failure, which says way too much about me that's hard to accept. You're... A knock on my door startles me, mostly because I've been living in a hole in the ground for five months. The concept of closed doors and boundaries is a bit foreign.

I move through the small living room to unlock the door, swing it open. Kynan stands there. I silently invite him in by moving away from the threshold.

"You settled in okay?" he asks as he enters.

"All settled and ready to rock and roll," I reply, shutting the door and twisting the lock. That's not habit in any form, but caution. Or maybe it's pure love of the fact I have an actual door that locks.

Kynan goes directly to my couch and sits, nodding toward a chair set perpendicular to it. The apartment is small but lushly appointed. Furniture is high end, there's crown molding in every room, and appliances are top of the line. It's the nicest place I've ever lived on my own. I take a seat, only perching my ass on the end and folding my legs before me, elbows to my knees. Expectantly, I look at Kynan.

"We're going to debrief at 0800 tomorrow," he says bluntly.

I nod, maintaining eye contact. Last thing I want to do is to go to the office and talk about what happened, but it's an essential part to every mission. It's where we learn from our mistakes, officially document what happened, and bury those details that can't be publicly known even to the government that hired us.

"Not a problem," I say. "I'll be able to get my written report done soon after that."

Kynan nods in return, rubbing his hand thoughtfully along his jawline. He studies me. Finally, he says, "I'm going to have Corinne sit in on it."

My jaw tightens slightly. "That's not standard protocol."

"Maybe not in the military sector, but it is in my own private consulting," he replies without any give to his tone.

Fuck.

Corinne Ellery is Jameson's resident psychiatrist. I had to interview her and do some personality testing before I was offered a job here. It's kind of stupid... I know he wants her there to evaluate how I'm dealing with captivity.

"On top of that..." Kynan continues, and I can tell there's more that I won't like. "For the foreseeable future, you're going to u

pt. counseling with Corinne. Until such a time she feels you're ready to g
ng in ainto active duty, you'll ride a desk."

ors and "You got to be fucking kidding me," I snarl. "I don't need a shri
I'm fully capable of getting back into the thick of things."

ging it "Denial," Kynan replies, and he doesn't say anything else.

om the Just that one single word, which he seems to believe describes eve
about me.

"I'm not in denial," I grit out. In an attempt to not appear so ben
oor andshape about this—and to prove I'm really okay—I slouch into the
it's justchair and try to appear relaxed. "I'm well-rested, gaining weigl
completely at peace with what happened to me."

r that is "What about with what happened to Jimmy and Sal?" Kynan ask
ed. Thecan't hide my body's involuntarily flinch or my slight grimace. I can
nd theand I know he can see it. It's the equivalent of a person getting th
y own. broken, adamantly maintaining they are fit for duty, and someone
7 handsthem the slightest poke so the person doubles over in pain and revea
weakness.

Not giving me a chance to defend myself, he merely rises and s
throughyou want to work at Jameson, you'll go to counseling with Corinne u
ve learnfeels you've adequately explored your feelings regarding your captiv
e thingsthe mission going south. I don't care if you like it—I just want you t

I'm eager to have you back on full duty. If you don't want to do it, I
e prettyyou a nice severance, then we can shake hands and part ways. Those a
only two choices."

w as he Goddamn, the man is a hard-ass. Yet... I can't help but respect t
out of him. The military has always taken a more hands-off appro
mental health awareness and action, which I never used to agree with.
pany,"how that changes when the spotlight is on me.

A little over two weeks ago, when my plane landed in New York
expected my family at the gate. And there they were... my parents
w withthree of my siblings.

I'm not But standing with them was Kynan, which was a surprise. How
with mywas his way of showing he considered me family. He stayed on

enough to give me a bro hug—one of those hands-clasped, slap-on-th
comingkind of thing—and to spend a few moments in the airport with my far
ndergone as we moved through the terminal. He parted ways with us c

go backpromising to see me back at Jameson when I was up to it. I'd later lea
put my entire family up in a fancy hotel so we could have some time t
nk, andbefore hopping flights to our next destinations.

The man cared—of that, there was no doubt.

And I have something to prove, so leaving Jameson isn't an option
rything “Fine,” I reluctantly agree. I push out of the chair, even extend
hand to him. Kynan shakes it, an expression of what looks like
t out of shadowing his face.

comfy “I know it's difficult to face this shit,” Kynan says after we release
ht, andWhen he turns for the door, I follow him there as he continues talkin
trust me... you need to process this and the healthiest way to do i
s, and Italking to a professional.”

feel it, “Understood,” I say.

air ribs “See you tomorrow morning for the debriefing,” he says, then cla
givingshoulder. “I'm really glad to have you back with us, Malik. You're
ls theirmember to our team.”

After Kynan leaves and I lock the door behind him, I lean agains
ays, “Ifthink about Corinne Ellery. She's a savvy woman. An excellent docto
ntil shemuch can I get away with while talking to her?

ity and Or, in other words, how little can I say while still getting declarec
o do it.duty?

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promising to see me back at Jameson when I was up to it. I'd later learned he put my entire family up in a fancy hotel so we could have some time together before hopping flights to our next destinations.

The man cared—of that, there was no doubt.

And I have something to prove, so leaving Jameson isn't an option.

"Fine," I reluctantly agree. I push out of the chair, even extending my hand to him. Kynan shakes it, an expression of what looks like pride shadowing his face.

"I know it's difficult to face this shit," Kynan says after we release hands. When he turns for the door, I follow him there as he continues talking. "But trust me... you need to process this and the healthiest way to do it is by talking to a professional."

"Understood," I say.

"See you tomorrow morning for the debriefing," he says, then clasps my shoulder. "I'm really glad to have you back with us, Malik. You're a vital member to our team."

After Kynan leaves and I lock the door behind him, I lean against it and think about Corinne Ellery. She's a savvy woman. An excellent doctor. How much can I get away with while talking to her?

Or, in other words, how little can I say while still getting declared fit for duty?

CHAPTER 4

Anna

THERE'S A SHARP knock at my door. With a quick glance over at the bassinet, which I'd rolled into the kitchen, I move through the con living area to answer it.

As expected, Cage stands there with a six-pack of beer in one hand and a stuffed pink teddy bear in the other. He offers me a quick smile before his gaze moves past me to the kitchen where he spots the bassinet.

"There's my girl," he drawls, eyes sparkling. When he shoves through my way, I grab it as he makes a beeline for Avery.

Many women would be offended when a man comes to their apartment for dinner, but then proceeds to ignore them in favor of a cute baby.

But that's not how it is between Cage and me. We are nothing more than friends, and it's all we'll ever be.

Good friends, though.

We've become amazingly close, and I don't quite know the reason for it. He has his buds... mostly the guys at Jameson—in particular his best friend Bodie, who works in Jameson's Vegas office. I have many friends, including my closest friend Delaney from high school who still lives in the Pittsburgh area. We get together a few times a month for drinks to catch up, and she was an amazing source of support when Jimmy died. I was in bed for a long time after his death, the stress of what happened causing some cramps and bleeding. Between my mom and Delaney, I had almost complete companionship to help me through my grieving and the remainder of my pregnancy.

So yeah... we have our own peeps, but we also have each other.

Maybe it's because I was in the Army that he feels some kinship with me. Cage was Navy. I've always been able to forge really good friendships with men, probably because I'm not an overly girly girl. I mean, I can get along with the guys to the nines with the best, but I'm also happy hanging in jeans and

while drinking beer. I can shoot a gun, which is a plus to a male-female for some reason.

Who knows for sure, but Cage and I have been hanging out a lot over the past five months and we've become close. Additionally, Cage has become quite enamored of Avery. I can tell he'll be a positive male role model in her life.

We try to have dinner together once a week if we can swing it. Avery sneaks out somewhere in downtown Pittsburgh before I pick Avery up to connect my mom, but since my dishwasher is leaking, I've asked Cage to take care of it in exchange for a home-cooked meal.

I'm a genuinely good cook, so it's a fair exchange.

"Whatever you're making smells amazing," Cage tosses over his shoulder. He's bent over the bassinet. Without hesitation, he lifts Avery with his arms. Pressing his nose to her head, he inhales. "Goddamn... she smells amazing, too. Why do babies always smell so good?"

Laughing, I move to the oven where I bend for a quick peek at the enchiladas. They have about ten more minutes, so I pull two beers out of the six-pack Cage brought before putting the rest in the fridge.

As I open them, I remind Cage, "She just had her bath. Of course she smells good. Why is it you're never around when she poops her diaper? If you were, you'd realize babies don't smell good all the time."

Cage peers down at Avery, who's nestled in the crook of his arm. He gazes at him curiously with her big blue eyes. He grins. "Your girls are making stuff up, isn't she? I bet your poop smells like lollipops and rain. It doesn't it?"

Rolling my eyes hard, I hand him one of the beers. "Oh, Lord. Don't start feeding her stuff like that."

"Not like she can understand me," he replies dismissively.

"Yeah, but you'll develop a habit of lying to her as she gets older. I'll spend a fortune in therapy trying to deprogram her from all the crap you tell her."

Cage snorts, heading over to my tiny kitchen table that only seats two. This little apartment isn't much, but it's all I need right now. It's only a bedroom, and I put Avery's nursery in the bedroom. I bought a good quality flannel couch for the living room, which is where I sleep. My mom still doesn't understand my need to be on my own, but I just couldn't go back to living with her.

le bondhome. It seemed like a huge step backward in my life of independence
couldn't continue living in the house Jimmy and I had just rented w
over themoved to the area after he accepted the job at Jameson.

become The life I was supposed to lead with him seemed different than th
d in herended up with, and everything in that little house was too painfi
reminder that I was never going to live that particular dream.

. We'll I bring Cage's beer to him, then set it on the table. He ign
up fromcompletely smitten with Avery. I lean against the short counter, w
e a lookthem for a few blissful moments. When people fuss over my daughter
it. It makes me feel more normal since I do it all the time. But serio
she's just the cutest baby ever.

ver his The oven timer dings, startling me. I set my beer down, straighte
ery intocheck on my enchiladas. The cheese is slightly browned and bubbly, v
e smellsjust perfect. I pull it out, set it on top of the stove, and turn the heat c
can rest a bit.

at my Nonchalantly, as I reach across the counter for my beer, I mention,
t of theMalik today."

His attention doesn't waver from Avery. "Yeah... I heard he can
rse shetoday, but I didn't see him."

aper? If "He's staying in one of the apartments."

"He probably debriefed today," Cage says, eyes still pinned on A
m. Shehe smiles at her. "I doubt Kynan will put him right back in the field,
nom isNot after all that guy went through."

nbows, I know the details since I'd relentlessly grilled Cage about the
deplorable hole Malik had been thrown in, freezing weather, near-sta
on't beconditions, and loneliness. My stomach churns every time I think abou

"Did you kill the men who took Malik?" I ask, a detail I had not
for before.

er, then That gets Cage's attention, and he swivels my way. He doesn't hes
rap youanswer me, though, respecting my ability to handle information. Aft

made Kynan tell me all the details about how Jimmy died and as muc
its two.could tell me about the mission itself without violating security issues.

r a one- "I have no clue about the actual men who took Malik, but yes, w
pull-outthe ones who were guarding him. There were others we didn't get
doesn'trotated out every few days."

iving at "Good," I reply softly, gaze going to Avery nestled in Cage's an

e. I also almost as if it's a bit of vengeance for Jimmy's sake that some of the men we associated with his death are now dead.

Bonus points for Malik's sake since those men deserved it after what he did to him.

"You think Malik will be all right?" I ask.

His eyes linger on me before he shrugs and looks back down at Avery, continuing to gently rock her back and forth. "I think he's the type who can handle it. I mean, he has a Special Forces background. He's trained for just about anything; I love the type of scenario. Bottom line... we all have to pull deep to overcome it... like that."

I jerk my chin inward, my stomach tightening at his insinuation. "What did you have to overcome something like that?"

"Yeah," he replies, which makes my stomach twist tighter. He looks off to the side, between me and Avery. "I was on a Jameson mission almost two years ago with Bodie. I got shot—"

"I saw what?" I exclaim, interrupting him.

Cage shoots me a "shush" look. He pointedly nods at Avery, who is leaning back and closing her eyes in his arms. His voice is low, soft, and without any hesitation, he begins sharing this with me. "We both got captured. Luckily, our captors treated us well and our wounds pretty effectively. The government quickly had a joint CQB team in place and on the ground. We were rescued in less than twelve hours, though. Four hours, so nothing like what Malik went through."

"Don't diminish—"

"I'm not," he assures me, head swinging my way again. He stands up from his chair, moves to the bassinet, and places a sleeping Avery in it. Cage straightens, comes toward me, and puts both hands on my shoulders.

"But this is what we train for. We all know what might happen and that's why we may pay. And every one of us who Kynan hires to be part of his team, we all have something inside helping us to overcome. Maybe not all, but acceptance that fate will be a bitch if she wants. We can't control it, or change it, but we have a little something extra that normal people don't.

describe it. But, bottom line, I think Malik's the type who will move forward even if he's killed just fine."

I wasn't aware of how worried I was about Malik until I hear those words of reassurance. Letting out a long breath of relief, I wonder to myself, "It's Jimmy who has that little something Cage just mentioned? A true acceptance?"

he mendeth will come when it comes, or maybe just a hidden inner strength
can't be explained?

that they I'd like to think he did. He was so strong and confident. Fully believing
his career. He was a protector to his core, not just of me and his unborn
but of freedom in general. There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in taking
Avery, that job. While he promised me that he'd be safe, he had to have known
who could have chosen him to be one of the ones who wouldn't return.

just that Shaking my head to pull me out of those thoughts, I give
me stuff a tremulous smile. "How about we eat and talk about something
pleasant?"

"Have Laughing, he grabs his beer, tapping it to mine. "I'll drink to that."

Upon my orders, Cage grabs plates, paper towels, and utensils.
glances dish out gooey enchiladas, we settle at the table with a sleeping Avery
arms outstretched in her bassinet.

"So, I have some news," Cage says as he digs his fork into his food.
hesitation in his voice is obvious, though, and I can tell he's going to
tell me who's climbing here.

about "Oh, yeah?" Ignoring my fork, I keep my attention focused on him
told our His face bears a tiny smirk, but I can see unease vying for attention.
I and hesitation makes me doubly curious.

twenty- "What is it?" I urge, lifting my fork and pressing it down sideways
enchilada.

"I'm seeing someone," Cage says.

ends up I snap my head up, cheesy goodness forgotten. "Seeing someone?
into it dumbly, because that's unheard of. It seems antithetical to everything
oulders. Cage. He's a playboy—a renowned hound dog. He hates the thought
of polygamy, and he thinks true love is for chumps.

team, Sheepishly, he gives me his regard. "I mean, it's sort of new, but
it's happened a few times..."

maybe "A few times?" I blurt, completely astonished. Cage is a strictly one
I can't do kind of guy. He's actually boasted he'd never date the same
woman more than once.

"Five," he clarifies. "We've gone out five times. I've even dated
Cage's brother."

... did I lean back in my chair, gaping at my friend as if he's grown antlers
since that "What?" he accuses irritably. "Me dating someone is not out of

gth that realm of possibility.”

“Uh, it is when you so adamantly decry the practice of monogamous relationships,” I point out.

“What can I say?” he says, attacking his enchilada and putting a huge onion in his mouth. He chews and chews before finally swallowing. “I was fated different.”

“What’s her name?” I can’t hide the suspicion in my tone, because Cage is still convinced he’s punking me somehow.

“Jaime,” he replies with a sappy expression. Holy shit... he’s a little smitten.

It’s at this point in this situation that any good friend would give up. After a lot of much shit, but I don’t want to scare him off. I need more info.

“Tell me about her,” I suggest.

A goofy smile breaks out on his face, and Cage shoves another bite of food into his mouth. He washes it down with a swallow of beer. “She’s great. Not like her. I mean, she’s really down to earth... not pretentious at all, although she has every right to be since she’s so gorgeous.”

Settling in, I listen to Cage wax poetic about a woman. As we go on. His drink beer, I learn all about Jaime, who has seemingly caught more of Cage’s attention. I wonder if he’s falling in love. I hope so. I remember how into an anime feeling when I’d first met Jimmy. Seeing Cage’s dopey expression and the respect he has when he talks about Jaime makes me believe in the miracle of love again.

“She sounds amazing,” I say when he finally loses steam while telling me about her greatness.

“She is,” he replies, but his tone is glum. “But there’s one problem with her.”

“What’s that?”

“When we first started seeing each other, I told her I was a used car salesman. So, now she thinks that’s what I do.”

Incredulously, my jaw drops. “I don’t even know what to say to her. What woman mean... why would you do that?”

Cage shrugs, his face turning a telling shade of pink. “I just have my expectations low with women, you know? When I meet someone I’m interested in, I hook up with, I make up a story about what I do for a living. I tell them the most dull, uninspiring thing I can think of, so they don’t get too interested in me. It lets me walk away at some point without her hanging on to the

of a badass security expert.”

my and I just stare. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Hey,” he exclaims, pretending to be hurt. “It’s worked well for me in the past. Except now, I really like Jaime. I want to keep seeing her, but I’m

“She’ll dump my ass when she realizes I’ve been lying to her all this time.”

“You need to tell her the truth,” I say with a pointed finger. “If she likes you back, she’ll forgive you.”

“I don’t know,” he replies skeptically. “And besides... this relationship probably not destined to last, right? I never stick around for the long haul.”

“Except you’ve pointed out to me in gory detail how much you resemble her,” I counter.

“Fuck,” he mutters, rising from the table. “I need another beer. Then you can convince me to do the right thing.”

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of a badass security expert.”

I just stare. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Hey,” he exclaims, pretending to be hurt. “It’s worked well for me in the past. Except now, I really like Jaime. I want to keep seeing her, but I’m afraid she’ll dump my ass when she realizes I’ve been lying to her all this time.”

“You need to tell her the truth,” I say with a pointed finger. “If she really likes you back, she’ll forgive you.”

“I don’t know,” he replies skeptically. “And besides... this thing’s probably not destined to last, right? I never stick around for the long haul.”

“Except you’ve pointed out to me in gory detail how much you really do like her,” I counter.

“Fuck,” he mutters, rising from the table. “I need another beer. Maybe then you can convince me to do the right thing.”

CHAPTER 5

Malik

AFTER I BACK out of my apartment, I lock it and pocket the key. I do not peek into anyone in the communal kitchen or living area, although I can smell the pot of freshly brewed coffee. I ignore it, having drunk my one cup for the day during my morning shower.

My understanding is the only other people who are currently living in the building are Cage and Merritt, but I've yet to see either since I've been back. Cageside I've stayed holed up in my apartment, for the most part, having nothing to do.

The Jameson apartments are on the fourth and top floor of the building, which is a renovated warehouse in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Outside, the building is dilapidated and covered in graffiti. The inside tells a different story.

In addition to the apartments, kitchen, and entertainment area, the top floor also has a state-of-the-art gym as well as access to a rooftop terrace. There are two ways to descend—the original freight elevator with a metal grating gate that takes forever to rumble up and down and the modern staircase that drops down through the dead center of the building. It's made of reclaimed wood, has a tarnished iron railing, and steel cables that give it the appearance it just hovers there.

I choose the staircase, heading down to the second floor, which houses the offices and administrative services of the company. Kynan spends a lot of decorating expenses here. The walls are of the same original brick that is seen up the outside, but they've been sand-blasted to their original quality. The floors are hardwood punctuated with plush area rugs, and the ceiling is decorated with a gridwork of exposed beams and ducts to heighten the industrial aesthetic. One end of the second floor has black leather furniture set in clusters around aluminum tables where employees can work or have impromptu meetings.

On the opposite side, there are glass-walled offices along the perimeter.

with the floor space housing rows of stylish desks made of steel and
There are no cubicles dividing, which promotes a collaborative atmosphere.

As I step off the staircase onto the second floor, I cut a hard left to
glanced office with a brass nameplate on the door that reads—*Dr. C
Ellery*.

She's a nice woman who is sure as fuck easy on the eyes. My guess
she's in her early thirties with thick chestnut hair she wears in a bun
won't run low on the back of her head. She wears glasses, which make her look
n't smell but seeing as she's a doctor and all, I'm assuming she actually is.

I met with her and Kynan yesterday morning for my debriefing meeting
It was held in the large conference room on the north end of the second
ng here which Kynan had set up with digital maps displayed on a large screen
granted, could go over the mission.

I didn't spare any details, even the painful ones where I believe I
g better up. Based on other accounts Kynan has, I'm sure he learned nothing
uilding, how the mission got ambushed and how we handled it all.

On the Jameson had been hired to work in conjunction with an international
e tells a rescue team that was going into Syria to try to recover some relief workers
who were taken hostage. The average person would probably be surprised

to fourth know how often governments—including our own—hire private security
garden, firms to help on a variety of covert missions. Jameson went in with a team

a steel-five—Jimmy Tate, Sal Mezzina, Merritt Gables, Tank Richardson, and
floating We worked with Special Forces teams from the United Kingdom
s made Australia, as the hostages were predominantly from those two countries
give it While there were no American citizens taken prisoner, it didn't really

uses all into whether Jameson took the job. If the pay is right and the risks are
red no acceptable, we'll help any citizens of the world.

at make The debriefing lasted about an hour. Dr. Ellery sat there quietly
ty. The Kynan went through a typed report he held, peppering me with questions
g is run had me clarify a few things, referencing the Syrian map a few times
al vibe, walked me through every step I took from the time we left the base
until the moment I got captured.

rs with Granted, it was a bit difficult to talk about the moments when Jim
ngs. Sal got hit, but I expect they were difficult for Kynan to hear again, too.

rimeter After, we moved on to my imprisonment. While I'm sure this was
Dr. Ellery was interested in hearing about, she just listened casually.

l wood, taking a single note. Kynan drilled me hard for all the nasty details. here.

“Where were you taken?”

oward a “Not sure. I was hooded the entire time, but I estimate it was roughl
Corinne hours of driving distance.”

“Did they take you to a city or suburban structure?”

guess is “Small village, I believe, based on the sounds of animals and the
resting traffic noises. I never got to see outside the windowless room they
c smart, in.”

“Describe the decor in the room.”

reeting. “Wood floor, plaster walls with cracks, a table with two chairs
d floor, middle. Table against one wall with a pitcher of water. They drank
1 so we but they never offered me any.”

And so it went before Kynan eased into the nitty-gritty.

fucked “What methods of torture did they employ on you and how
new on Kynan had asked without any noticeable inflection in his voice. Th
research, which it was obvious he hoped to learn from.

ational “Several times a day for roughly nine days as best I could tell,”
workers “Sleep deprivation the entire time, starvation, loud music, electrical
rised to and physical beatings.”

security Succinctly and without emotion, I rattled off the details. I ha
team of trained to withstand torture—to a degree. Everyone cracked eventually
nd me. was no shame in it. The key was to make them work for it, to give th
m and least harmful intel or die trying, and to learn all about the enemy whil
untries. so. I know I succeeded on those fronts, mainly because I didn’t have
y factor good intel to give. Luckily, they believed me and stopped the torture,
sks are me across the desert to toss me into a hole until I could be useful i
other way.

y while Kynan then asked about communications, the times of day they
ons. He guards, and whether I was able to pick up any other intel. I to
ies. He everything I knew, not even getting annoyed when he sometimes as
e camp same question twice. It was a genuinely legit tactic to help check for v
or to poke for additional memories.

my and At the end, he’d thanked me for my time and reiterated I was c
) duty until I completed my counseling with Dr. Ellery. She would be
the part who would release me back to full duty.

without And so, I’m now walking toward her office.

She's sitting behind her desk, peering at something on her computer. She has a set of bookcases behind her, which are loaded with books, mostly twopsychoanalysis based, I'm sure. Two plush-looking chairs flank one wall table and a lamp between them. I'm grateful she doesn't have the couch.

Dr. Ellery eschews the overhead fluorescent lighting of an in-hospital building. Instead, she utilizes scattered lamps to provide a calming glow. Her office is the only one that has shades along the glass walls, presumably she can close them for privacy reasons. Not that I care. I expect it works in the long-held secret I have to go to counseling with the good doctor from it, returning to active duty. I'm not embarrassed about it in the slightest.

I just don't want to fucking talk about it.

Two separate things.

When I tap on the glass door to her office, she swings her head and smiles. Smiling, she waves me in. It's one of those glass doors on hinges that swings shut behind me as I enter.

I said. "Hey, Malik," she says warmly, motioning to one of the guest chairs. She rises out of her desk chair, grabs a notepad and pen from her desk, and comes over to join me. I quickly find the chairs swivel as she angles hers in my direction. "Glad you could make it."

"We both know I don't have a choice," I say lightly, attempting at least a little humor. It falls flat to my ears, but she smiles.

"Well, that's not true. You could have chosen not to come. Came in with a lot of some excuse. Said you were sick. Hell, you could have opted to get a new moving job."

I incline my head in capitulation. "Point taken, Dr. Ellery."

"Corinne," she insists. "We're all on a first-name basis here."

I blink in surprise. "I was going to have you call me Mr. Fournier."

Tipping her head back, she laughs, nodding. "Sense of humor. I know. And it bodes well for you. Those who can laugh even after experiencing trauma tend to do very well with therapy."

"So that's what we're going to actually call it, huh?" I ask, because the word on my desk that hasn't been used yet.

Corinne shrugs. "Call it what you want, but you and I will be doing a lot of talking. My goal is to determine if you are coping with your trauma."

"I am," I assure her.

ter. She She ignores me, continuing. “—in a healthy and productive way
ks—allimportantly, in a way *I* deem to be sufficient to put you back on du
with a your teammates. It’s not only about your mental health, but it’s also fo
e cliché reasons, too.”

When I consider this, I have to agree... it makes sense. Still doesn
dustrial I want to talk about it, because it takes time and the rehashing of wou
ow. Her rather just let hurry up and close. Still, I truly don’t have a choice.

7 so she Not if I want to continue working at Jameson.

it’s be a “All right.” I make a show of giving in by settling back in my
before casually propping an ankle on a knee. “Might as well get this started.”

“Excellent,” she replies with a sparkling smile, poising her pen o
pad. “Today’s going to be pretty boring, actually. Background inform
where you grew up, relationships with your family members, choices
y way you into this career, etc.”

s, so it “Got it,” I reply. This would be the easy part.

Leaning an elbow on one of the armrests, she says, “Tell me abo
irs. She family, Malik. I understand you have dual citizenship with the U
l moves Canada?”

toward I nod. “My dad is a French-Canadian doctor. My mom’s an Ar
public-speaking coach. I was born and raised in Montreal, and I ha
a bit of brothers and a sister.”

“Where do you fall in line among your siblings?” she asks.

up with “Let’s see...” My face scrunches slightly as I suck at birthdays a
t a new like that, but I do love my siblings, so it eventually comes to me. “Ma
oldest, and he’s twenty-nine now. Then Lucas is next... he’s twent
Then me—I’m twenty-six—and, finally, Simone is the baby at twenty-

’ “And I seem to remember your first time here at Jameson when w
meeting in the big conference room... Cage went bananas when he

like it, your brothers play for the Cold Fury as that’s his favorite hockey team
iencing I can’t help but laugh. Cage had been hilarious at that meeting w

first been introduced, and he’d made the connection I had two
se it’s a brothers. “Yeah... Max and Lucas both play for the Cold Fury.”

Her head tilts. “Did you play hockey, too?”

ng a lot “I did. Both Max and Lucas will tell you that I could have gone p
—” but it just wasn’t my passion. I wanted to join the Marines, and nothin
sway me from that.”

7. More “A French-Canadian kid who wanted to join the U.S. n
ty with Interesting.”

r safety “It’s in my blood. My grandfather was a Marine, and I loved hear
stories growing up.”

’t mean We continue to talk in the same vein, all background informatio
nds I’dprods into my personal life and about whether I’ve had any serious re
relationships in the past. That was a negative answer, not because I’m
but more of a timing issue. In that I never seemed to have time. B
7 chair, working Special Forces in the Marines, and now with Jameson, it’s be
hard to even date someone seriously. Not to mention the whole bein
ver herin-captivity-for-five-months thing.

ation... And to my surprise, the hour is over before I even realize it. I’m s
that ledat how fast the time went by. I had assumed every minute of this r
would be torture, but, to the contrary, it was easy talking to her.

I knew what was to come wouldn’t be so easy.

ut your Before Corinne ushers me out, we move to the calendar on her
.S. andmake the next appointment. I wanted to come again tomorrow, beca
had to complete “therapy” before returning to active duty with the cor
nericanwanted to get it knocked out.

ive two “I’m good anytime tomorrow,” I say.

She bends over her calendar—one of those flipbooks, surprising
she’s not digital—and smirks. “How about Monday?”

nd shit Frowning, I point out, “But that’s four days away.”

x is the “Correct,” she replies as she glances up. “There’s a thing c
y-eight.weekend. When I took this job with Kynan, I told him I absolutely
-three.” work weekends.”

e had a “But what about tomorrow... Friday?” I press.

learned Corinne straightens, inclines her head in an understanding way, o
.” she lays down the boundaries that will keep me on a slower track. “Yo
hen I’dtime in between sessions to process and decompress.”

famous Muffling a growl of frustration, I nod down to her book. “Wh
Monday?”

“Eight?” she inquires.

ro, too, “Fine,” I grumble.

g could Apparently, this amuses her because she laughs. “Have patience,
This is the best for you. And who knows, if you come into this with cc

military.honesty and transparency, I could cut you loose pretty quickly.”

Easier said than done. I know damn well she’ll want me to confess my feelings of guilt I have, but to do that implies I’m not cut out for this work to some extent, which isn’t acceptable to me. Perhaps I can do something. She job of convincing her that I’m fine, though.

Romantic Corinne pencils me into a slot, then walks me to the door. He averse, comes to my shoulder to stop me from walking out. I’m forced to turn between “You may not believe me now, but I actually think you and I are going on a bit just fine together. You’ll be back out in the field in no time at all.”

Big-held- God, I fucking hope so.

I give her a nod, manage a gung-ho smile, and exit through the glass door. Shocked “Hey, Malik,” I hear, instantly recognizing Anna Tate’s voice. I meet her coming off the freight elevator, carrying a somewhat largish box. She doesn’t seem to be weighing her down, but still seems awkward wearing a slim tweed skirt in a brown color, a cream sweater that hangs off her desk to frame all too well, and high-heeled leather boots. Her golden hair is fastidiously styled in loose waves around her shoulders. She looks fashionable and young vibrant. I can see a bright future life ahead of her. She doesn’t seem like a widow at all. Instead, she appears to be a beautiful woman in the prime of her happy life.

Without thought, because it’s how I was raised, I move quickly to take the box from her arms. For a moment, she doesn’t let it go, and our hands connect.

“I have this,” she insists, giving it a little tug.

Called a “Is it top secret?” I ask, not releasing my hold.

I won’t “No,” she replies with a frown.

“Then let me carry it for you.” I tug it out of her grasp, trying to ignore her worried expression as it becomes clear she’s not sure I’m physically able to carry the box.

You need I actually find that adorable and touching at the same time.

“Got most of my strength back,” I offer, and she blushes. “I mean, I’m not able to pick up buildings or anything, but I’m starting a new strength program today, so that will be coming soon.”

“Well, that’s good,” Anna replies with a smile, the blush fading from her face. “Because Kynan has a project he wants you to help me with. The boxes are up on the fourth floor, and they need to come down.”

Complete “A project?” I ask curiously as she moves past the end of the stairs.

over to the glassed offices on the opposite side of the building. I re-
front the Kynan's office, but he's not inside. Anna leads me into the one right
type of his. Much smaller than the boss's, but it's clearly strategically placed
a good close by should he need her.

"Dozer has created a matrix database that will collect all
er hand information on past cases, analyze it with algorithms or some other
to her magic, and help make predictions on future cases. You and I ha
g to do glorious honor of figuring out what data is relevant, then inputting it
system."

No shit. I had met Dozer when I first came to work here, and
ss door present at the get-together for drinks the night before I flew out to Syri
turn to like super-freaky smart. Word is Kynan stole him from NASA, so I ca
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ad, she where we can talk about how we want to work the project between us."

I stumble over that invitation, because it seems weird. This is ar
to take environment, so I'm not used to the whole "Let's go out to lunch" thin
ur eyes I most certainly don't want to sit down and talk over salads with t
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When I look back over my shoulder, Anna has squatted beside
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seems to loosen the tightness in my chest that seems to presen
ignore whenever I run into her.

lly able My stomach growls, making me realize I didn't have breakf
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over to the glassed offices on the opposite side of the building. I recognize Kynan's office, but he's not inside. Anna leads me into the one right beside his. Much smaller than the boss's, but it's clearly strategically placed so she's close by should he need her.

"Dozer has created a matrix database that will collect all of our information on past cases, analyze it with algorithms or some other witchy magic, and help make predictions on future cases. You and I have the glorious honor of figuring out what data is relevant, then inputting it into the system."

No shit. I had met Dozer when I first came to work here, and he was present at the get-together for drinks the night before I flew out to Syria. He's like super-freaky smart. Word is Kynan stole him from NASA, so I can't say this project surprises me.

Anna motions to the floor. "Just set it down somewhere. There are five more boxes that need to come down, so let's go get those."

"I'll go get them," I say, turning back toward the door.

"Sweet," she replies. "Then I'll take you out to lunch as a welcome back where we can talk about how we want to work the project between us."

I stumble over that invitation, because it seems weird. This is an office environment, so I'm not used to the whole "Let's go out to lunch" thing.

I most certainly don't want to sit down and talk over salads with the wife of the man I helped get killed.

When I look back over my shoulder, Anna has squatted beside the box and is rummaging through it. She is oblivious to my unease. Somehow, that seems to loosen the tightness in my chest that seems to present itself whenever I run into her.

My stomach growls, making me realize I didn't have breakfast this morning, so I figure one lunch can't hurt.

CHAPTER 6

Anna

“I JUST HAVE to say thank you,” Malik says with a grateful sigh before a large bite of his sandwich.

“Why’s that?” I ask, picking mine up. I try to figure out how to get a portion of it in my mouth, but it does not open that wide.

“For not taking me to a restaurant that only serves salads and smoothies,” he replies after swallowing.

I grin over the thick Italian bread of a Primanti’s pastrami, stuffed with coleslaw and crispy French fries. “That’s kind of sexist.”

“No, it’s not,” he replies with a frown. “Kynan brought me out to eat the first day I was back, and he took me to just such a place. Grant is always happy for any food these days, but damn... salad just isn’t my thing has been.”

Laughing, I study my sandwich. “Well, I love Primanti’s. It’s one of my favorites in the Burgh, but it’s definitely not first-date food.”

Malik snorts, nodding with agreement. He takes another huge bite, a strand of coleslaw left hanging from the corner of his mouth. I resist the urge to reach across the table to use my finger to push it into his mouth. I’m not sure what that feeling is. It’s not an attraction thing. Not quite a motherly urge either. Definitely not a sisterly urge, but it’s definitely rooted in ten years of watching out for this man who has been through so much and survived. He’d eat hundreds of Primanti sandwiches if that’s what he wants.

Maybe I stare just a little too long because Malik grabs a napkin and wipes his face, still chewing the bite he just took. I go ahead and attack the corner of my sandwich, savoring the explosion of flavors in my mouth.

“You’re native to Pittsburgh, right?” Malik asks.

I nod, taking a sip of my Diet Coke before answering. “Born and raised here. Moved away at eighteen, but I knew I’d come back one day. It’s home.”

“College?” Malik guesses. He takes another bite, content to listen.

“Yeah... in Ohio at Bowling Green. But I dropped out of sophomore year to join the Army.”

Malik sucks in a surprised gasp. He proceeds to have a coughing fit as the food enters his lungs. Taking a few sips of his drink, he clears his throat and studies me in wonderment. “Why would you drop out of college military?”

I shrug, picking a French fry out of my sandwich. “I liked college but I really didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. It was getting time to declare my major, and I just didn’t know. It felt like a waste of money. So, I decided to try the military, and I ended up loving it.”

Malik shakes his head, a respectful gleam in his eye. “Just... well, your gut instinct is impressive you had the guts to follow your... well, your gut instinct. I have major respect for joining the military.”

Malik holds his fist out to me. Without thought, I reach across the table and bump mine against his.

“Why did you go into the Marines?” I ask.

I’m able to eat several bites of my sandwich as he tells me about his family’s mixed heritage. American mother who fell in love with Malik and Malik’s father, so that’s where they chose to raise their family.

All the Fournier boys were into hockey, but Malik didn’t love it like his older brothers Max and Lucas did. I found it touching Malik’s respect for his American grandfather’s footsteps into the Corps, to defend a country he wasn’t raised in but still had ties to.

“Still, I miss playing hockey,” Malik muses. “When I was active I’d play on a local rec league if one was available.”

“And do you cheer for your brothers’ team?” I tease. “Or do you have loyalties elsewhere?”

“As long as my brothers are with the Cold Fury, then that’s my only team.” The love and pride in his voice causes warmth to spread across my chest. As an only child, I don’t understand the tie of siblings, but I very much enjoy the way he lights up as he talks about his family. I imagine that he must have missed some of the good things he yearned for while a prisoner.

But that’s too heavy of a discussion, even though a deep part of me wants to talk to Malik about his time in Syria. It’s almost as if taking on that burden will help purge the hurt of losing Jimmy. I can’t describe it other than that what happened in Syria has seemed to make Malik important to me.

ter my Instead, I keep the conversation light. “Okay... I have to know. much has Cage bothered you about your brothers?”

g fit as Malik’s head tips back as he laughs from deep in his gut. Despite oat and gauntness in his cheekbones still left behind from months of starvation for the pure humor radiating from his hazel eyes transforms him into a vibrant beauty. I’d always thought him handsome, but he’s gorgeous in this regard and all. His hair was buzzed short when I’d first met him back in June, but it’s long to be clearly grown while he was in captivity. I imagine he also had quite a bit of time when they found him, which has been shaved clean, but he left his brown hair long and wavy. It curls around his ears, and almost brushes his jaw. It’s collar of his shirt.

ct. And I’m so lost in his attractiveness that I’m actually startled when he proclaims, “That guy has got it bad for the Cold Fury. Since he’s from North Carolina, he’s like a zany fan.”

It takes me a moment to understand what he’s talking about. My realization I was just ogling another man—one who is not my husband—shoots out and shames me. My cheeks heat up. Inside my heart, I immediately apologize. *I’m so sorry, Jimmy. So very sorry.*

“You know—” Malik continues, clearly not privy to the guilt I feel. He says nearly drowning me right now, “—after they rescued me, one of the things Cage asked me when we were on a transport plane over to Guantanamo was if I could get him tickets to a Cold Fury game. I told him if he gave me a cheeseburger as soon as we landed, I’d get him all the damn tickets. I’d wanted.”

Malik chuckles at the memory, but his reference to wanting a cheeseburger after probably eating nothing but dirt and stale water for weeks hits me hard. I can feel the heat leave my cheeks. Malik must be a little off-kilter because he asks, “Did I say something wrong?”

Quickly, I shake my head. “Not at all. I guess the comment about wanting a cheeseburger was just a stark reminder about how bad things were for these guys.” He doesn’t have to, but Malik goes out of his way to downplay his pain. He holds up his sandwich, grinning. “Which is the reason I don’t want to eat lunch.”

“Noted,” I say softly, giving him a smile I hope isn’t overflowing with sympathy. Instead, I hope it merely conveys he has a friend who will help him in any way I can.

... how It's an honor to Jimmy's memory for me.

It represents a victory that Malik made it back while the bastard who killed my husband didn't win.

Since things have gotten a little heavy, I decide it's time for us to talk about our database project. I twist to grab my notepad out of my purse which hangs on the back of my chair, when Malik says, "Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

There's an actual tremor moving through me, knowing he's going to talk about Jimmy. And while I never mind talking about my husband, who I love very much, it's important to me that Malik has open access to my full transparency about him. I imagine Malik is suffering from the death of Jimmy and Sal, and he might need some solidarity.

I lock eyes with him. "You can ask me anything. Talk to me about anything."

Something passes between us. There's relief in his gaze, and a bit of shame—that I've just opened a doorway for him. Mostly, I see the knowledge that he can share something many others wouldn't understand.

"How are you doing? I can't imagine what it was like for you after the first confirms the loss of lives—Jimmy's and Sal's—may have had as much effect on him as what he'd been through as a prisoner.

He's just starting his recovery. I've been at it for a few months, so I think I can offer him something.

Hope.

"It was really hard at first," I admit. "My body didn't react to the months and grief very well, so they had to put me on bed rest for the remainder of my pregnancy."

Malik's eyebrows draw inward with shared empathy. He places his forearms on the table, leans in, and ignores his food.

"It was hard going through the birth without Jimmy," I say in a rush. He offers total candor. I hadn't talked about this with anyone much. "I mean, I had to go to all the classes together. He was supposed to be my coach. It was a disaster."

I had to squeeze and nearly break during the contraction. Smiling at the image, Malik nods. It's a silent encouragement to let everything out because I have his undivided attention.

"I'd like to tell you Avery's birth was an event of joy and happiness."

it wasn't. I was so extremely sad Jimmy wasn't there. Honestly, at
ds whodidn't even want to hold her when she was born. It kills me to even ad
aloud."

to talk "It's understandable," Malik says.
, which I nod. "Yeah... I eventually understood that, and my mom didn't g
: you any choice. She was there in Jimmy's place. She was the first to hold

She's the one who put her on my chest. Forced me to hold her. And...
g to askit was like a veil got lifted when I finally looked at her. I mean, I e
m I stillthis magical moment like maybe I'd see Jimmy's face reflected ba
ne withlet's be honest... all babies look alike with their smooshy faces."

loss of Malik busts out laughing. "Totally."

I grin back, the heaviness fully lifted. "But when I looked at her
e aboutfull love at first sight. In that moment, I knew I could grieve for Jimm
still being filled with hope, love, and happiness over Avery. That it w
of fear to be happy. It was a clarifying moment. My daughter was what star
we bothhealing process. Every day, she has made me exponentially happier."

His eyes jump back and forth between my own as he considers my
—" "It takes time, right?"

nce. It Malik's not asking the question to know if that's the theory applie
h of anown grief. He's asking for himself.

Reaching across the table without thought, I lay my hand on top
o I feelHe doesn't flinch or acknowledge the touch in any way, but he
withdraw either. "Yes... it just takes time."

Then, to my surprise, his hand shifts, twisting slightly so he's able
e stresshis fingers around mine. He squeezes. With the most penetrating lo
r of myhas ever been bestowed upon me, he says, "I am so very sorry Jimmy
would have traded places with him in a heartbeat."

ces his "I'd never ask that of you," I reply, giving him a squeeze back. "I

God has bigger plans for all of us. I don't try to pretend to understand
nomentIt's healing to accept it's out of our control, though. The best we ca
.. we'dlive a good life in acknowledgment."

was his "Brave words," Malik murmurs.

ns." After giving me one more squeeze, he pulls his hand back. I th
o purgebecause the contact might have been weird, but it turns out he's just l

The sandwich is back in his hands, and he takes another bite.

ess, but "One more thing," I say as he chews. He lifts his eyebrows to i

first, I he's listening to whatever sage advice I might have. I lean in, giving
mit that pointed look that means business. "Give Corinne a chance. I saw
several weeks after Jimmy's death, and it made all the difference to be
process my feelings in a healthy, private environment. I'm always h
give me you to talk to, but Corinne is a professional who is good at what she do
Avery. Malik can't hide the slight grimace, telling me he's against ha
Malik, counsel with her. But he'll thank me for it later if he gives it half a
xpected He has deep issues to work through... more than just losing his frien
ck, but went through torture and isolation. I hope he understands that pro
everything safely, while learning how to accept it, is going to be crucia
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he's listening to whatever sage advice I might have. I lean in, giving him a pointed look that means business. "Give Corinne a chance. I saw her for several weeks after Jimmy's death, and it made all the difference to be able to process my feelings in a healthy, private environment. I'm always here for you to talk to, but Corinne is a professional who is good at what she does."

Malik can't hide the slight grimace, telling me he's against having to counsel with her. But he'll thank me for it later if he gives it half a chance. He has deep issues to work through... more than just losing his friends. He went through torture and isolation. I hope he understands that processing everything safely, while learning how to accept it, is going to be crucial to his happiness in the future. I'm determined to help him figure that out.

CHAPTER 7

Malik

“**A**ND HOW DID that make you feel?” Corinne asks.

It’s a dreaded question, and it isn’t the first time she’s asked it. It’s the second full counseling session this week, and she has me talking a bit today. Admittedly, Monday was a little stilted. She’d done some prodding around the edges.

Today, when I sat in her chair, she point-blank said, “We’re going specifically about your captivity today.”

Which was fine.

Monday, we talked about torture.

Today, we could talk about captivity if she wanted.

Neither event was more important than the other in my mind because both sucked.

“I felt hopeless,” I say truthfully. “I figured the chances of being rescued were near to impossible, so I didn’t hold out hope. I set low, resigning myself to die in that hole or being executed.”

We had been focusing on the months of isolation I had to endure with no one to communicate with. Yes, it was horrific being freezing cold, filthy, and hungry all the time, but the worst was truly not being able to talk to anyone. The guards hadn’t spoken English. Or, if they did, they’d refused to talk with me. The only time I heard spoken language had been when they told me to hand up my shit bucket or threw my food down.

The worst had been hearing their conversations filtering through the walls—hearing them joking with each other. I couldn’t understand them, their tones and laughter, I could tell they’d been happy and having fun while guarding me. Knowing happy human beings were within arm’s reach and I couldn’t have any part of it had made the loneliness a hundred times more unbearable.

“You sound so matter of fact,” Corinne points out.

“Is that wrong?” I counter.

“Not at all.” She glances at the clock. I do as well, noting we are time. She clicks her pen closed, then places her hands over her notes angles her body toward me. “That was a coping mechanism. The we’ve lost hope is how our minds start protecting themselves from hurt and disappointment. It’s natural, but it’s also incredibly depressing when you suffer that feeling for such a long time, it takes some bounce back from that dark place.”

It’s our offer. “Well, being rescued and the sheer joy that comes with it helps a it more

gentle Laughing, Corinne nods. She rises from her chair, indicating our is over. “Indeed, that would definitely help dispel some of the dep; to talk What I’d like you to do for me is journal specifically about that. Are y feeling bouts of hopelessness or anxiety? Residual feelings are mo commonplace. The best way to lessen their effects is to confront them.

Just fucking great.

Homework.

use they Corinne motions me to the door. “And since Friday is a holiday, w be able to meet again until next Monday. Same time?”

; found Shit. I’d forgotten. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, which means Jam the bar closed down for all nonessential personnel, including Corinne and me I loathe the idea of counseling, I want to tackle this bitch so I can r with no with my life.

hy, and I don’t show my disappointment, though. It’s my job to convince C anyone. I’m happy with my life, so I merely smile. “Of course. See you on M engage Happy Thanksgiving.”

7 yelled “Big plans?” she asks.

I shake my head, smirking. “I’m Canadian.”

he door “But you’re half American,” she counters.

but by “Well, growing up in Canada, we only celebrated that cc a good Thanksgiving, which is in October. The American holiday hasn’t ever spitting big deal to me.” And because it’s the polite thing to inquire, I ask, “Yo

million “Flying home to Atlanta to celebrate with my parents,” she replies.

I wish her safe travels, she tells me she’s pleased with my effort then we say farewell until Monday when we’ll see each other again. lucky, and she truly feels I am making good progress, maybe she’ll

me from her care and back to full duty next week.

Until then, I do have another job to do. Even if it's not exciting field work, I am enjoying the project I'm doing with Anna.

I make my way to her office, stopping at August Greenfield's desk for a few minutes. He's a recent transplant from the Vegas office who joined a few days ago. Nice guy, although he's in a bit of a weird situation. He's married to a woman who was in WITSEC but came out by her own

They have a son who just had a stem cell transplant to treat leukemia. He's a bit of a bit," I seem to be doing well. I like the guy, and I hope to get to know him better.

I find Anna in her office at her desk, working on her computer. She has a binder open, glancing from its contents to her screen.

Rapping lightly on the doorjamb, I ask, "Working on the database?"

Her head pops up, and she gives me a warm, welcoming smile. Safer than I've received all this week we've been working together. I have to say she has a kind of smile that puts me in a great mood.

"Nah... organizing a proposal for Kynan, which he's going to submit to some congressional committee that will make Jameson a preferred contractor for the government to use," she replies.

I step in, then take a seat in one of her two guest chairs opposite her desk. "But isn't Jameson already sort of preferred? I mean... Kynan and I are. While being personal friends of the president and all?"

"You make a fine point," she teases as she closes the binder. "And in theory, the president does prefer to use us for any work the government needs. But in this instance, I think it's more of a designation that speeds up assignments of work to us without some of the initial vetting that normally happens."

"Makes sense," I reply, then nod to the large stack of folders on the desk. "That our work for today?"

"Yup," she replies. "I decided we would start chronologically, but in reverse order on the freshest cases we've concluded."

Monday and Tuesday of this week, Anna and I sorted all the files into boxes I had carted down from the fourth floor to her office. We then

sorted them out and separated them by date, spending the rest of the time looking at the database in which we'd be entering the information. Dozer had made the order of the fields customizable, then left it to Anna and me to release and organize it in a way that made input of the data easiest.

Today, we're ready to start entering the information.

"Want to grab the top one?" she asks, tapping away on her keyboard, presumably pulling up the database.

Theoretically, the most recent case Jameson had was my rescue in I met but that folder wasn't in the box because it's probably still being dealt with the government. Kynan has been working with his liaisons choice. Defense Intelligence and Central Intelligence agencies to apprise them, but he how our mission went down and to account for the dead guards they left behind. Apparently, Jameson had been sidelined—intentionally told he has a United States to stay out of my search-and-rescue efforts given the situation in the Syrian region.

Kynan, of course, had ignored them. Had it not been for a very ridiculous amount of money he offered for information on my whereabouts, it's the balls to ignore mandates by the government, and came in with guns to secure my release, I'd still be stuck there. I'm forever grateful, and I submit to his shifting around a lot of heat that's coming down on him right now. I wonder if that will affect his proposal to become a preferred contractor.

The file in my hands reads, "Code Name: Hacker," on the tab.

Frowning, I say aloud, "Code Name: Hacker?"

Anna grins. "I sort of named all the cases to keep them straight in my mind. That's actually a case Bebe was involved in to take down a mobster slash black-hat hacker in New York last month."

"No kidding," I murmur. Opening the file, I start flipping through the pages. I haven't had a chance to see Bebe since my return. Actually, I haven't even known her all that well before I left for Syria. Hell, I hadn't known these people well, but I do know Bebe is essential to this company's operations because she's a certified tech genius. Apparently, while she was being held prisoner, Kynan had a state-of-the-art research and development lab built on one of the subterranean levels. Cage had told me it was high tech. People aren't allowed down there without an escort, and only a few people have keys—Bebe and Dozer.

"It's probably easiest," Anna says as she pats the side of her desk, "earn me a move your chair over here so we can look at the file together. We can decide what's the most important to put in the database, then I'll type it in."

"Let's do it," I reply, pushing up from my chair to drag it over beside me. As I round the desk, I take a moment to notice how pretty Anna

today. For a sliver of time, I allow myself to appreciate the navy dr
ard andpaired with the same brown boots she wears almost every day. Sh
scarf tied around her neck with her hair in a high ponytail. One thi
1 Syria,noticed is Anna doesn't wear much makeup... maybe just a little ma
:briefedlike the way she has a light dusting of freckles across her nose.

in the The moment fades when Anna glances up. Immediately, I feel co
hem offor checking out my dead teammate's wife.

y'd left Christ.

by the "Pop a squat," she teases as she nods at my chair. Thank Go
ensionsfucking oblivious.

I leave the chair where it's at, which is a safe distance of at least t
liculousfrom hers, and toss the file on her desk. She pushes the binder away, p
and thefolder closer, and opens it to study the first page.

blazing Leaning forward in my chair, I try to read over her shoulder, but
I figurereally see shit. She notices, gives me an eye roll, and says, "You ca
now. Iyour chair closer. I don't bite."

? I know I'm being ridiculous. I move the chair beside hers unti
clearly see the documents. She reads aloud and points out a few thir
all I notice is her perfume smells really good.

t in my Light and fresh.

Russian Anna grabs some sticky notes. "I'm going to flag all the people v
to enter."

ugh the Before I can respond, someone's knocking, and we both pop our h
[hadn'tto see Cage. He walks in, winks at Anna, and sticks his hand out aci
any ofdesk to me. "What's up, Mr. Admin Man? Heard you're riding des
pany'sbit."

e I was "Just watching over Anna to make sure she does her job right,
opmentback. Cage laughs, and Anna lightly jabs me in the ribs.

s pretty I double over, exaggeratingly rubbing at my side.

nly two "So what are you guys actually doing?" Cage asks as he plops in th
chair across the desk from us.

"if you "Putting all past cases into Dozer's new database," I reply.

1 figure "That dude is crazy smart," Cage says with an incredulous exp:

"That database is actually more along the lines of artificial intelligi
de her. will be able to learn the plans we enacted, where mistakes were ma
a lookscome up with better solutions."

Impressive indeed. Anna nods, continuing to go through the folder she has snatched a stapled memo, I start flipping through it.

“So listen,” Cage drawls. Once again, we glance up from our work. I’m looking directly at Anna. “Um... Jaime’s starting to think it’s we hasn’t met any of my friends or coworkers yet.”

“Uh-huh,” Anna replies, her head dipping back down to the contents of the folder.

“And well, I’m taking her out to dinner tonight, but I thought she’d drinks would be nice first, you know?”

“Uh-huh.” I’m not even sure Anna’s paying attention to him. I have no clue who Jaime is or if I should even be a part of this conversation. They tell me one thing, though... Anna and Cage are good friends since coming to her with girl troubles.

Or maybe boy troubles. I suppose Jaime could be a guy.

“So you’ll come with me to meet her for drinks then,” he asks, but it’s really a question. More of a statement, which is confirmed when he says, “That’s great. Thanks so much.”

Cage stands from his chair just as Anna realizes something important happened. Her head snaps up. “Wait! What?”

“You’ll come meet Jaime and me for drinks, so she thinks I’m leaving,” she says, still heading for the door.

“Wait a minute,” Anna commands. Cage stops, turning around with a sheepish smile. “Thinks your legit? Have you not told her the truth yet?”

Now I’m confused as I lobby my gaze between Cage and Anna.

Cage ducks his head as he shakes it. “Hasn’t been the right time.”

“Now would be the right time,” Anna says with a fair amount of sarcasm.

“I can’t,” Cage replies... well, actually almost whines. “But I figure if I passes muster with you, I’ll know she could potentially be the one, I’ll tell her.”

“Forget it,” Anna grumbles. “I’m not going to pretend to be a... well, you even tell her you do again?”

“A used-car salesman,” he admits in a low tone.

“Yeah... not doing that,” she says adamantly.

I can’t help but snicker as I think I’m figuring out the story now.

“You don’t have to pretend to be anything,” Cage maintains, holding his hands up. “Be yourself. You’ll just be coming as a good friend of mine.”

ie file. “Ask August,” Anna says with a sniff, glaring down at the fo
know you were good friends back in Vegas.”

k. He’s There’s a long silence before Cage finally admits. “No one know
ird sheJaime except you, Anna. I only told you because I needed a w
opinion, and I trust you.”

tents of Cage actually cuts his eyes to me, and he adds, “Guess I’m trusti
with this now, too.”

maybe I cock an eyebrow, tapping my finger against my chin. “You mean
dating someone who thinks you’re a used-car salesman? Why the big s
ave no “Because Cage doesn’t do relationships,” Anna mutters sarcas
It does“Thinks it will ruin his rep or something.”

ce he’s “That’s not it,” Cage growls. “This is new for me, Anna. I don’t
fuck it up, and I want you to meet her. Please come.”

Anna finally raises her head, blowing out a long breath. “Fine. But
it’s notwant to be a third wheel. Malik can come, too.”

ie says, “Whoa,” I reply, shaking my head. “I don’t think—”

“You’re coming,” Anna says firmly, giving me a scowl that
ant justscares me.

And... okay, fine. Looks like I’m going out for drinks with Ar
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“Ask August,” Anna says with a sniff, glaring down at the folder. “I know you were good friends back in Vegas.”

There’s a long silence before Cage finally admits. “No one knows about Jaime except you, Anna. I only told you because I needed a woman’s opinion, and I trust you.”

Cage actually cuts his eyes to me, and he adds, “Guess I’m trusting you with this now, too.”

I cock an eyebrow, tapping my finger against my chin. “You mean you’re dating someone who thinks you’re a used-car salesman? Why the big secret?”

“Because Cage doesn’t do relationships,” Anna mutters sarcastically. “Thinks it will ruin his rep or something.”

“That’s not it,” Cage growls. “This is new for me, Anna. I don’t want to fuck it up, and I want you to meet her. Please come.”

Anna finally raises her head, blowing out a long breath. “Fine. But I don’t want to be a third wheel. Malik can come, too.”

“Whoa,” I reply, shaking my head. “I don’t think—”

“You’re coming,” Anna says firmly, giving me a scowl that frankly scares me.

And... okay, fine. Looks like I’m going out for drinks with Anna and Cage tonight.

CHAPTER 8

Anna

I SPOT CAGE and Jaime across the crowded bar area where we'd agree to meet for drinks. They are seated at a small table in the corner. Mali move that way, winding our way in and out amongst the other happy drinkers, neither of us in a rush to perpetuate this bit of fraud Cage has on.

It's odd walking into an establishment with a man—even though I have only friends. I can't say it's unpleasant, but why would it be? Malik is tall and gorgeous, causing many a female head to turn his way. His hand is on the middle of my back to help guide me through the crowd, putting his hand slightly just ahead of mine to part the way so I don't get jostled. I'd forgotten how good it feels to have a man—or anyone really—protect me. There's a downside to being alone.

"Let me get this straight," Malik mutters, leaning his head closer to mine. "Cage basically only does hook-ups, nothing serious. And he always has a false profession for whatever asinine reason."

I nod. "Correct. And the reason being—from what I understand—most women knew he was a bad-ass Special Forces security expert, they'd be afraid of him, not stalkerish or something, but I really think he just likes keeping it impermanent."

"Dumbest thing I've ever heard, but whatever. So, this woman is more interested in him than a hookup and she still doesn't know what he does for a living?"

"That's the way I understand it," I mutter.

"And he's too scared to tell her the truth because he's afraid they'll do them in?"

Not afraid to just lay it out there. "The guy is a certified moron for sure. However, I think it's adorable he truly likes this woman, and he isn't sure how to rectify the situation. It's kind of fun to watch him stumble while trying to figure it out."

"Seems stressful to me," Malik murmurs, but I don't have time to respond.

as we reach the table.

Cage makes the introductions between us and Jaime, who is gorgeous with vivid red hair cascading down her shoulders, pale blue eyes, and delicate facial bones. She's willowy and graceful as she stands to shake our hands.

Malik and I are merely introduced as friends of Cage's as we take chairs opposite.

Cage had already ordered a pitcher of beer. Once glasses are poured and passed out, the conversation is remarkably light and fluid. It's nice to get out to enjoy a few beers without having to worry about breastfeeding tonight. I pumped enough milk to keep her happy, and my mom is going to keep her overnight.

I spend this little bit of precious time with Cage's new woman, peering at her questions her way so I can learn more about her. More importantly, I go to keep her from asking too many questions of her own that would put her in a position to have to lie. While I don't mind helping Cage out tonight, I don't want her to end up being something that could go the distance, I don't want her to forget me for my part in the deception.

It only took to the bottom of my first beer to determine I like Jaime. I can tell Cage really does, too. She's not only beautiful, but she's charming, humble, and genuine. Definitely about a hundred steps up from the bimbos he normally hooks up with.

My next opportunity to have a private conversation with Cage, I need to demand he get his head out of his ass and tell her the truth. It's especially important because I can tell Jaime likes Cage a great deal. I'm back. Who knows, this could be true love in the making.

Jaime takes a sip of her beer, smiling over the edge. When she sets down, she levels a finger, moving it back and forth between Malik and me. "So how long have you two been dating?"

I jerk, whipping my head to the left to look at Malik, then back to Jaime. "Oh... we're not dating."

Jaime's gaze moves to Malik, who shakes his head. "Nope. Not dating." "Really?" Jaime asks, completely amazed. "I could have sworn you were because when you talk, he's totally absorbed in what you're saying and vice versa. It's a shame. You two would make a beautiful couple."

"Nope, not dating at all," I confirm quickly and perhaps a bit too

“Just friends.”

beyond Laughing, Jaime nudges Cage in the ribs, giving him a knowing look in the eyes, before turning her attention to me. “Oh, someone doth protest just a little to shakemuch.”

And, in that moment, I don’t like her anymore because she’s shined the twospotlight down on me. She’s calling out every inappropriate feeling I have about Malik over the last week since he’s been back.

red and I mean, nothing awfully inappropriate, but I definitely feel close to come. There’s a bond because of shared losses. And he’s a gorgeous man, and I’ve noticed a time or two, and I absolutely have no right to be doing this. At that moment, Cage gallantly intervenes, perhaps reading the unspoken in my posture. His arm goes around Jaime, and he pulls her into his side. “Calm down, seriously, babe... they’re really just friends.”

I try to Not sure if she just has the personality of a dog with a bone that she won’t give something up, or she’s an eternally optimistic romantic, but she has a soft smile between Malik and me with a soft smile. “Oh, but why not? You two look like clearly great friends, and you do look beautiful together—”

I’m not sure what my expression says—or Malik’s for that matter. I don’t dare look at him, but Jaime abruptly cuts off her words, contrite and smart, worry crossing her face. “Oh God... I’m sorry. I totally overstepped the bounds. Said something awfully rude, didn’t I? I didn’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings. I’m just such a romantic. Sometimes, I see things that aren’t there, I think.”

This is I glance over at Cage, who shrugs, then get the guts up to peek at him. He just stares back with a sorrowful smile before his attention goes to Cage.

“Shit,” Jaime exclaims, ducking her head in apology. “I said sorry, it back really bad, didn’t I? Totally stuck my foot in my mouth. I’m not sure if you mind me, but I know I did.”

I shoot her a reassuring look meant to tell her to stop beating her head against the wall. Opening my mouth, I start to gently tell her the truth about my father having just died when Malik stuns the shit out of me.

ting.” “I’m gay,” he blurts out.

ou were Once again, I jerk, whipping his way.

nd vice Cage makes a choking sound, but Jaime doesn’t hear it. She merely looks sheepishly at Malik. “Well, totally missed that. My bad.”

shrilly. “It’s all good,” Malik reassures her. When he cuts his gaze at me,

convey my gratitude with just my eyes.

“And look at the time,” Cage announces, glancing down at his watch. “We have to get going if we’re going to make our reservations.”

I happen to know Cage’s dinner reservations aren’t for another forty minutes. Plus, the restaurant he’s taking her to isn’t but a few blocks away. He’s just cutting this a bit short before the conversation can turn more personal, either creating more lies or forcing me to have to talk to him. Jimmy’s death.

Malik and I rise when Cage and Jaime do. We shake hands, and promises to get together for drinks again. When they leave, Malik releases me back to the table. “Want to finish our beers?”

“No,” I reply, taking my seat again. Malik goes to the other side. I don’t believe it’s because he doesn’t want to sit beside me. It’s just easier to talk while sitting opposite each other. He rearranges the glasses, pushing Cage and Jaime’s to the side, then takes two beers off from the pitcher.

“Cheers.” I tap mine against his. “Cheers.”

“So... that was slightly awkward,” Malik observes after he placed my glass back on the table.

I laugh, my nerves finally having settled, knowing I don’t have to say anything anymore or explain I’m a widow to Jaime. “Totally. I didn’t have to go the whole ‘I’m gay’ route.”

Malik chuckles. “It was fun to see her face when I said it, though.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Besides,” he continues. “I didn’t want you to have to bring up why, when you’re not ready.”

His words strike something deep within me—that I’m not ready to get myself up. I wonder if that’s true or not. I mean, I haven’t looked at another man since Jimmy died. Been a little bit busy being a single mom while working a job.

But I don’t necessarily feel lonely from a romantic perspective. I mean, because I’m still grieving that I haven’t had time for any other emotional connection. How do I work their way in?

Regardless, I can’t help but be truthful. “I have no clue if I’m ready. I’ve never even thought about it until you just said that.”

“Sorry,” he murmurs apologetically.

watch. “No, don’t be sorry,” I rush to reassure him with a quick shake head. “Actually... it’s part of my push forward, right? I mean, I suppose fifty-five will come a time where I’d consider dating. Is there like an appropriate amount of time you’re supposed to wait?”

turn any Malik smiles, seeming amused. “I’m pretty sure there’s no handbook about this. Also, pretty sure Corinne would tell you to trust your gut.”

making “Yeah, she’s pretty good at pushing things off on gut instinct, isn’t she?” Malik leans back in his seat, fingertips tapping the side of his glass and considers it. “I think she reminds you to trust your gut if she thinks you’re a strong enough individual to have a reasonable compass when it comes to scenarios like that.”

it’s want “Good point,” I say, picking up my glass. I take a tiny sip. “But she’s back to Jaime, I have to say... despite her matchmaking enthusiasm, I guess we both liked her.”

Malik nods sagely. “You can tell Cage really likes her, too.”

“He needs to tell her the truth.”

“Immediately,” he adds.

ices his I take another sip of my beer. “What about you? Are you dating anyone? Or are you sort of a hook-up kind of guy like Cage?”

to watch After pondering his beer for a moment, Malik finally shrugs. “I’m not sure about you one thing. I mean... I’ve dated. Had some serious relationships—mostly in high school—but, honestly, my time in the Marines sort of put a cramp on my dating life. I expect this job will be much of the same. Maybe that’s why Cage is the way he is... because of the job.”

Jimmy “Cage is actually relationship averse,” I point out. “As in... I’m not into monogamy is for schmucks, but I actually think he just doesn’t trust people—and I think he’s afraid of being hurt, so he holds himself back.”

in since “No rewards without risks, right?” Malik suggests. “Maybe you should give him a new reminder of that.”

“For sure,” I reply.

Or is it We chitchat about work, mostly me filling Malik in on the company’s new hires so new when he joined us last June and he immediately headed back to Syria, so he just hasn’t had a chance to get to know everyone yet.

eady or He asks about Avery, which leads to questions about my family.

Which, in turn, makes me ask, “What are your plans for the future?”

weekend? Going home?"

of my Malik shakes his head. "Nah... we never really celebrated Thanksgiving... being Canadian and all."

ropriate "But aren't you a dual citizen?" I ask.

"So it's been pointed out," he replies with a smirk. "But growing up in Montreal, we just never celebrated it. It wasn't a holiday for us."

"Still, Jameson is going to be closed down." I pick up my glass, knock it back the last swallow. "Be a great time to get in a trip home for a visit, is it?" Malik once again shakes his head, appearing a bit contemplative. "You're my family to know I'm okay. The best way to do that is to not go home. Thought I'd just hang out here, eat all the calories my body can handle, maybe catch up on some reading."

going "Well then, you must come with me to my mom's for Thanksgiving dinner," I say enthusiastically. "I mean, she'll have a combination of traditional turkey, mashed potatoes, and stuffing, but she'll also cook some Polish stuff for her brothers who come over with their families. My cousins and kids will be there. It's a great time."

Malik seems horrified at my suggestion, and I feel terrible for making the offer. He must see something in me, recognizes he might be offending me, and he backtracks. "It's a really great offer, Anna. In any circumstances, I'd take it. Honestly, I'm just not up for socializing in now."

in my I tilt my head. "But you came out with me tonight—"

it's why "Because I feel comfortable with you," he points out. "I'm sure your family is amazing. I'd also really like to meet Avery at some point, honestly... it's just a little too much right now."

easily. I "Of course," I rush to reassure him. "It's not a problem at all."

He smiles, gesturing at my empty cup. "You about ready to go?"

should I nod, but I can't help but speak something that's been on my mind. "It's painful to be around people, isn't it?"

Malik's eyes flare. Rather than look put out, though, he tilts his head curiously. "What makes you say that?"

out on "It's just that you were isolated for so long without much conversation or stimulation, so I imagine society has to be a bit of an overload for you now."

holiday It's fascinating to me when total relief washes over his face. "The

for getting that about me. For understanding.”

“It will get better,” I promise.

“I hope you’re right,” he replies.

“It will,” I say adamantly. “I know, because I’ve been in a real
g up in place. Eventually, it gets brighter. Little by little, you’ll break away from

I know you can do it if I did. You’re far stronger than I ever was.”

“You’re pretty damn strong,” Malik murmurs with an acknowledgment
” respect in his tone.

“I need “I’ll help you along the way,” I promise, and I’m heartened when I
home in acceptance.

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“It will,” I say adamantly. “I know, because I’ve been in a really dark place. Eventually, it gets brighter. Little by little, you’ll break away from that. I know you can do it if I did. You’re far stronger than I ever was.”

“You’re pretty damn strong,” Malik murmurs with an acknowledgment of respect in his tone.

“I’ll help you along the way,” I promise, and I’m heartened when he nods in acceptance.

CHAPTER 9

Malik

I MOP THE sweat at the nape of my neck with the t-shirt I'd ditched fifteen minutes into my workout, then sling it over my shoulder. God damn, I can't help but grimace at my ribs that are still showing through skin, but I figure they'll disappear with another month or so of high-intensity.

It's not like I'm completely emaciated, thank fuck. When I was captured back in June, I was a pretty big dude. I'd seriously worked out and had a storage of thick muscle when I'd gone into captivity. So now I've withered down, but I was steadily building it back up. The ribs still show, but they are merely the result of having my low body fat drop beyond a certain amount, but at least my stomach is no longer caved inward from starvation. At the rate I'm going, I might even have a little pooch by springtime.

Just today I held nothing back. I might not be knee-deep in turkeys and mashed potatoes, but I made a huge breakfast—four eggs, six slices of toast, a mountain of fried potatoes, and two pieces of toast.

Basically, I laid around feeling sick to my stomach and watched a movie, then had a frozen pizza for lunch. I washed it down with a pint of Jerry's, then watched another movie.

It was around midafternoon when I got up the gumption to remind myself that today wasn't actually a holiday and there was no rest for the weary. I hauled myself over to the gym—also located on the fourth floor of the Jameson building—and got in a pretty intense leg workout.

In fact, they're a little wobbly as I walk back to my apartment, but I'm proud of myself and the effort I'm putting into getting my health back on track. I'm determined to bounce back as quickly as possible so that nothing is holding me back for a return to full duty.

I reach into the pocket of my shorts and pull out the key, sliding it into the lock. Just as I start to turn it, I jolt when I hear a feminine voice behind

“Hey, Malik.”

My skin tingles as I recognize Anna’s voice. Slowly, I turn my head to see her coming off the elevator. She has her daughter strapped to her chest with some type of hammock-looking scarfy-thing, an arm under to support the baby’s weight, and a large paper bag with handles in the other hand.

I move from my door to her, taking the bag to lighten her load. “Hello.”

My gaze falls to the top of the baby’s head. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is curled up near her mouth. When I glance back at Anna, she smiles. “This kid can sleep anywhere.”

I nod, grinning back.

There’s a tiny moment of awkward silence, but then she gestures to the bag I’d taken from her. “I decided to bring you Thanksgiving dinner.”

My eyes widen as my stomach grumbles with interest. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“Oh, trust me... I did,” she says with a laugh. “We had so many leftovers that we just couldn’t fit them all in the refrigerator.”

I heft the bag up and down a few times, noting how heavy it is and how bad Anna hauled it all the way up here while carrying a baby. “Did you put an entire turkey in here?”

That tinkling laugh filters through the air, and it amazes me how much it sounds like the sound of it. “Let’s see... I put some turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, three types of stuffing—plain, herbed, and oyster—corn, mac and cheese, green bean casserole, rolls, cabbage rolls, pierogis, and three types of pies: apple, pumpkin, and pecan.”

“Christ,” I mutter as I turn back for my door. “I just gained ten pounds listening to that. Thanks!”

I glance back, find Anna just standing there, and motion with my hand. “Well... come on in. You can watch me eat myself silly if you want.”

She doesn’t hesitate, shooting me a dazzling grin as she hurries in. “Actually... we ate around one today, so I’m hungry again. I’ll join you if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” I say as I lead her into my small apartment. I wait for her to cross the threshold, then shut the door.

“Looks just like Cage’s apartment,” she observes, cradling Avery against her chest.

I step into the kitchen. Placing the large bag on the counter, I reach

to start unloading it. There are plastic containers and Ziploc bags stuffed with more food than I could possibly eat in a week.

“Let me help you,” Anna says before scanning the room. “Mind moving Avery on your bed?”

My mind races, wondering how messy my room is. I never make a mess, and I’m prone to throw my clothes on the floor until laundry day, but when I realize I actually did laundry today.

“This,” “Sure,” I reply.

Anna moves to my room, which is off the living area, and pokes her head in. “She’s not quite to the rolling-over stage yet, but you have plenty of pillows I can place around her,” she observes.

“More on the couch if you need them,” I say, gesturing to them. “I’ve got a sort of came with the furnishings.”

Anna laughs. “I know. Cage has the same ones.”

I unload the food while Anna settles Avery onto my bed, and I wonder exactly how close Anna and Cage are. They seem to be only in the same feeling zone, but it makes me wonder if that’s only because Anna’s a recent widow. Maybe Cage wants more... and he’s just biding his time until she’s ready.

But that doesn’t make sense, not when he seems to be so into that much I—Jaime—we’d met last night.

Or maybe Cage is just a player who runs through women.

I have to admit that the thought of him playing Anna in any way is a little off-putting, but it sits right with me. While I owe the man the world for being part of my team, I actually think I would cheerfully kill him if he hurt Anna.

I know this deep-seated urge to protect her comes from my guilt about protecting her husband, as if it’s my life’s duty now to watch over her head. Maybe that will go away in time... and maybe it won’t. I just know that at this moment, Anna’s health, safety, and happiness seem crucially important to me.

I glance into my bedroom to see Avery on her back, sound asleep with pillows bordered all around her. Anna sits on the edge of the bed, watching her daughter with a dreamy smile. It’s not something I’d ever want to interrupt, so I pull out two plates and start loading them, keeping the portions for her substantially smaller than mine.

I nuke mine in the microwave for a minute, then Anna’s. By the time I’m pulling hers out, she comes out of the bedroom, casting one last look

fed full daughter.

“I wonder how many hours of your life you have spent watching her if I put since she was born,” I say with a smile as I carry the plates to the dining table separating the kitchen and living area.

my bed Anna laughs as she sits. I set a plate in front of her, putting mine in the adjacent space at the table. I head back into the kitchen, grabbing silverware and bottled waters from the fridge. At the last minute, I duck to nab a roll of paper towels, tucking it under my arm.

er head She regales me with tales about Thanksgiving holiday at her house. I eat—how her great-uncle Richard got too drunk on peppermint schnapps and cousin Tim showed up stoned but no one knew it but her, and how her father. “They accidentally used a bowl to serve the corn in that had soap in it so even I was practically gagging and blowing bubbles.

“They sound hilarious,” I observe, laughing at yet another story.
wonder “They are,” she replies, her smile sliding a little. “But in a dysfunctional friendway.”

widow? “Are you close to them?” I ask. “I mean, you clearly enjoy spending time with and love them—”

woman “But do I spill my life’s secrets to them?” she finishes. “Because you know you can love someone in your family, but not actually be close to them.”

doesn’t I nod.

er rescue Anna shrugs. “I used to be really close to my mom while growing up, particularly after my dad died. She and I really bonded after that.”

over not “But then...” I prompt, fully aware there’s more from the way she looks at her words hanging.

that, in Anna shrugs. “But then life happened. When she remarried, she and her new husband split her attention between me and my stepdad.”

“Is he nice?” I ask.

ep with “Sure,” she replies, again with a shrug. “He loves my mom. Cares about me, no doubt. But maybe a part of me resents him because he took a part of my mom away from me.”

portions “I can understand that,” I commiserate.

“Yeah, but it’s not very mature of me to think that way, so I accept new boundaries in our relationship. To answer your question, I guess I’m not as tight with my mom, but we’re not as close as we once were. I haven’t

talked to her about Jimmy dying all that much, so that should t
er sleepsomething.”

e small My head immediately starts to buzz at the mention of Jimmy. These
it only takes his name to immediately transport me to the Syrian
e at theseeing him lying dead on the hard-packed earth.

erware I take a sip of water, hoping it dispels the lump in my throat, the
n entiremyself ask, “What can’t you tell her?”

Anna’s eyebrows draw inward as she considers my question. “I ca
e as weher that I don’t need her. I mean... not the way she wants me to. L
ops, herdoesn’t understand why I wouldn’t move back home after Jimmy diec
er momI got my own apartment instead. She doesn’t even understand what a
eryoneindependent woman she raised. How when my stepdad came into the

I was forced to start fending for myself somewhat, so I learned how
care of myself. And now, I just want to show Jimmy I can do this bec
actionalalways knew I could take care of myself. It was one of the things h
best about me, and I certainly can’t tell her that she helped make me th
ng timebecause it would kill her to know that. At the same time, I feel guilty a
just can’t let her be a mother to me now in all the ways she wants to be
ve bothoperating on instinct, knowing I’ve been in pain and wanting to sooth
lose toI have to get through it my own way, you know?”

My eyes continually get bigger the more she continues to voi
feelings out.

ing up, Anna is equally wide-eyed, appearing completely stunned si
unloaded like that.

left her But then she giggles—just a tiny chirp of a sound. Her hand cla
her mouth, eyes growing even bigger at her own temerity.

had to I snicker. “Wow... that was quite the mouthful.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says while laughing and not looking remorsefu
“I guess I have some repressed feelings where my mom is concerned, l
for me, Shrugging, I consider getting a second plate of food, but I figure I
part ofgive my stomach a rest. I put my fork down, gesturing pointedly at A
don’t mind you unloading on me.”

“Same goes for you,” she replies softly. “I mean... I know yo
oted theknow me all that well—and you have your own family and friends—b
ess I’mchecked, I have two sympathetic ears.”

t really I nod, not able to voice how much I appreciate the sentiment. E

ell you while I'm grateful for her offer, I don't think I could ever talk to her about what happened in Syria.

se days, How could I tell her that it's my fault her husband is dead? That, I don't want to desert, of me, Avery doesn't have a father?

And it would come out. I know the minute I opened myself up to her to make empathy, I'd spill my guts to her the way she just did to me, and I'm not ready to see the hate or disappointment in her eyes just yet.

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while I'm grateful for her offer, I don't think I could ever talk to her about what happened in Syria.

How could I tell her that it's my fault her husband is dead? That, because of me, Avery doesn't have a father?

And it would come out. I know the minute I opened myself up to Anna's empathy, I'd spill my guts to her the way she just did to me, and I'm not ready to see the hate or disappointment in her eyes just yet.

CHAPTER 10

Anna

SETTING MY KINDLE on the table, I get off the couch and head into the kitchen. I have a craving for chocolate milk—something that started in the second trimester of my pregnancy and never went away even after birth.

Maybe a chocolate chip cookie wouldn't be bad either. In my opinion, no person can ever have too much chocolate.

I step into the kitchen. Before I can even turn on the light, though, I'm cursing as my socks instantly get soaked by water.

I slap at the wall switch. When the light clicks on, I gape at the gallons of water that covers my entire linoleum floor. Suspecting the dishwasher is the culprit since I had just started it about half an hour ago, I snap on that way, dismayed to see a steady rush of water coming out of the door and spilling onto the floor.

"Goddamn it," I exclaim as I rush toward the dishwasher, my thighs now weighed down by the water that has soaked into them.

I snatch the door open to halt the cycle. For some reason, though, it doesn't stop the flow of water. I have officially exhausted my knowledge of how water moves through a machine.

"Shit, shit, shit," I mutter as I scramble into the living room, splashing water everywhere to grab my phone. After I pull up the superintendent's contact information, I stab hard at the number. It's the first time I've called him since moving in. When I get his voicemail, I growl in frustration.

I leave a screeching, slightly hysterical message for him to please come to my apartment and help me turn the water off. The minute I disconnect, I'm calling Cage. He's the one who had tinkered with the damn thing already, so he should know what's wrong with it.

I get his voicemail also. "Cage... damn it. Now is not the time to call me. I have a slight emergency over here... like water all over my

from the dishwasher you supposedly fixed for me. Call me. Now!”

Those last words were snarled as I disconnect the phone.

For a moment, I decide to just give up. I’m going to end up flood apartment, probably cave in the ceiling on the one below me, and I that outcome. Mentally, I start preparing what to say to my poor ne who live under me.

But then inspiration strikes. Once again, I pull up the contacts nto myphone.

l in the Malik answers on the second ring. “What’s up?”

I gave I take a deep breath, then let it out. Even trying to sound calm totally hear my voice quavering. “Um... my dishwasher has flood inion, a entire kitchen, and it won’t stop leaking water. I pulled the door open the cycle, but it won’t stop gushing out.”

gh, I’m If there’s ever a testament that Malik is the type of man who can steadfast and calm in any situation, it’s in the way his tone char od inch comfort me. “It’s not a problem, Anna. Easy fix. There will be a wat isher as off valve under your kitchen sink. Just open the cabinets and look ay gaze there. The valve will be vertical. Just turn it to horizontal until the wat bottom off.”

“Okay,” I whisper, tears now pricking at my eyes. I slosh thro k socks water, my socks now starting to come off and hang around my heels, f in the front like long flippers.

gh, that I open the cabinet under the sink, bend, and peer under there. All I r entire half-a-dozen bottles of household cleaners, a spare roll of soaked towels, and my dishwasher detergent.

loshing The tears really threaten to spill. For the first time in a while, I th ndent’s *can’t do this without a man in my life. I need Jimmy, and it’s unfair* : had to *have him.*

on. But then... I spy it, right against the back just behind the U-benc come to water pipe. The valve is exactly as Malik said it would be, and I reac ect, I’m turn it to the horizontal position.

ady, so Immediately, the rush of water silences. When I hopefully cast a over, I see it has blessedly stopped coming out from the bottom ignore appliance.

kitchen “That worked,” I exclaim gleefully as I straighten.

Malik chuckles. “Awesome. Now, if you’ll text me your address

come over and see if I can figure out what's going on with it."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I say, miserably examining all the
ling my "Text me your address," he repeats firmly. "And might I
acceptgathering all your towels to start sopping the water up?"

ighbors "Okay," I murmur, giving in. All too easily, I've rolled over and a
Malik's help to come over and help me mop my floor. So much
on myindependent woman who can take care of herself in any situation thro
way.



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IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, Malik knocks on my door, the benefits of being
close to Jameson without actually living in the bad area of town
wearing sweatpants and a hoodie, and he's carrying a small toolbox.

He holds it up with a grin. "Wasn't sure if you had tools, so I si
this from the common area at Jameson."

I wave him in, suddenly aware I'm already in my pajamas and it
seven on a Saturday night. Fortunately, my pajamas consist of yoga pa
an oversized t-shirt. It's one of the few I kept of Jimmy's, and it still
like him no matter how many times I've washed it. I managed to di
sopping socks and slip on a bra before Malik arrived, so I'm decent a
but there's no getting past the fact I'm completely lame.

"Avery sleeping?" Malik asks as he surveys the kitchen.

I'd managed to get the water cleaned up, but now a pile of sodden
is in a massive heap on the floor. Because I have an efficiency wasl
dryer, it's going to take me at least five loads to finish them all.

"Yeah," I say as I shut the door. "Luckily, I had just gotten he
before I found this catastrophe."

Malik makes a sound of acknowledgment deep in his throat befor
right to the problem. "Have you had issues with the dishwasher
today?"

"Oh, yeah," I mutter as I lean against the counter to watch. "Supp
Cage fixed it when he was here last week."

"Well, let me take a look," he says easily. "If it's something I can
can get your water turned back on at least."

Malik sets the toolbox on the counter, then pulls his hoodie over hi

As he lifts the heavy material, it causes the t-shirt he's wearing under water. rise. An expanse of tanned skin and a muscled back are exposed but suggest falls back down to cover him up.

Even in the last week and a half since Malik returned, he's filled out a bit. It's mostly obvious in his face, especially since the dark circle under his eyes have receded. I know he's been packing in some calories so he can overcome his deficit, but there was no mistaking the outline of his ribs in that brief glimpse. In a few more months, though, I expect he'll have his brawn back.

"Wouldn't happen to have a beer, would you?" Malik asks as he hangs his hoodie on the counter.

"I most certainly would," I say with a smile, moving to the fridge to retrieve one. I twist the cap off, toss it in the garbage, and hand it over. He takes a long swig before setting the bottle near his sweatshirt.

He opens the door of the dishwasher, then commences to work on it.

I watch for a while, asking a few questions, but he has no answers. After he removes the entire lower basket and starts dismantling the pieces, I decide to go ahead and drink the chocolate milk I'd been craving.

While I'd love a beer, too, I don't drink if there's a chance I'll have a stomach ache. Avery within a few hours. Given she's hungry often, it's not worth the risk at least.

As I'm draining the last of my milk—having taken a decent amount—teasing from Malik over my choice of drink—Avery's cry rings out from the bedroom.

"A mother's job is never done," I quip, then tell Malik, "There's a beer in the fridge. Also some leftover pizza if you're hungry. Feel free to help yourself."

"Got it," he grunts as he works to unscrew something in the bottom of the machine.

Leaving Malik to his repair job, I go into the little nursery I'd set up before decorated myself. I turn on a small lamp on the dresser before leaning over the crib. "Who's a hungry little princess?" I coo.

Avery answers me with a lusty cry, her little fists balled up and waving.

"Patience," I remind her in a lilting voice, reaching under my t-shirt to unsnap my bra. My nipples actually tingle when she cries, a response I took some getting used to as a new mom.

I pick Avery up and carry her to the rocking chair in the corner,

death to lowering down into it. I've become adept at breastfeeding, and so has before it. Her cries cease as she recognizes the movement—the way I shift, lift t-shirt on one side, and put her into position. She easily finds my nipple at quite palms pressed to my skin, and starts to suckle.

Leaning my head against the padded top of the chair, I start to gently rock her as I hum a lullaby. Avery's such a good baby. This will be her first feeding tonight. She's actually starting to sleep for more than a few hours most of the time, something my body greatly appreciates.

A shadow passes across the doorway, and I lift up to see Malik the moment he tosses. "Oh, shit," he says abruptly, spinning to give me his back. "So I didn't know you'd be... um..."

I chuckle, glancing down at Avery. There's very little of me exposed. He's sure he didn't realize that in the brief glimpse he got when he walked

"It's okay, Malik," I say on a laugh. "I'm covered, and I'm doing more than feeding my daughter. Not a big deal."

Hesitantly, he turns. While I'm mostly in the shadows, the glow from the lamp reveals his embarrassed expression slowly disappearing as he looks earlier. Avery and me in, realizing there's truly not much to see.

"Is my dishwasher toast?" I ask.

"Actually, no... I fixed it, but you're going to need a new seal around the drain. I'll pick one up for you tomorrow."

"You don't have to—"

"I don't mind," he replies, leaning against the doorjamb.

I consider this because I don't want to feel indebted, but I'm extremely appreciative of the help. "How about I cook you dinner tonight in exchange?"

"Deal," he replies. I'm surprised when he moves into the nursery and lowers to sit on the floor. He leans against the dresser, crossing his legs up and at the ankle. Nodding at Avery, who's starting to get a full belly, he says, "Does that hurt?"

"Not so much," I say.

"Is this weird? Me sitting in here while you breastfeed your daughter?" Chuckling, I shake my head. "Oddly, it's not."

"Yeah," he murmurs with a pensive look. "Weirdly, it's not either."

It hits me a bit like a sucker punch, coming out of left field, and I

Avery, how I hadn't realized it before. Malik and I have actually bonded on the flight up my plane that transcends basic friendship. I've always had the feeling that Malik is a little more important to my life somehow. It's why his capture had been so concerning for me. Truly, it was one of the reasons I wanted to come work at Jamestown. The need to have Malik be okay would always reflect on my own need to be okay in turn.

And, unknowingly, I think it ended up forming a unique bond between us. To my surprise, it appears to go two ways.

I decide it's the perfect opportunity to try to push some boundaries. "Are things going with Corinne?"

Malik shrugs. "It's going. We've only had a few sessions, but she's been a pretty good person to talk to."

"Yet, I still get the distinct impression you don't want to talk about anything," I say. He smiles faintly as he nods. "Men never like to talk about their feelings. Didn't you know that?"

I can't help but laugh because Jimmy had been just like that—trying to be so tough. "Boy, do I ever know that."

There's a long moment of silence before he says, "I'm an introvert." "I can see that," I admit.

"I was always the type who enjoyed being alone," he continues. "I have friends and enjoy being around them, but I was never into big social events, you know? I like small gatherings. Meaningful talk."

I don't say anything, because I sense there's more to his story. There's a slight pause as his gaze drops to his hands, which are folded in his lap, before he looks back up. "From the moment I was taken—through the beatings and torture and threats of death—the absolute worst thing was being alone. After they chained me up in that hole and left me for hours upon hours, day after day, month after month, with no meaningful interaction... it was beyond unbearable."

"I can't even imagine," I whisper, the mere thought of Malik being alone through that has my heart shredding for him.

He takes in a deep breath, pasting on a confident smile. "One might think going through that would make me so appreciative of people that I would want to be around them all the time, right?"

I shrug, trying to lighten the moment. "Want to go to a restaurant or something?"

Malik barks out a laugh. “Fuck no. If anything, it reaffirmed I am, he was an introvert. It’s those deep, meaningful connections with people that summing important. Like right now... sitting here talking to you.”

Something inside me swells with the knowledge Malik has received and validated the same bond I feel. Through our experience, grief processing, we’ve found something within each other. We’ve recognized we can rely on each other.

“I’m really glad you made it back,” I say candidly. “Not just for obvious reasons. We all wanted you back. But you’re like a miracle that’s shining some light down on what’s been a very dark time for me. I know it’s easy to sound weird—”

“It doesn’t,” he assures me.

“But I treasure it,” I finish, giving him a smile. “I’ll always cherish the feelings.” “Me too,” he murmurs, leaning his head against the dresser again. “I’ll always treasure you.”

“I’ll always

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Malik barks out a laugh. “Fuck no. If anything, it reaffirmed I am, indeed, an introvert. It’s those deep, meaningful connections with people that are important. Like right now... sitting here talking to you.”

Something inside me swells with the knowledge Malik has recognized and validated the same bond I feel. Through our experience, grief, and processing, we’ve found something within each other. We’ve recognized we can rely on each other.

“I’m really glad you made it back,” I say candidly. “Not just for the obvious reasons. We all wanted you back. But you’re like a miracle to me... shining some light down on what’s been a very dark time for me. I know that might sound weird—”

“It doesn’t,” he assures me.

“But I treasure it,” I finish, giving him a smile. “I’ll always cherish it.”

“Me too,” he murmurs, leaning his head against the dresser again. “Me too.”

CHAPTER 11

Malik

CORINNE LISTENS AS I expel everything I've been thinking.

“This thing with Anna... it's a problem. There's been a shift. No, not quite right, yet... there are things that do feel very right with her. I'm a million different ways fucked in the head as to what this all means. I do have a friendship. This weekend, I fucking sat in the nursery while she breastfed her daughter, and I honestly didn't blink an eye at that matter, neither did she. What in the fuck does that even mean? I'm not sure what pair of coworkers... friends...whatever we are... does that? An even get me started on the fact that, despite having this crazy emotion with her, I can sometimes barely look at her without feeling immense guilt. I'm hiding a truth from her that would make her hate me, or, at the very least, be so severely disappointed in me it would kill our friendship. If only I had made a different choice... Jimmy and Sal would still be alive.”

The gunfire was so unexpected that all we could do was operate on instinct while hoping the training we'd all received would be enough.

We were still half a click from the camp where our intel said the hostages were being held. Our contingent of rescuers was as top-notch as you could hope, with our small Jameson unit complemented with Australian and Special Forces.

We were out in the open, though, exposed with very little brush and terrain formations with which to take cover. I managed to find a slightly depressed area in the ground, almost a ditch of sorts, and I propped my rifle on the ground to take aim at the enemy I was having a hard time identifying. My night goggles were doing their job, but bullets seemed to be flying in from everywhere.

I saw the British unit where they were pinned down and returning to the west... seeming to hold their own.

The Aussies were about twenty meters to my left, also fully exposed.

flattened to the ground.

Glancing around wildly, I finally located Jimmy and Sal, who had found a fortuitous depression in the landscape, on which they propped rifles on the ledge to mimic me. They seemed secure for the moment, but I couldn't locate Tank anywhere.

Was he with the Brits? The Aussies?

Fuck.

Needing to decide where I could provide the best support for returning, it seemed to me the Brits were in the most perilous position, as they were in the open and closest to the firefight. Pointing my gun in that direction, we started to return cover fire to give them the opportunity to bug out. All of a sudden, it happened in mere seconds.

It happened so fast I missed the gunfire behind me... a different sound than the M16s we were using, but I didn't have time to turn and look. I didn't know enemy combatants emerged from the darkened shadows and advanced on me, raining down a hail of bullets.

I made my choice and stuck to my plan, aiming, and then picking targets one by one so the Brits could make their way to safety. In under a minute, I took out four, giving the others time to scramble out. I turned back to check in on Jimmy and Sal, I knew I'd made the decision.

Apparently, they'd taken fire from the rear because both were crawling in the ditch. Motionless.

I slung my rifle strap over my shoulder, starting to belly crawl the way I could, but then something hit me hard on the back of the head. Jimmy's sullen eyes, glowing almost green through my night-vision goggles, were the last thing I remembered before I lost consciousness.

Opening my eyes, I focus on Corinne, who stares with empathy.

And so now she knows all of it.

Knows exactly how fucked up my feelings for Anna are, and how she's tearing me apart... because I could have saved her husband.

"Quite a burden you've been carrying," Corinne murmurs thoughtfully.

"Anna will hate me if she knows I could have saved Jimmy," I mutter.

"I'm not so sure you could have," she points out. "Seems like the Brits snuck up behind all three of you."

“I made a choice—assumed my teammates were relatively safe—*and also* concentrated on helping someone else,” I growl. “It was the wrong choice *and their* Corinne caps her pen, sets it and her notepad on the table between us, *but* leans against the armrest, lasering her eyes to mine. “Look, Malik... I’m not even remotely qualified to understand battle protocol, nor could I begin to understand the enormity of the decisions you had to make in just a few seconds of adrenaline-charged time. But what I do know is the information you gave me... it’s nothing new. It’s the same information that was *there* outcompiled in the debriefing reports from the other people involved. I interviewed every single member of that attachment... Tank, along with *l of this* every Brit and Aussie who made it home. They all talked about your decision in holding off those advancing men—how you saved many lives that day. *t sound* pretty sure if Kynan were here, he’d tell you that you made the right *Several* decision.”

“Big words coming from someone who just said she can’t begin to understand those things,” I growl bitterly.

“True,” she replies with a shrug. “But I have read the final report that was *twenty* issued, and there’s nothing but praise for how you handled the situation. When I recommended further training. No good solutions on how you could have better protected Jimmy and Sal. The fact of the matter is you were surrounded on all sides. You had no clue there were people coming up behind you. You could only deal with the problem in front of you, which you did *efficiently*.”

Taking a deep breath, I place my hands on top of my head and let my *rightless* fingers. I stare up at her ceiling, letting the air out of my lungs. Finally, *the last* my gaze swing her way. “From a military perspective—I understand. Rationally, I get it. Truth be told, I could probably get to a point of acceptance for Jimmy and Sal’s death. But now...”

I pause, unsure how to express my disgruntlement of the situation. I had no intentions of even going here with Corinne. Talking to Anna this week *why* it’s was a fucking revelation. I’m ashamed I let any type of bond form with a woman whose husband died on my watch.

“But now you have feelings for Anna, which you are having a hard time *fully* processing?” Corinne asks, finishing my thought.

She’s completely right, yet I still jerk in shock over the way it was *enemy* when said aloud. Heat creeps up my neck, and I rush to assure her, ‘

—and I have feelings like *that*.”

“Like what?” she counters, knowing damn well what I mean.

I refuse to answer because a million different types of feelings but I’m not inside me when I think about Anna... and they all seem wrong to me.

Wait... that’s not it. They seem *right* to *me*, but I’m afraid they’re a few *wrong* to *everyone else*.

Corinne attempts to come at it another way. “You know there are a lot of things that matter when it comes to matters of the heart, right?”

My jaw locks down tight, and I make my expression blank. I really don’t believe any of this with Anna has become embedded in my heart. I don’t want that at all.

“Anna is free to do what she wants,” Corinne reminds me. “Free to be your friend. Even free to be your lover if it comes to that.”

“Whoa, now, wait a minute,” I blurt out, holding my hand up defensively to get her to stop. We aren’t going there. “It’s not like that.”

“I’m just saying it could be, and it would be okay,” she replies. “Or it could be that you and Anna just continue to have a deep connection. No that will probably transcend other types of friendships because of your unique bond. My point being that there is absolutely nothing wrong with your emotional connection between you and Anna, whatever it may eventually become.”

My breath rushes out, an indication it has been pent up for too long. I’ve hashed this out. It makes me realize I’ve been feeling bad for even having my friendship with Anna. That I don’t feel like I deserve even that much goodness with a woman I’ve come to admire a great deal in a short time. I refuse to consider what else could happen. I’d have to be dead not to be attracted to the woman, despite my guilty misgivings. Anna is going to be inside and out.

I think back to walking into Avery’s nursery on Saturday night, to see Anna’s daughter at her breast. At first, I was so shocked I whipped around with the hadn’t really seen anything, but it was the intimacy of the moment that caught me off guard.

Anna quickly put me at ease, and something made me turn around to give her a good look at her.

She was right... I couldn’t really see anything. Her t-shirt covered the top part of her body, and her daughter shielded the rest. Maybe a flash of

the swell of her breast, but I mostly just saw mother and daughter engaged in the most primitive, special type of bonding that can occur between people. There was nothing sexual about it, but it touched something inside that aroused my emotions.

It made me feel even closer to Anna than I had already become.

That was the transcendental moment that changed everything between us. It had made me determined to spill my guts to Corinne today.

Because I need her to tell me what to do.

Should I keep exploring things with Anna or cut contact off completely? I don't know. Not even sure if that's possible given we work together, but fuck if I stay at Jameson. There are any number of contract security companies I can work with.

But damn... the thought of actually leaving the people here... of leaving Anna?

Not sure I can do that, either.

Knowing damn well how pleading my expression is, I ask Corinne, "What do I do?"

She shakes her head with an empathetic smile. "I can't tell you what to do with Anna. The only thing I can urge you to do is revisit your feelings and work through them."

A bark of sardonic laughter erupts from me. "You mean forgive me?" "Oh no," Corinne replies with a resounding shake of her head. "I don't think you have anything to apologize for or to be forgiven for. You just basically accept you did nothing wrong. That way, you can move on with your life."

I stare at her for a long moment, feeling like her words are ridiculous. Corinne's gaze drops to her watch before returning to me. "And we're out of time."

"Am I released?" I ask.

Shaking her head, she puts me in my place. "Not even close."

It's clear what I have to do.

Either I have to take her advice, accept I did everything in my power to protect those who needed it the most urgently—or, in other words, I accept my failure—I should have—or I have to move on and away from Jameson.

Corinne rises, an indication our time is truly over.

As she walks me to the door, she asks, "Are you going to the skin tonight?"

aged in There's going to be an after-work party for Bebe, who receives an official pardon from the president today for the crimes she was convicted on that sent her to prison. It was part of the deal Kynan worked out on her when she helped our government bring down a Russian criminal master last month.

been us. "Probably," I say. While I very much feel a part of the Jameson team, the truth is I don't know these people all that well yet. It seems weird to celebrate victories with them that I wasn't a part of when they occurred.

pletely? "I think you should," Corinne advises. "It's part of accepting you're a valued member here."

I could "Not all that happy in crowds," I say.

"This isn't a crowd," she points out. "This is your family. Or it could be, leaving you open up to it."

And damn her... now I have something else to think about.

Corinne,

at to do
of guilt

yourself?"
'I don't
need to
live."
ridiculous.
get out of

power to
control the

the party

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CHAPTER 12

Anna

BEING THE ASSISTANT to the illustrious owner of Jameson Force Security means I do pretty much anything he needs.

Some days, I'm helping to plan a mission by organizing binders, pulling strategic topographical maps, scouting lodging accommodations, and arranging meetings with military colonels.

Other days, it means buying party decorations.

I didn't begrudge being a party planner today, because this is a deserved celebration.

Bebe Grimshaw got a pardon for her crimes, and her record has been officially expunged. If that's not reason for a party, I don't know what is.

It goes without saying Bebe is perhaps the most interesting woman I've ever known. She spent seven years of a thirty-five-year sentence in prison for a crime she absolutely committed. When I first came to work for Jameson, I was shocked to learn Bebe had conspired against the United States by hacking our defense systems and steal nuclear launch codes, which were going to be sold to a foreign enemy.

Appalling, I know, but when I learned the story, it was understandable. Bebe is a brilliant tech genius. She had done some low-level black-hat hacking when she was in college to make ends meet when she'd gotten pregnant and promptly deserted by the baby daddy.

Then she got in too deep and couldn't get out. A Russian mobster took control of her—keeping the threat of killing her son, Aaron, and her mom, hanging over her head so she'd do his dirty work. She was forced to do anything he bidded until he wanted her to steal the nuclear codes. It was then she realized she had a duty to not only protect her family, but her country as well.

Bebe intentionally got caught, leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for the government to find her easily enough. It foiled the hacking plot, saved the country, and sent her to prison.

Of course, all's well that ends well, because Kynan heard about extraordinary talents and knew they could be used for good. He worked his contacts within the government to get her released from prison, and she had been a happy and productive member of Jameson—fighting against the forces of evil—ever since.

Now, it was Bebe who earned the pardon and expungement, because last month, she worked with the government to bring down that same intelligence security mobster who was on the FBI's most-wanted list.

Tonight... we party and celebrate her successes and heroism.

My mom is keeping Avery for the evening. I have Uber on my phone and I'm going to drink, eat, and be merry with my Jameson teammates. It's the first happy occasion we've had in a while to get most everyone here who isn't off on an active mission together.

Kynan put me in charge of planning the party, telling me I had carte blanche to do whatever I wanted. The first thing I did was ask Bebe what she wanted, it being her party and all.

I suggested fancy restaurants in Pittsburgh or a shindig to be held at Kynan's house, but Bebe wanted it here... at Jameson. It was symbolic of just how far she'd come and how devoted she was to the people here.

I decided the second floor was the best place to have it since most of the floor plan was open space with some scattered furniture between the dining room and the couches and chairs on the other. I'd rented some additional tables for seating and a caterer to provide food that wasn't hoity-toity. It wasn't meatballs and pigs in a blanket.

For a second, I wasn't sure if I went too far, so I had to verify my plan with Kynan, but he eventually gave me the go-ahead and boom... with a bartender with an open bar.

I spent today decorating, hanging Chinese lanterns and streamers from the industrial ductwork and pipes overhead, moving the ten-foot ladder out of the desks and generally making a pain-in-the-ass of myself during my workday. After his meeting with Corinne, Malik came to my rescue and ordered me off the ladder.

I tried to argue with him, but it turns out he's incredibly stubborn. A little bit of a sexist by having the temerity to think I couldn't hang from a ladder, but I ultimately gave in to him. It was easier than arguing.

Everyone seems to be here now, and the festivities are lively.

out her person in charge of managing all the employee files, I can affirm J. I've employed a total of sixty-eight people between the Vegas and Pittsburgh offices. Of course, the folks in Vegas couldn't come for this party but these several of our agents are out on active assignments, but there are at least a hundred and fifty people here tonight as family members were present, just to attend.

Russian I see Kynan move through the crowd toward Bebe, who's standing with her new beau, Griff, her son, Aaron, and her mom, Gloria. He says something to her, and she shakes her head adamantly. She even attempts to move away from him, but Griff, as if she needs his protection from the dastardly owner of Jambo's. It's the Kynan smirks, takes her by the elbow, and leads her away right where she's floating staircase leading upward through the rest of the four floors. He holds her about halfway up until they can be seen by the crowd.

and carte Chatter starts to die down as people see Kynan with Bebe by his side, and that she clearly he's going to make some type of speech.

held at casually holds a beer in his hand. "Some party."

to her "I'm glad you came," I say, bumping my shoulder against his. "The crowds aren't your thing."

of the "Meaningless drivel of conversation's not my thing," he corrects me. "Just greater chance of finding it at a large event like this."

ditional "Noted," I reply with a laugh.

y... but Kynan holds his hands up, someone gives a wolf whistle, and everyone quiets. He looks out over his domain—his people—and there's pride on his face.

he had a "Okay, everyone," he calls out over the last few people who don't hear. "A speech is forthcoming. Pipe down for about two minutes, then you're free to go back to all of this wonderful food and liquor I'm providing for you."

among Everyone moves in a little closer, circling around the base of the stage so they're able to hear.

ue and "As you all know," Kynan announces imperiously. "We're here tonight to celebrate this woman beside me."

n and a Kynan is clearly enjoying the limelight while Bebe looks like she's about to melt into the floor. While she's the sweetest, nicest woman ever, she is a bit of an introvert, perhaps given all her years locked away.

As the "Bebe doesn't like me drawing attention to her, and I promised I w

ameson make her give a speech, so let me just ask all of you standing here
tsburgh your glasses to toast this woman.”

ty, and Everyone does as asked, beers, wine, and highballs rising high i
asily at air.

invited “I could give you story after story of how Bebe has masterfully m
to take down the bad guys. She’s what I would call the heart and br
ng with this organization, and her innovation and determination are unparallel
nothing world became a better place—certainly safer—when she came to join
e closer so, it’s my great pleasure to announce that today, President Alexander
eson. a presidential pardon for Bebe as well as ordered her entire recor
t to the expunged. It’s definitely a big deal... one we are all honored to celebra
le pulls our Bebe. She wore her conviction like a badge of honor, and every
this room knows it was with the utmost integrity she took the fall
and it’s scrimed in order to save her country. It’s the highest order of heroism,
both spoke via speakerphone with President Alexander this mornin
k as he was signing the pardon, and he made sure Bebe understood our coun
indebted to her for her actions.”

I know It’s at this moment Kynan risks a glance at Bebe, who is no
blushing but actively crying. It stuns Kynan as he takes her in
cts me. streaming down her face as she listens to him.

He wisely decides to wrap it up. “So, let’s everyone toast to
pardon, proclaiming our gratitude that she belongs to us, and
veryone everyone, let’s just have a great time tonight.”

etched Everyone yells and cheers. Kynan grabs Bebe and gives her a ha
then releases her so she can melt down the staircase and disappe
realize Griff’s arms.

can go “You’re crying,” Malik observes, tipping his head to look at my fa
I hadn’t realized it, and I brush the back of my hand across a wet
stairs to “It’s just so wonderful, right?”

“Right,” he replies. He puts his arm around my shoulder, givin
night to slight squeeze. I take a moment to lean my head against his shoulder
we break apart.

e wants There was nothing awkward about it, either. Just a second when
e’s also emotional, he acknowledged it without making a big deal or making
stupid about it, and then it was over.

ouldn’t “Want to get some food?” Malik suggests.

to raise “Sure,” I reply, following him through the crowd to the buffet table where the caterers had set up.

into the There’s a short line, and we file in behind Cruce Britton. He glances over his shoulder at us, smiling brightly.

managed Turning, he holds his hand out to Malik, who takes it for a short moment. “Hey, man... good to see you back here.”

ed. The “Thanks,” Malik replies. “Good to be back.”

us. And It’s strange in a way how even though Malik has technically been a signed member of Jameson for over six months, he’s still such a newbie since he’d only been here for those months he spent as a prisoner. No one really knows him all that well, and vice versa. In fact, these two men have only met on one other occasion and that was the night before Jimmy and Malik were shipped out to Syria. It’s ironic that it was the first time Cruce had met Jimmy as well, but he would have had the opportunity to know him any better. It’s a bitter pill to swallow as we watch the two men chat as we inch forward in the line.

try was Cruce’s gaze comes to me as he asks, “How’s the peanut? Growing in the weed?”

longer “Yes,” I exclaim, promptly pulling my phone out of my shoulder bag to show him pictures.

“You need to send these to Barrett,” he says with a laugh. “She has a fever.”

well... “Really?” I drawl, my eyebrows raised. “You two are trying?”

“When we’re on the same side of this continent,” he replies with a wide grin and exaggerated hug.

Mar into Malik looks a little lost, so I fill him in. “Barrett travels back and forth between California and Nevada. She’s helping a private research consortium out there develop a fusion reactor to generate fusion energy.”

cheek. Malik looks slightly confused as he blinks his eyes. “Sounds like a hot woman.”

g me a “Double PhDs in electrical engineering and physics,” Cruce says proudly, his chest puffing out a little. Then he leans in toward Malik, and I subtly look around to ensure no one else is listening, and murmurs, “But don’t let that fool you. She’s hot as hell, too.”

me feel I snort as Malik bursts out laughing. “Duly noted.”

We load our plates up with slices of carved beef tenderloin with horseradish, Cajun boiled shrimp, glazed carrots, pasta salad

bles the dumplings, and samplings from a charcuterie board. My plate has little neatly arranged while Malik's is weighed down by a mountain of food. Cruce joins us at a table already occupied by two other Jameson Ladd McDermott and Jackson Gale. They were both hired after Malik was captured, so I make introductions.

Both men are easygoing and make Malik instantly feel welcome. Jackson is one of our older agents at forty-one. He has premature salt-and-pepper hair, but he wears cropped short and brushed forward. His piercing blue eyes catch the light offroisty at first glance, but he's a pretty nice guy from what little interaction I've had with him. Kynan told me that he's former CIA, which means on occasion, some really good stories to tell I bet.

Jackson is about Malik's age and a former Navy SEAL. Cage led me into Jameson a few months ago. Despite being in his mid-thirties, Jackson has an old man's vibe about him. Not physically, of course, but in spirit. It's like he's seen things he shouldn't have and, from that experience, developed a wisdom most people his age don't have.

"Where's Cage?" Jackson asks.

"San Francisco," I reply, cutting into my tenderloin. "He and Rachel are speaking at a security conference all week."

Rachel is Kynan's second in command at Jameson, and she runs the Vegas office. I haven't met her yet, but I have talked to her many times on the phone and Skype. She's super cool. It's one of the things I love most about working at Jameson and having Kynan as a boss. He puts women in positions of power, and he doesn't believe their gender is a limiting factor at all.

It often makes me wonder if I could be "more" one day. I have a lot to offer. I'm training, after all. I'm daring and adventurous, not afraid of a challenge.

While I'm good at my job of helping Kynan run this company, I know I can offer a lot more.

"I was thinking of hitting The Basement tonight," Jackson says, turning to Malik. "Want to come out?"

To my surprise, Malik's gaze moves to me. While his face isn't motionless, I can read the question within his eyes.

Should I?

He's not asking me from any type of proprietary standpoint. He's just asking if I believe he's ready to put himself out there with his new team and help them get into mainstream life.

le piles “I better put a warning out to all the single ladies,” I say with a wir
. Malik takes that as my acknowledgment that... yes, I do think it w
agents,good for him. Plus, he needs to bond with more members of Jameson.
alik got “What about you?” Jackson asks Ladd.

 He shakes his head. “Sorry... got plans tonight, but maybe som
d. Laddtime. They have that new ax-throwing thing there, which sounds right
per hairalley.”

an look “You’ll come, too, Anna?” Malik asks, and I swivel his way.
ractionthere’s nothing on his face and his tone is neutral, leaning toward jus
; he hasinclusive, but it seems to me it’s important to him that I come, too.

 Jackson jumps in to correct his invitation oversight. “Of course,
broughtYou come, too. I wasn’t excluding you at all. I just assumed you’d
venties,get home to Avery.”

ut more “My mom has her all night,” I reply with an understanding smile
at, he’salso know part of that was exclusionary, and not because Jackson i
guy. It’s just... I’m not really part of *that* team.

 I’m Kynan’s administrative assistant, which is not comparable
chel arebond the agents who are continually putting their lives at risk in some
missions they go on share.

uns the Maybe I should talk to Kynan about moving me up in the ranks. I
nes viaI could be of better service here, although Jimmy is probably rolling
st aboutgrave right now at the direction of my thoughts.

power I think I’ll find some time to run it by Malik first—see what he thi
 And then it hits me... Malik has somehow become the person I
militarymost comfortable going to with a life decision.

allenge. Jimmy’s not here to guide me anymore.

7 I have My mom would tell me that I’m being foolish.
 My best friend wouldn’t understand.

ning to Cage is too caught up in his new love life.

 But Malik... he’d get my motivation. He’d let me talk it out. He
remainseven disagree with me, but he’d also move mountains to help me achi
goals. That’s a lot of faith, I realize, to have in someone, but it doesn
it any less true.

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CHAPTER 13

Malik

ANNA COCKS HER arm, narrowing her eyes in concentration, and her peeps out the side of her mouth, which is all kinds of adorable. She focusing on the target, and then she lets the ax fly.

It tumbles effortlessly, end over end, and strikes the red bulls-eye center.

“Goddamn,” Jackson mutters in defeat, then picks up his beer to c
“Never seen anything like that.”

Anna turns our way, eyes shining bright with victory and alcohol my hand up, and she gives it a stinging high five before Jackson grun offers her the same. She’s kicked our asses for five straight games. W male ego has taken a slight ding, I’m far more enjoying seeing Anna l much fun. This past weekend when I came to her apartment to dishwasher with the part I’d picked up at the hardware store, s admitted she sometimes feels guilty when she has moments of happine

I know the feeling. It’s hard to register and accept those moments when good people—like Jimmy and Sal—can’t have them anymore told her a truth I hope she remembers for a long time to come.

“Jimmy would want you to be happy.”

Jackson picks up his phone from the tall table we were gathered getting absorbed in something for a minute before announcing. “I l head out.”

“Hot date?” Anna teases, picking up her beer to take a sip. She’s down considerably, but she’s still had several. Which makes it all th surprising how accurate her ax throwing has been.

“You’re a lady,” Jackson teases her right back. “So sure... we’ll c date.”

Anna snorts, elbowing me in the ribs. “He means a hookup.”

“Yeah... got that,” I reply with a chuckle.

A waitress comes by to ask if we want another round. I decline on behalf because she's probably had enough, and I don't want her puking guts up tomorrow. It's something I usually don't worry about with but since I still need to put on another fifteen pounds or so and not alcohol for months, it's time for me to stop, too.

We settle up our tab and Jackson takes off, making Anna proclaim a rematch soon. We walk through the bar/nightclub. Most of the people here for the liquor and dancing, but we'd hung out in the new addition, built recently that has a variety of games to play, including the popular one called "Dart Throwing."

When we hit the cold December air, we zip our coats to ward against the chill. Even though it's about twenty degrees colder than what I'd recently faced in that hole in the Syrian desert, it was still infinitely colder because I had no way to protect against it. I'd even go as far as to say that the loneliness and isolation made me colder still.

Anna pulls up her Uber app. As she's ordering her ride, I say, "I'm riding with you to your place, then I'll catch an Uber back to Jameson."

"You don't need to do that," she replies. "It's a short ride."

"And you could order up Jeffrey Dahmer as your driver," I point out.

Anna snorts. "I don't think I'm to his taste."

I give her a mock glare. "The point is you could be to *someone's* Uber. I'm riding with you, and that's final."

"Fine," she snaps with a dopey grin. "You're such a caveman."

"Well, don't make me conk you over the head and drag you to my car," I retort.

Anna laughs and tucks her phone away, hooking her arm through mine. She presses into me, squeezing the crook of my arm with her bicep. "Such a good time with you, Malik."

"Ditto," I reply under my breath, noting the harsh truth to something she said. It still somewhat shames me. But I've decided to roll with it because life is fucking complicated.

Our Uber driver is a pimply-faced kid who chatters the entire ride to Anna's apartment. He's a freshman at Duquesne who just started working to earn some spending money. Anna's the type who has never met a stranger so she chitchats right back. I try to ignore the fact that when we slid into the backseat, she didn't move all the way over, which left our legs an

Anna's touching.

ing her It's innocent, yet I feel like she's burning through my thick parka. myself, ignore it, blaming every bit of my thoughts on the alcohol we consume having The driver pulls up outside Anna's building and I open my door closest to the curb. Before I get out, I tell the driver, "I need to go promise about a mile."

e come "Sorry, dude," he replies. "I already accepted another job."
i they'd "No worries," I say as I step out, turning to give my hand to Anna. A taxi takes it, alighting onto the curb with a tiny wobble. My hand tightens until she steadies, then I release her.

inst the The driver takes off as soon as I close the door, and Anna pulls out my phone to add a tip for him. I grab my phone, needing to order my over there but Anna grabs my wrist. "Might as well come inside to wait while I say warm."

"I don't think—"

n going "Oh, come on... I made a chess pie yesterday and I have exactly three slices left."

I look at Anna, cheeks pink from the cold and her hair flowing out of her shoulders. Her eyes appear more blue than gray under the warm glow of the lighting coming off her building, and they're sparkling with a bit of happiness and alcohol.

I should say no, but I don't think it's within my power because I want the night to end yet. I've come to enjoy being with her too much. "I can't give up my cave," deprived soul, the way she fills me up feels too good to give up just yet.

"Fine," I grumble as I hold my arm out. She hooks hers through mine again, and we head toward the entryway. "I suppose I could test out my I have baking abilities."

"Truth be told," she whispers conspiratorially, "I'm not that good at baking, but it's chocolate so it's edible."

e is just "I'm adventurous, so let's do it."

We make our way up to Anna's apartment, and I try to ignore the way my giggling feeling that this is wrong. Normally when I come to a woman's Uber apartment after a night of drinking, there's really only one thing I'm thinking about... and that's sex.

into the I'm not thinking that now. I swear I'm not.

id arms I might think of Anna in a lot of inappropriate ways—like how

enjoy being around her or how she's about the prettiest woman I've
I try to see, but not once have I ever let my thoughts go toward sex.

Dad. And now I'm thinking about sex with her.

as I'm Fuck.

uptown As Anna's unlocking the door, major doubts overwhelm me. "Yo
what... I think maybe I'll just order that Uber."

"Oh, quit being a baby," she says with a laugh as she pushes the
na. She opens. "I swear my pie won't poison you."

on hers She moves into her living room before disappearing into the kitchen
helpless but to follow her inside because fuck if I want the night to be

out her "Do you want whipped cream on your pie?" Anna calls just
around the corner.

ere it's She's already got the pie in front of her, a can of spray whipped cream
her hand, and she's pulling a knife out of the drawer. She ditches her

I take mine off, tossing it on top of hers where she'd thrown it over a
tly two chairs.

"Sure," I reply, moving to the fridge to grab some water.

over her "There's beer in there if you want," she remarks.

of the "I think I'm done with beer tonight." I chuckle, nabbing two bottles
of water.

"God, me too." Anna groans. "I've already got a headache starting
I don't I let the door swing shut, putting a bottle of water on the counter

To my her. "Drink all that water, then one more bottle before you go to sleep.
t.

"Yes, Dad," she drawls, shooting me an eye roll.

h mine I open my own water, watching as she takes the remaining piece
ut your and cuts it in two. She slides the slices onto two plates, then picks up

of whipped cream. After giving it a few hard shakes, she aims it at the
great at slice. I'll never know if the can itself was defective or maybe it just

buildup of air, but the minute she presses her index finger on the nozzle
creamy foam shoots out everywhere, but it mostly covers my entire arm

at little "Holy shit," Anna exclaims with a choked laugh, setting the can
oman's and wiping at my arm with her hand. "I'm so sorry."

hinking "No, you're not," I grumble affectionately, grabbing a dish towel from
counter.

Anna continues to laugh as I wipe the whipped cream off my
much shirt. "No, I'm not sorry at all."

ve ever She looks from my arm up to me, smiling in amusement at happiness. Without a doubt, she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. I'm mesmerized as she lifts her hand and touches a finger to the side of my neck. "Bit of cream there."

u know I have an insane, irrational thought she might take that little smudge of barely noticeable dairy on her finger and place it to her tongue, licking it with relish. I immediately feel like a douche for even thinking that, but she does nothing more than take the towel from my hand to clean her finger.

n. I am There will come a time where I'll think back on this moment and wonder if perhaps I've gone a little crazy from my time in captivity, but more as it seems to move on its own accord, snatching Anna's. With startled eyes she gazes at me, but I'm heartened not to see any fear.

ream in Just curiosity.

coat, so My heart is hammering inside my chest. It's not a new feeling, as I've experienced plenty in Syria. When the bullets started flying, when I was tortured, when I was thrown into the hole. All fear based.

It's fear now I feel as I stare down at this woman who has come to mean so much to me in such a short time, and I can't even begin to understand what I'm doing right now.

"I want something," I say while keeping my eyes locked onto hers. Anna's head tilts... a silent *what?*

before My mind spins, races... searches for the answer. It's not fair for me to want anything from her, yet my mouth is forming the words before I can stop myself. "A kiss."

of pie Her eyes flare with surprise. "Oh," she murmurs.

the can "Tell me to get out of your apartment," I demand, a little too harsh. I'm trying to make her see reason where I can't seem to.

t had a Fuck me to high heaven, but she steps in a bit closer to me and shakes her head. "I won't do that."

n. "Tell me what I want is stupid." This time, it sounds like I'm begging.

n down "Never," she promises in the barest of whispers.

rom the "Tell me it's wrong." I dip my head, my gaze falling to her. "Please push me away and tell me it's wrong."

Instead, Anna goes to her tiptoes, bringing her mouth right to mine. Clutching my hand hard, not touching me anywhere else, she presses her lips to mine. Suddenly, I know my life will never be the same.

id silly Everything around us just disappears... her kitchen, the pie, the world. There's only Anna, the sweet smell of her shampoo, and the sound of myon her breath. Her mouth is a thief, stealing the breath from my lungs. I never knew something could feel so good and hurt so much at the same time. I reach for her neck of "I have to go," I mutter, pulling sharply away from her. Spinning around, I tug my coat and head for the door.

it Anna "Wait," Anna exclaims, and I can hear her rushing after me. "Please don't go off. go."

wonder I grab the door, start to pull it open, but then I realize I owe her more than my handthis.

es, she When I spin back around, she's standing right in front of me, a shocked expression on her face. Look at that... I've already hurt her from the first second kiss.

I'd felt "This is wrong," I say. "Me... you... I'm sorry."

l, when Her hand is on my arm, insistently pulling at me so I'll face her. I don't do so with a heavy heart, prepared to tell her that I don't deserve any of this.

o mean Instead, there's no speaking because her mouth is back on mine. She says, "I don't know what my face with her small hands, pressing her body against mine.

There was a time I wanted to die out there in that cold desert, but a moment like this in this moment is life. Warmth, electricity, joy, fulfillment. All from her lips. A mash of her lips against my mouth that speaks of everything she feels for me to this moment.

an stop Anna pulls away, her hands still remaining on my cheeks to look at me fiercely in the eyes. "There is nothing wrong with this."

I don't respond.

hly, but "Nothing," she snarls before letting her hands fall away. She takes a measured step back. "But we're both drunk, and I'll be damned if I'm not making her to let that be blamed."

"Anna," I start to say, but I quickly shut my mouth. I have no clue what I'm fucking say.

"Goodnight, Malik," she says, leaning past me to open the door. With a sigh, I shrug my jacket on and step out into the hallway. I feel like I've ruined everything, so I lift my gaze to take her in for what may be the last time.

her lips Anna smiles, moves to the threshold, and reaches for my hands. Her fingers are warm as she wraps them around mine, giving a slight squeeze.

right of expect you to kiss me again when we're sober. Then you and I can
he beer whether it's right or wrong."

s, and I I blink in shock, her words penetrating and causing my head to swi
e time. Then her hand is gone, and she shuts the door in my face.

g, I nab I have no clue what in the hell just happened.

se don't

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id. Her
eeze. "I

expect you to kiss me again when we're sober. Then you and I can debate whether it's right or wrong."

I blink in shock, her words penetrating and causing my head to swim.

Then her hand is gone, and she shuts the door in my face.

I have no clue what in the hell just happened.

CHAPTER 14

Anna

NIBBLING ON THE end of my pen—which is a nasty habit, by the way—at my computer screen and try to become inspired by the most current Kynan has put me in charge of. It’s nothing groundbreaking, a completely what would be expected of the administrative assistant to the in charge of this company.

And yet, it seems just a little too mundane for me.

Or maybe, that’s not even it.

Maybe it’s because I’m completely distracted by that kiss Malik shared three days ago.

Or maybe... it’s because I’m distracted by the fact the kiss was a and now Malik is completely avoiding me. Which would ordinarily be difficult for him to do since he’s been riding a desk since his return puts him in the same vicinity as me, but he somehow talked Kynan into letting him go with Ladd to New York to prepare for an upcoming security job escorting a foreign dignitary visiting New York City around next week. After scouting out the venues where the VIP will be present, they’ll develop a security plan with that information.

I’ve tried to call him. He doesn’t answer, and he hasn’t called me back.

I tried to text him. He responded, but feigned he was too busy to talk. He’d “get up with me” when he returned to Pittsburgh.

I’d think my feelings would be hurt, but they’re not. If there’s one thing that rang true the other night, it’s Malik is completely conflicted about his feelings. I can’t hold that against him. He and I are complicated as hell. The amount of baggage each of us is carrying on this journey is incredibly heavy. I’m not stupid... I know how treacherous this could become for us but it’s something we need to talk about.

I can’t do that if he’s avoiding me.

Setting my pen on the desk, I get out of my chair and stretch my

take a walk around my small office, trying to get focused, and look through the glass wall—across the open space of the second floor at the floating staircase to the offices across the way.

I see Corinne sitting in her office, typing on her laptop.

Haven't talked to her in a while. Maybe I'll take a little break to over to say hello. Just a friendly thing.

Nodding hello at several coworkers as I wind my way through—I stare desks, I saunter over to Corinne's office and give a light tap on her project door. When she lifts her gaze, I'm given a welcoming smile.

nd it's "Hey," she says warmly. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

he man I step inside, then settle into one of her guest chairs. She shifts her chair my way, uncrossing and recrossing her legs.

"Just thought I'd stop in to say hello," I reply vaguely. "Haven't seen in a while. How are you?"

k and I "I'm good," she replies with a bob of her head. "Had a Thanksgiving back home in Atlanta. How are you?"

mazing For a second, I consider giving the obligatory "all is good on my rily be reply, but then think better of it. Part of Corinne's job is to keep the J employees mentally healthy, so I should take advantage of it.

1 and it "I have a bit of a problem." I hesitate in case she needs to tell an into isn't a good time and I need to schedule an appointment, but she just security month. alert and interested, so I jump at the opportunity to spill my guts. ' work up there's something romantic happening between Malik and me, but not acting weird about it. He has misgivings, and so do I, but then again, ack. don't. I mean... it's complicated, right? And his issues aren't the s lk. Said mine, but we've been through an event that's sort of bonded us in a w now he's just wiggled out and not speaking to me, and I'd really ie thing explore that kiss and perhaps—"

out his "Whoa, wait," Corinne cuts in over my rambling. "There was a kis

ell. The "A short one," I reply, nodding. "But it was so good. Impactful

heavy. totally freaked him out. Now he's avoiding me."

oth, but "Okay," Corinne says, popping out of her chair. She moves to t and shuts it, then takes the other guest chair beside me. "I have about

hour until my next appointment. Back up and start from the beginning.

back. I I take a deep breath, then spill all about what's happened between and me over the last few weeks since he returned. She listens p

look out without interrupting.

and past When I finish, I add, "I can't explain it, but we have a bond. It's more than friendship... deeper. And there's obviously attraction, but I think I'm a bit afraid to take it farther."

mosey "Put Malik aside," Corinne says bluntly. "Because you truly don't know what he's feeling, so you can't speak for him. Tell me what *you* want. I want to know what *you* feel."

opened That sets me back on my heels a bit. I've been so concerned about Malik that I haven't even considered that Malik is taking everything I hadn't bothered to assess my own thoughts on the matter. I mean... I generally know what I feel, but is it healthy?

in office I take another cleansing breath so I can focus. "Okay... I feel sorry for Malik. A lot of things, actually. Empathy for what he's been through. Respect for the same thing. We both lost something in Syria, so we have a bond because of it. While I'm not sure exactly of the why of it, I can't deny that the bond is incredibly deep. Almost metaphysical. Additionally, I'm attracted to him as a woman is attracted to a man, in a way that has nothing to do with anything that happened in Syria. But I feel guilty about it, because my husband died only six months ago, which makes me feel shallow and disloyal. It makes me think I should just take the easy way out by marrying him. It's nothing but a friendship with Malik, but it's hard when I know he is also attracted to me in the same way. Plus... add that he has some misgivings. I think doubts, same as I do. Is this even a place we should consider going?"

now he's Corinne nods thoughtfully, seeming to consider my words. "It is a bit complicated. I really you right now. Malik, too. You've both experienced trauma and grief, and you're still processing those emotions. Ideally, it's not the best time to act on those types of feelings, which can get garbled up with the other emotions."

like to An overwhelming sensation of disappointment hits me, and I don't want to gaze down to my lap.

s?" "I can see it bothers you," Corinne murmurs. "Which is certainly understandable, but I said 'ideally' it's not the best time to act on those types of feelings. Doesn't mean it's a hard-and-fast rule."

he door I jerk my head up. "So I should go for it? Or at least confront the possibility of a relationship with Malik?"

"I didn't say that," she replies carefully. "It just means there are no guarantees with Malik. But there are perils you need to be aware of. You also need to be patient and understanding that starting a relationship with Malik, given what you've been through, is a long process."

have been through, could potentially be difficult to navigate.”

What she says makes sense, but it doesn’t address my most p
nk he’s concern. I can hear the pleading in my tone when I ask, “But is it *wro*

I being disloyal to Jimmy by feeling attraction to Malik?”

’t know “Did Jimmy ask you to never get married or be happy again if he
t. Whatshe counters.

“We never talked about it,” I admit.

ut how “Well, do you think he’d want you to stay single forever—to stay
ghts onhim?” she presses.

The answer comes to me immediately. “No. He’d want me to be
nothing no matter what that happiness looked like.”

rough. “There you go,” she says, waving a hand. “If Malik makes you h
have a and Jimmy would have wanted that for you no matter what—it seems
tell you can’t be wrong.”

to him Seems fairly straightforward. I sink back into the chair, mulling
lo without I quickly realize that’s only half the formula. “Still doesn’t mean I
use my okay with any of this.”

ow and “That’s something you’ll only figure out by talking about it with
tainingshe replies with a pointed look.

at least I sigh. “If he would quit avoiding me, I would. It’s hard to talk
rings or when he’s jetting off to New York.”

Grinning, Corinne rises from her chair. “He’s back.”

a lot on “What?” I exclaim, popping up.

ief, and “I was upstairs about an hour ago, and he was just getting back.
o act on was going to grab a workout before hopping in the shower.”

I pivot to stare at the floating staircase that leads upward. If he’s
rop my the gym, I could potentially corner him... force him to discuss this with

“Be prepared,” Corinne warns. I turn to give her my attention, the
telling. the nape of my neck rising at the tone of her voice. “He may not be
eelings. get past his concerns the way you have. If not, you need to be accep
that.”

ont the I swallow hard past the lump of foreboding clogging my
“Understood.”

o rules. I’d never do anything to make this harder on Malik. But I don’t w
ave into ignore this, either. Better to rip the bandage off, then staunch the
ou two blood thereafter.

“Thanks, Corinne,” I say, moving toward the door. “I think I’ll go see if I can have a talk with him now.”

“Good luck,” she replies.

died?”



THE FOURTH-FLOOR GYM has been a haven for me over the last several years. I’ve always been into working out, even as early as high school when I played volleyball and ran track. My dedication to fitness is how I knew I was a good soldier, and why I wasn’t intimidated by joining the Army. Jameson gym is how I got the baby weight off after Avery was born. I still use the facilities whenever I get the chance. For the most part, my workouts have to be done at home because of Avery, but whenever I have extra time, I can be found at the gym—either running on a treadmill or strength training with weights.

The facility is huge, taking up half the fourth floor, and it has a conceivable piece of equipment anyone could ever want, including a court basketball area. It’s why I don’t see Malik immediately when I visit. It’s midafternoon and fairly deserted, since most people prefer early morning or after work to hit the gym.

Finally hearing the clank of metal from where the power rack is located, I head that way. I have to wind through a few rows of stationary bikes, stair climbers, and treadmills before I see him doing chest presses. He’s flat on his back, pumping heavy stacks of plates. Not wanting to disturb his concentration, I move in a bit closer, but I remain out of periphery. When he’s finished and has the barbell racked, he sits on the bench, straddling it.

Malik doesn’t see me right away. Instead, he twists to the left to grab a towel. I take a moment to appreciate the unfettered view of his body. I’m not ashamed in the least to admit I find attractive. He’s wearing a pair of low-hanging gym shorts. He’s lean, which is an improvement over emaciated. The muscles of his bare chest are starting to build up, and there’s beautiful definition in his shoulders and biceps. There’s a sheen of sweat over his body, but he only uses the towel to mop his face.

When it falls away, he sees me, and his entire body goes still.

I close the distance between us. The closer I get, the more alarmed

o up to expression becomes. I guess he knows I'm here to discuss what happens in my apartment the other night.

Malik rises from the bench, dropping the towel. I come to a stop a few feet away from him. "Hey."

"Hey," he replies hesitantly.

"You're back."

nonths. "Just a few hours ago," he says, then lamely adds, "I was going to see you—"
where I see you—

v I'd be I hold my hand up to stop him because his intentions, or lack thereof, are unimportant to me. I'd thought to come in here and demand we sit down, and I have a meaningful discussion about what's going on between us.

art, my But, to be honest, everything in my gut straight up to my heart is telling me that talking might not be the right course right now. We're in a room doing seemingly alone since I didn't spot anyone else—and Malik is half-naked and looking incredibly hot.

s every Sometimes... words can be overrated.

a half- I step into him, my hands settling on his damp chest. The muscle walk in, my fingers leap, and a low rumble emits from within him. Slowly, I do a morning gaze up until my eyes lock on his, which are darkened, confused, and feral.

cks are Purposefully, I slide my hands up.

itionary Over his collarbones, then along the sides of his neck.

es. Fingertips touching the damp ends of his hair, thumbs along his jawline, my gaze narrows on his mouth, and there's no way he can mistake my intentions.

of his I pull him down to me... or attempt to since he resists.

s up to Letting my eyes drift up, I feel my heart squeeze when I see the light on his face. Never have I seen someone want something so much, but a clear refusal to go there is obvious.

grab a Stroking my thumbs along his stubble, I murmur, "Trust me, Malik."
, which Immediately, I feel the tension in his neck release as he does exactly what I request.

o again, He trusts me.

s a thin I rise onto my tiptoes, exert the tiniest amount of pressure with my hand, and draw Malik's mouth down to mine.

ned his At first touch—his lips against mine—I know within my heart of mind that there is nothing wrong with this. It's an exploratory meeting of our lips.

ened insoft and hesitant.

Hopeful.

Malik's breath stutters... a shaky exhale into my mouth.

The last bit of control he's giving up.

His arms come up, knocking mine out of the way, then it's his hand
my face.

Holding me in place as his head tilts and he deepens the kiss. I feel
the way down to my soul. Now, I can do nothing but grip onto his shoulder,
and hang on for the ride, my life suddenly turned into a roller coaster
down to emotion.

Then, a noise penetrates through the fog of lust... voices.

Two men, laughing about something, near the front of the gym.

Malik and I spring apart from each other as if we'd been shocked
and current. When I glance over my shoulder, I see Saint and Cruce walking
with gym bags in their hands. They don't see us as they head toward
basketball court.

I turn back to Malik, dismayed to see a thin veil of unease creep
across his expression. How he can have doubts after that kiss is beyond me...

I guess now is the time to actually use my words.

Well, not "now". We have work to finish out for the day.

Reaching out, I grab his hand and give it a quick squeeze. "Will
you come over for dinner tonight so we can talk? I think it would help."

"Help what?" he asks... his voice cracking.

"You to be okay with this," I reply gently with another squeeze
of his hand. "I want you to know I'm okay with this. I want you to be, too.
We have something, Malik, but we need to talk, okay?"

He merely gives me a nod with so much emotion written all over his face.
Fear, doubt and yet... there's one thing I decide I'll hold on to... *hope*.
"

As I

hands,

of hearts

mouths,

soft and hesitant.

Hopeful.

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The last bit of control he's giving up.

His arms come up, knocking mine out of the way, then it's his hands on my face.

Holding me in place as his head tilts and he deepens the kiss. I feel it all the way down to my soul. Now, I can do nothing but grip onto his shoulders and hang on for the ride, my life suddenly turned into a roller coaster of emotion.

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CHAPTER 15

Malik

I AM NOT an indecisive man, yet I've vacillated on whether to go to apartment tonight a good twenty times. I feel like I have solid reasons why I should stay away, but fuck if it isn't that kiss that has me s outside her door right now.

But not just the physicality of the kiss. That's not it.

I've kissed a lot of women in my life. From the playground when five to the last woman I was with just two nights before I had shipped Syria. I've kissed them in a lot of different places. Romantic kisses on drenched street to making a woman come with the power of my between her legs. I've tasted it all with my mouth, yet what we share gym today—just fucking mere hours ago—tipped my world sideways.

Scared the shit out of me, actually.

Anna almost brought me to my knees with that soft but insistent c and I fear what else she might force me to do because I want to f mouth on mine again.

I remember my mother and I having a conversation many years ag I was fourteen. Admittedly, I was a mama's boy, and I had experien first broken heart. While I loved my father dearly, I could have never to him for solace and advice the way I could her.

My mother, Marilyn, is a speaking coach and has a way with v hadn't cried over the breakup of my very first love, but it didn't m heart wasn't shredded.

I remember her saying, "Malik... take stock of how you feel rig Remember the pain and the misery of it all. Never forget how badly y in this moment, for, one day, it will seem silly. There will come a da you meet a woman who will make you feel such amazing things that y wonder how you could ever be feeling this badly right now."

She was talking about the proverbial soul mate people of r

persuasions believe in. And back then, listening to her talk, she made me believe in them, too.

But then I grew up. And in all the women I had dated or been with, I never met one who made my first heartbreak seem silly. It doesn't matter how obsessed about that heartbreak. Quite the contrary.

I think it goes more to the power of feeling, and I've never met someone who could evoke such a visceral response, pleasant or awful, good or bad.

Anna's Until Anna.

As long as to standing While I knew I genuinely liked her—as a coworker, friend, companion—I never could have guessed how deeply she'd possibly touch me.

To most, I bet it would seem a no-brainer that given the force of my feelings, I'd show up for dinner and be happy for the invitation.

When I was taking advantage of her? Is she truly ready for this, regardless of the risk of taking a rain- But no one can understand the level of doubt I have within myself. How confident she portrays?

My tongue Most of all, can I let her walk this path with me—the man responsible for her husband lying cold in a grave?

I start to turn away from the door, but, to my shock, it swings open and she stands there, appearing beyond beautiful. She changed out of the dress she wears to work, now worn to work. Now, she has on a pair of flowing pants with a long-sleeved sweater that hangs off one shoulder. Thick, fuzzy socks adorn her feet. Her hair is piled messily on top of her head, and she's holding a beer.

So when I noticed my door turned you in with a beer. "I heard you out here pacing," she says with a soft smile. "Watched my door through the peephole for a bit—saw your indecision. Figured I'd try to turn you in with a beer."

Christ, that's fucking cute.

Words. I can't say "Okay, yes," I admit as I take the beer from her before entering my apartment. "I'm all up in my head."

"Figured," she replies pertly as she heads into the kitchen. I smell the scent of sauce and garlic as I follow along behind.

You feel "Where's Avery?" I ask.

Why when they will "Sleeping. Which, if you know anything about babies at all, you know they sleep a lot. And eat. And poop."

"But they're damn cute," I point out, taking a sip of my beer.

Romantic Laughing, she glances over her shoulder. "So very cute. She's always sleeping three-to-five-hour stretches at a time now, which definitely

ade mewith my own beauty sleep.”

There’s a pot of boiling water on the stove, already boiling with, I’dspaghetti noodles, and she gives it a stir. Beside it, another pot bubbling mean la tangy-smelling red sauce. The light on in the oven showcases a garlic bread, and my stomach growls with anticipation.

Someone “That had to have been hard.” The soft tone of my voice has had. coming to me in question. “A baby all on your own. Up every few hours care for her with no help.”

triot—I Anna smiles, giving a slight shrug. “While I would love to be those martyr mothers who will one day hang it over Avery’s head how of theseI sacrificed for her, I have to tell you... she’s a pretty easy baby. Y cries when she’s hungry, so yes, I have to wake up and feed her. But s f. Am Iright back to sleep, and she’s really a happy kid. Doesn’t cry a lot of the re self-if she’s hungry or she has poop in her diaper.”

It makes me glad to hear it, so I can’t help but say, “I’ve heard who ishave a really easy baby, it means they’ll be hellions in their teens.”

“God, I hope not.” When Anna laughs, I join her. A reminder 1. Annaincredibly easy it is to fall into comfortable conversation with her, des is she’dfact we have some heavy things hanging over us. That says something, sleeved Or maybe it doesn’t since Anna sets down the wooden spoon she et. Herstirring the pasta with, then turns the stove off. She shifts to face me on hips, and I’m immediately on guard by her uneasy expression.

ied you “What’s wrong?” I ask.

to lure She glances away, face turning red as she shakes her head. “It’s stu “I promise it’s not,” I assure her, making a firm mental note not to no matter what she says.

ing the Anna’s head tips up, and she looks miserable. “It’s just... I can’t thinking about the kiss, okay? It almost knocked me over—”

tomato “Which one?” I interrupt. “There were two instances.”

“The one in the gym today, but the first one was awesome, too.”

“Got it,” I reply with a nod, up to speed on things.

know... “I know we need to talk about it... about us. About whatever the hell is—about what it means and how to be comfortable with it. Which is thought making you dinner and having a rational discussion would actuallyway to go. So, I made spaghetti, which seemed like a good idea because helpseasy and not over-involved, if you know what I mean. Plus, I didn’

have time to go shopping after work, and I had these ingredients—”
around “Anna,” I interrupt again, since she’s rambling from nerves and r
ng withto get to the point.

pan of She takes a deep breath, blushing so deeply I bet her cheeks are v
the touch. “It’s just... I want you to kiss me again. I want that more
er eyeswant to talk to you right now, and I’m afraid if we talk first while eat
ours tokiss won’t be that great because it will be too planned. Plus, I cook wi
of garlic, so now I’m afraid it’s going to be a horrible kiss after the sp
one ofbut I want it to be perfect, you know?”

ν much Despite all my misgivings about this—no matter the guilt I ca
’es, sheregardless of the fact I don’t believe I deserve her—it’s in this m
he goeslistening to her insecurities about a garlicky kiss, that I fall just a littl
ier thanlove with Anna Tate.

It’s also when I decide we can talk later, because another kiss real
ien youwait... for her own peace of mind.

Setting my beer bottle down, I reach out and circle an arm arou
of howwaist. It lets me easily reel her into me. Her eyes flash with surprise, jo
pite theheat. Each emotion hits me square in the gut, especially knowing I ca
. that many in such a short time.

’d been My other hand goes to her cheek, holding it there before slid
, handsfingers to the back of her head. I dip my head, locking my eyes to he
stares back with such trust I know I have to do right by her.

“We’ll eat and talk later, okay?”

ipid.” She nods, licks her lower lip, and exhales as her hands come to my
o laugh, “Okay.”

My mouth descends on hers. No one can call this kiss sweet or
r’t stopThere’s no hesitation, no wondering if I’m doing the right thing.

I claim Anna’s mouth as my very own, not willing to share it with
soul. As good as she tastes, I’m pretty sure I’m never going to give
Her moan is deep and guttural, rumbling across my tongue, and m
instantly reacts.

eck this Skin tightening, blood hammering through my veins, and
s why Ithickening. I haven’t had a woman in almost six goddamn months,
be thesure any I’ve ever had before this kiss with Anna amounted to much.

use it’s Anna’s arms go around my neck as she presses her body tight
t reallymine. I should be embarrassed she can feel my need for her pressed i

belly, but I'm not. Just as I hope she's not embarrassed by the way she refusing from the sensation, biting down hard on my lower lip.

I spin her away from the stove, back her into the wall, and kiss her warm to deeply. She lifts a leg, wrapping it around mine in an effort to get her than I pelvises in better alignment.

ing, the Our kiss goes from tentative to lightening in about five seconds with a lot. Already, I think I might die if I can't feel more of her. Sink deep into her, her.

Too soon, Malik.

rry and It is with a massive amount of self-control and effort I pull away from moment, kiss before it can go any farther. Anna and I are just about a few hours a bit in from shedding clothes. As much as I want to be with her in that way, when there are still so many things between us.

ly can't I kiss her one more time, full and deep, but then gently withdraw to examine her. Her eyes flutter open, and she looks about as dazed as I find her. "Too fast?" she murmurs.

oy, then "Too fast," I agree. "We have to talk."

to evoke Anna exhales as I take a step away from her. She brushes a lock of hair from her face, giving me a tremulous smile. "We have to be the only thing in my world attracted to each other who need to have a serious talk before we do anything about it."

She's probably right about that. Most people who decide to have sex with each other operate on instinct, let their feelings alone drive them forward to a conclusion. Anna and I have too much at stake, though. While I describe myself as such, we're both vulnerable and perhaps susceptible to the influence we hold over each other.

We have to go into this with open eyes and clear consciences.

another "But that kiss was really good, right?" she asks impishly.

her up. "Really fucking good," I reply. I know whatever comes next will likely be better.

If we can agree on how to get there, or if we should even go there at all, I cock my head. "Let's eat dinner," Anna suggests. "And after, we can talk. After that, yet not who knows?"

It's a solid plan, and I nod my assent. What I have to decide is how to get into it. I want to go with this woman? She's not anything I was searching for. I can't imagine ever wanting anyone else.

growls In order to even consider it as a possibility, I'll have to do the or
I'm not sure I have the guts to do.

er more Tell her the truth about Jimmy's death.

get our It makes me want to vomit.

ds flat.off my chest to let the chips fall where they may.

inside of Anna takes my hand, then leads me to the couch in the living room
releases her hold just as we reach it, pointing at one end. After I sink down
it, Anna takes a position on the opposite end, a single cushion forming
from the distance between us. She curls her legs up, her back to the armrest
heartbeats hands folded in her lap. Her expression is open and trusting.

I can't Having such faith in me that I don't deserve makes my stomach twist
a hard knot.

so I can I start off carefully, acknowledging what has developed between us
eel. and I... we have a connection that is hard to explain."

Anna nods, presenting me with a reassuring smile.

"And I'm grateful for it," I say truthfully. "It wasn't something
of hair expecting or looking for. Serendipity, I guess, but it makes me happy
people make me happy."

fore we "I feel the same," she murmurs.

I don't even bother with a steadying breath. If I take the time to
ex with might chicken out on what really needs to be said, so I just go ahead
ard to spit out there in all its blunt cruelty. "It's my fault Jimmy and Sal died."

hate to It's as if I physically struck Anna when she reels backward, her
e to the coming to cover her heart. "That's not true," she whispers.

"It is." My gaze stays locked on her, refusing to look away even though
fucking hurts to see the horror on her face.

"I don't believe it," she mutters, her gaze sliding off to the side
be even becomes lost in thought. "Someone would have told me."

"It's probably—"

at all. She cuts me off, head whipping back my way as she angrily de
er that, "Explain."

So I do.

v far do I tell her how the events unfolded with the Brits being fired upon
or, yet I mistaken conclusion that Jimmy and Sal were in a somewhat safe place
behind me since the enemy fire seemed to only be coming from our

ie thing Without any gory details, I explain what happened to Jimmy and Sal
was raining down protective fire for the British Special Forces. That t
for Jimmy and Sal getting ambushed laid squarely on my shoulders
was in an equally good position to protect them instead.

o get it “I shouldn’t have assumed the only danger was in front of us,” I
the disgust in myself evident by my tone. “I should have kept a better
m. Shethem. I should have chosen to protect *them*.”

own on The only sense I get from her that any of this is penetrating is a
ing thenarrowing of her eyes on me. As if she’s having an epiphany. I’d
and herhaving this talk now was the right thing to do. There’s no way we cou
gone down the path we were destined for without giving her the privi
/ist intobeing fully informed of my perfidy.

Anna lets out a shaky breath. Dipping her head, she stares at he
s. “Youwhere they are folded in her lap. Her voice quavers a bit. “Thank
sharing that with me.”

“You don’t know how sorry I am. How I’d give anything to cha
; I wascircumstances.”

ly. You She refuses to look at me, but her tone is gentle... so Anna-like.
imagine, and I think I’ve told you before that I’d never wish anyt
change for you so they could change for me. You’ve given me a lot t
do it, Iabout, though.”

and lay It’s the long silence that lets me know the conversation is over. I
nothing more to say to me, and I’m not sure if I should continue to ap
r handsI’d do it as penance if I thought it would help, but the distinct impress
getting from Anna is she would like to not have to suffer in my presen
ough itnow. I’ve given her far too much to think about, and in no way can sh
with me sitting next to her.

as she The man who killed her husband.

Quietly, I get up from the couch and head to the door. I don’t exp
to stop me or even call out a farewell. I get what I deserve as I l
mands.nothing from her at all.

and my
osition
r front.

Without any gory details, I explain what happened to Jimmy and Sal while I was raining down protective fire for the British Special Forces. That the fault for Jimmy and Sal getting ambushed laid squarely on my shoulders since I was in an equally good position to protect them instead.

“I shouldn’t have assumed the only danger was in front of us,” I clarify, the disgust in myself evident by my tone. “I should have kept a better eye on them. I should have chosen to protect *them*.”

The only sense I get from her that any of this is penetrating is a subtle narrowing of her eyes on me. As if she’s having an epiphany. I’d known having this talk now was the right thing to do. There’s no way we could have gone down the path we were destined for without giving her the privilege of being fully informed of my perfidy.

Anna lets out a shaky breath. Dipping her head, she stares at her hands where they are folded in her lap. Her voice quavers a bit. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“You don’t know how sorry I am. How I’d give anything to change the circumstances.”

She refuses to look at me, but her tone is gentle... so Anna-like. “I can imagine, and I think I’ve told you before that I’d never wish anything to change for you so they could change for me. You’ve given me a lot to think about, though.”

It’s the long silence that lets me know the conversation is over. She has nothing more to say to me, and I’m not sure if I should continue to apologize. I’d do it as penance if I thought it would help, but the distinct impression I’m getting from Anna is she would like to not have to suffer in my presence right now. I’ve given her far too much to think about, and in no way can she do so with me sitting next to her.

The man who killed her husband.

Quietly, I get up from the couch and head to the door. I don’t expect her to stop me or even call out a farewell. I get what I deserve as I leave... nothing from her at all.

CHAPTER 16

Anna

MY MOM DOES me a solid by meeting me close to Jameson so we can drop off Avery, saving me a good half hour on my commute to work. I wake up in early because I have important things to do.

Not anything to do with my actual work duties for Kynan and Jameson, but important all the same.

I didn't get a wink of sleep last night. Malik's confession left me with my thoughts running in a hundred different directions as I tried to make sense of his bombshell. After hours of tossing and turning—punctuated by thoughts of Avery and getting her back to sleep—I finally realized there could be no clarity until I knew the absolute truth.

The only thing I knew for sure is I only had one side of the story—Malik's—and there's always more than one side. Or maybe I'm so determined to disbelieve Malik that I want to believe he's wrong.

But how could he be?

He was there.

And why would he tell me something so awful? Just to sabotage a potential relationship? That doesn't make sense, because even though I'm a little wary, the kisses we've shared revealed the utter truth: we have the potential for something amazing. Besides that, Malik's not the type to come up with a whopper lie just to end things. He has integrity. He would tell me the truth, which means what he told me last night was complete truth.

It just doesn't mean it's the complete one.

I'm not the first to arrive—that's always Kynan. I see him in his office as I walk by. He looks up, I wave, and he lifts his chin in response. He's the type of boss who expects me—his assistant—to get him coffee, but I see him look out through his door, “Need me to get you anything?”

“I'm good,” he replies with a smile. “You're in early.”

“Yeah,” I reply distractedly, taking a moment to stop and lean back to give him my attention. “Got a lot going on.”

“Then don’t let me keep you.” The smirk I get has me moving away from his office and straight to mine, bypassing the tiny kitchenette one door down that has a small coffee pot set up and a vending machine. I don’t drink more than one cup of coffee a day, and I’ve already had my allotment.

No need to flip on the light in my office as I enter. They’re on motion sensors. The overhead sputters to life, burning brightly. I set my purse on my desk, shrug out of my winter coat, and plop into my chair to look at my computer. Drumming my fingers impatiently on my desk, I wait for the login screen.

“Morning, Anna,” I hear from my doorway.

I glance up to see Saint walking by as he throws an arm up in greeting. He’s gone before I can even respond, so I call after him, “Morning.”

My gaze moves back to the monitor, and I see the login fields. I scroll to input my credentials, then I’m inside the secure Jameson database.

There’s a slight flush of guilt creeping up the nape of my neck as I scroll to the mission files we keep. A digital retelling of every case every agent has ever worked on, from something as simple as protective services to infiltrating a terrorist regime. This information is a collation of all data which will eventually be input into Dozer’s new AI database, along with the physical files I’m currently still working through. Because it’s my job to move this information, Kynan has given me full access.

Even though I have every right to be here, it’s the purpose that I’m feeling slight regret. I’m not here to do the assignments I’ve been assigned with. Instead, I’m snooping for information about Malik. It feels like a violation of trust, yet I’m not deterred. I need to know what happened that night Jimmy died.

Even if Malik is right, I need to decide how my heart feels about the possibility I could hate him?

My chest feels like it’s about to implode from the possibility, and I’m not the only one who’s prickled at my eyes.

I find the folder I’m searching for, an innocuous-looking thing labeled as *JtTaskSyr 6.12.19*. I’ve never wanted to enter this realm, preferring to accept the brief overview of what happened. Kynan provided mi

ck a bit Jimmy's, Malik's, and Sal's families with explanations. They were
over since some of it was classified months ago when it first happened
ay from was at the direction of the federal government. But it's all de-classified
or down At least, I think it is.

ik more Regardless, this file holds the answers I need.

I double click on it, bracing for the deluge of information that
motionspread before me, only to get a pop-up window that says, "Access Den
e down For a minute, I don't believe what I'm seeing, not really understand
boot upI click on the "OK" button, which makes the window dis
for theImmediately, I double click on the folder again, only to get the same
blocking me.

"What the hell?" I mutter, leaning back in my chair and staring bla
reeting.the screen.

I've been denied access to the folder that holds what I now firmly
rambleto be horrible secrets about my husband's death.

A surge of adrenaline propels me out of my chair with such force
I moverolls back, hitting the low bookcase behind me. I charge around my de
ent hereof my office, and then cut left. More people have arrived, some of th
rices toin the open area filled with agents logging onto their computers or s
reports,around talking before the workday starts. Ignoring them all, I march ri
with theKynan's office.

job to He glances up with a lazy smile that immediately slides right off v
sees me. I can only envision the image I present as I can feel my
has mewired like it's a bomb set to go off. My hands are curled into fists, ar
taskedfeel the heat of color from high emotion in my cheeks.

like a I shut the door, not able to slam it because it's on heavy hinges. N
ied thatsnicks shut, I demand, "I need to know what happened the night Jim
killed."

it. Is it Kynan frowns, the slight veil of confusion only pissing me off.

"Did Malik get Jimmy and Sal killed?" I snap.

nd tears "I don't believe so," he replies, but it's a vague answer and not mo
at all. Pointing at one of his guest chairs, Kynan barks a command, "Si

simply A tiny part of me wants to defy him, to put on a show that I'm n
ring totrifled with right now. It's only due to the fact my legs feel like jell
ne andplop my butt down, but I remain perched on the edge, poised and r
spring up should the moment demand such an action.

glossed “What would you like to know?” he asks calmly, leaning back in his office chair and folding his hands over his stomach.

I now. “What part of my question was confusing?” I retort sarcastically. “I want to know if Malik is the reason I don’t have a husband.”

“And I repeat,” he says slowly, enunciating every syllable. “I will believe so.”

“That’s your opinion,” I point out with a huff of frustration. “I’m not arguing it’s a fact.”

“Why?”

I blink, affronted he’d ask such a thing. “Why? Because Jimmy doesn’t have a husband. That’s why.”

“No, why do you suddenly want to know?” he clarifies. “It’s been a while since his death. Why now?”

“Because I just tried to access the folder, and I was denied.”

Kynan lifts his hands, spreading them in question. “Still, it doesn’t make sense that it’s why you want to know. Why did you come in this morning, hell-lunch, only to ask, ‘outfinding answers?’”

“What does it matter?” I cry.

“It matters because that information is still classified,” he replies. “There’s an active government investigation ongoing into this matter. There are hostages still missing—the ones who were originally going to be rescued. There are dead ISIL members our team left behind when rescuing the body is. That file’s going to remain closed for months and months to come.”

That takes me aback. “I didn’t know that.”

Kynan’s silent as he regards me. Finally, he leans forward in his chair, rolling it slightly to his desk. He folds his arms across the top, then looks toward me. “Why is it important for you to know now?”

And it hits me. The information is private. Technically, he’s not allowed to share more with me than what he already has. But if I provide him with a compelling reason, he might just bend the rules a bit so I can have some fucking peace. He just wants to know what the source of my angst is.

“I sigh deeply, my lungs decompressing harshly. Leaning back in my chair, I admit, “Malik and I have become close.”

“I’ve noticed,” he replies.

That has me sitting straight up again. “What? How?”

Kynan shakes his head. “Nothing overt. I just can see the way you

... in his interact with each other—how a bond has developed. I just assumed
start of a good friendship.”

“I want Taking a minute to consider the repercussions of full honesty, I c
have nothing to lose.

I don’t More importantly, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I’m confident
I feel about Malik... or at least I was until last night.

‘I want “It’s more than friendship.” Kynan’s eyebrows shoot high. Immed
start shaking my head in a backtracking kind of way. “It hasn’t progre
anything... um... intimate. But it could. I mean... I want it to... or I d
was mylast night. Malik came over for dinner, and well... we kissed. But he :
needed to talk before it went anywhere, and...”

months My words trail off as I slide my gaze down to my lap. As hot as I
have answers just ten seconds ago, it seems abhorrent to me to repeat
claim that he was responsible for Jimmy’s death.

tell me “What did Malik tell you?”

cent on It’s with great effort I raise my head to meet Kynan’s eyes. “He t
that he should have protected Jimmy and Sal, who were behind him.
assumed they were safe, so he concentrated on shooting at the g
calmly,overwhelming the British soldiers who were pinned down in the op
: Theresa said he was responsible for Jimmy and Sal’s deaths.”

escued. My last words come out on a sob, which has Kynan rising from h
Malik, and hurrying my way. He sits in the chair next to me, angling his bi
toward me. My hands are immediately drawn into his. He squeezes th
silent request for my attention.

s chair, I had not even realized my focus had drifted away again, but it’s r
n leans of avoiding the truth that he’s clearly going to lay at my feet right now

“Here’s what I will tell you,” Kynan says very deliberately. “Our
allowed which had joined up with British and Australian forces—was ambus
t with an overwhelming number of what we believe were members of the
e some State. It was a fast and furious firefight. There was very little cover t

From all the interviews we conducted, bullets were flying everywhere
in my I’m getting ready to tell you is going to discount Malik’s rendition of e
I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you want to know what happened, so I’m going to tell ;
version from every other person who escaped from there, including o
rou two Tank Richardson, because I believe Malik has his own perception of e

it's the For the first time since our talk last night, I feel a glimmer of hope.
is all but insisting Malik's story is part fact and part personal opinio
decide Itelling me to discount it right now.

"Malik had a decision to make," Kynan continues. "He was con
in howwith identifiable enemy targets to his front. There were team member
yes, the British soldiers were every bit as much a part of our team as
ately, Iand Sal were—under heavy fire. Jimmy and Sal were also providin
essed tofor those men. They were doing the exact same thing Malik was doin
lid untilthat was based on their intensive training—which was to confront the
said wewho could be seen. They had neither the time nor the means to figur
anyone was behind them. We're talking about only a matter of sec
was tomake that decision. In my opinion—which, remember, I was a membe
Malik'sBritish Royal Marines—they all made the right call."

"Malik did the right thing?" I ask, trying to summarize the
information into a singular idea.

told me Kynan nods. "I believe he did. Tank believes he did. The British
But heForces members Malik saved believes he did. It's only Malik who f
gunmenshould have been watching Jimmy and Sal's backs at the exact mor
oen. Heenemy snuck up behind them."

"Then why would he say he was responsible for Jimmy and Sal dy
is chair Kynan gives my hands a squeeze, and I see the sorrow etched c
ig bodyface. "It's called survivor's guilt, Anna. We all wish we could do r
em in athose instances."

"Have you told him that?" I demand.
ny way Kynan nods. "In our debriefing. And while I'm not privy t
. conversations, I believe Malik should be working through those issu
team—Corinne. It's why I insisted he counsel with her."

shed by "Oh," I reply numbly, trying to process everything he's telling me
Islamicoverwhelming that I can't quite accept the little kernel of happiness
to take.inside me at the knowledge Malik has no culpability in Jimmy's death.

2. What But then I instantly question myself. Should I be more outraged
vents."hadn't protected Jimmy? I mean, he was my husband. Shouldn't I be

Malik to the same cruel and unreasonable standard he seems to be
you theupon himself?

our own Immediately and unequivocally, the answer is clear.

vents." No, I can't do that.

Kynan Kynan has told me that numerous witnesses besides Malik have seen him. He's the same thing. He not only wasn't responsible for Jimmy and Sal in those brutal moments they were killed, but it also seems as if it were only because he wasn't killed, too. It was awful he was captured, but at least he eventually came home alive.

Jimmy On top of that, it kills me to know that not only has Malik been trying to cover himself, he's also probably never even accepted the gratitude and praise—probably came his way from saving the British guys.

enemy I bolt up from the chair, pulling my hands away from Kynan. "I'll be out if I go."

ends to I have to find Malik to make him believe it's not his fault. I'm sure I can get them to make him see that. He has nothing to be ashamed of, and I'm simply going to have to insist he quit blaming himself because no one else is doing that. I'll take the load off his shoulders. I make it to the door before Kynan's soft issuance of my name starts ringing in my tracks. "Anna."

Special Turning hesitantly, I glance over my shoulder.

feels he "Be careful," he murmurs.

ment the "I'll be careful with him," I promise.

Kynan shakes his head. "No. Be careful with yourself. Your hearing?" vulnerable as Malik's right now. Both of you are in dangerous territory. I'm worried over his. It's foreboding, the expression on his face, yet it would never more in back down. "It's not about us right now," I tell him with a confidence that surprises my chin. "This is strictly about Malik learning to accept what happened."

o their Kynan inclines his head, accepting my zeal to make this right. "Please, let's visit to Corinne first. She might have some advice that could be helpful."

"Good idea," I reply with a smile. "Thanks."

. It's so "Sure thing," he says softly.

flaring I start for the door again, but then another thought strikes me. I whirl around. "Um... just to be clear... is there any kind of company I can bring with me? I mean, I don't want to bring Malik about... um..."

holding "Fraternization?" he teases.

placing "Not sure that's the word I would use, but yes... can we have a Jameson date?"

"I'm sure Rachel and Bodie would tell you it's not only possible, but also quite rewarding," he replies with a chuckle.

all said That heartens me. I give him one more smile before dashing out
n those office and making a beeline right to Corinne's.

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That heartens me. I give him one more smile before dashing out of his office and making a beeline right to Corinne's.

CHAPTER 17

Malik

I SHOVE A new magazine into the Desert Eagle .44 Magnum, extend my hand and sight the target, which is thirty feet away. Squeezing off eight fluid rounds, I relish the feel of having a gun back in my hand. It's beyond cool. J has its own indoor firing range on the third floor of the building.

The walls and floors are reinforced concrete—not only for protection, but also for noise cancellation so it doesn't impinge on the floors.

After I flip the button to bring the target back, I pull my ear protectors. Not bad. Cluster shot of four to the chest, four to the head.

Surprising, since my hands haven't felt very steady today.

I'd like to say what has my nerves all jammed up is from finally telling Anna the truth last night, but it was really the last kiss we'd shared. When I knew the bond we had definitely transcended more than friendship and it was firmly in the category of sexual attraction.

Of course, it's made worse by the fact I've told her the truth, and there's a divide between us I doubt can ever be bridged, not only from a way for us to perhaps explore this attraction, but from even being able to have a friendship. And as much as I want Anna—which I can not admit—her friendship is what's really important.

"Not bad," I hear from behind me. I pivot around to find Kynan standing there.

"Ready to get back in the field," I assure him.

"Hmm," is all he replies with.

"My weight is almost back to normal, and I'm close to hitting my PRs in the gym."

Kynan considers this with a nod. "Physically, it does seem you're ready to

It left the unspoken floating out there—outside of the physical, ready?

“Sessions with Corinne have been good,” I say with a firm lift chin. “I’ve not held a single thing back from her. She’ll corroborate that.”

“Talked about what happened with Jimmy and Sal?” he asks, narrowing slightly.

“I have,” I affirm.

“It’s more than just talking about what happened,” he says with a look. “It’s about really understanding what happened.”

My chest burns as I reply slowly, “I understand.”

“Do you?” he challenges me.

“Of course I do.”

Kynan moves in a step closer. “Then why is it still holding you back?”

My frown is instantaneous and deep. “What do you mean? Since I’ve been back, my work has been impeccable.”

“I’m not talking about your work,” Kynan replies with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I’m talking about you still believing deep in here—” he points to the center of my chest, “—that you did something wrong. That you somehow let Jimmy and Sal killed.”

“I thought my conversations with Corinne were confidential,” I say, feeling immensely betrayed.

“They are,” Kynan replies with a soft voice. “But Anna came to me just a bit ago, wanting to know about what happened to Jimmy. It was so now you told her that it was your fault.”

Well, shit. That means he must have some inkling that there’s something going on between Anna and me, and I sure as shit don’t want to get involved in any trouble. “We’re just friends—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kynan cuts me off. “Could see that with my own eyes. It’s clearly there’s the potential for more—”

“I would never take advantage of her,” I assure him quickly.

At this, Kynan jerks his chin in, blinking in confusion. “I don’t know what that is.”

“Whatever you think this is,” I rush on to take Anna out of the line of sight. “she has nothing to do with it. It’s all on me.”

Kynan appears slightly amused. He actually leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. “You don’t say?”

“That’s right. We’re friends, and we sort of share a bond because of Syria. I’m attracted to her, and I kissed her. She never once—”

of my “Let me stop you right there, buddy,” Kynan drawls, holding up
at.” “I think it’s precious you’re trying to protect Anna and all, but she’s a
s, eyes and she has already laid it all out to me. I know this is very much a tv
street.”

“I’ll tender my resignation,” I offer quickly, now thinking he
pointed because a relationship between Anna and me is prohibited. “A
blameless.”

“Jesus Christ,” Kynan growls, pushing off the wall and getting
face. “I don’t care if you and Anna date each other. What I do care a
you telling her things that aren’t truthful.”

“k?” “Excuse me?” I ask, tilting my head.

ce I’ve “You have it in your head that you did something wrong dur
ambush, but you didn’t. I get you’ve talked to Corinne and told he
re wave happened, and I get you’ve told the same to Anna. But when you ar
taps the words—stating it’s your fault they died—well, that’s just not the tru
ow got protected the men to your front who were under a direct threat. They
much a part of your team as Jimmy and Sal were. If I’d been in your
I snarl, would have done the same thing. Anyone else from Jameson who’d
your shoes would have done the same thing, too. So quit fucking t
see me Jimmy and Sal are dead because of you. It’s simply not true. And if
appears one more word about it, I’m going to fucking fire you. Accept we l
good men, but *it was not your fault*. Move on from it. Move forwa
nothing Anna. But figure this shit out, Malik, or else you’re never getting o
t her induty. Are we clear?”

I’m frozen in shock over his words. Clearly, this has hit a nerv
yes, but Kynan, and I’m a bit confused as to why. Is my perception that far off?

“But they were unprotected,” I hesitantly point out.

“As were you,” he says, this time in a gentler tone. “As were th
’t think The Aussies. Tank Richardson. Everyone was unprotected, and you l
the biggest and most immediate threat. Your actions saved countless
of fire, fucking sucks we lost two others, but we cannot expect things to w
perfectly in these scenarios. If anything, I could go one further a
e wall, Jimmy and Sal should have been doing recon on their rear to ass
danger—or one should have been watching their fronts while th
ause of watched their backs—but I’m not going there because they are dead. I
not, though. Get the blame out of your head, so you can start living life

a hand. okay?"

big girl "Um... okay," I reply hesitantly, but I'm not even sure what that no-way Just because Kynan tells me not to feel guilty doesn't mean it will ju

Any soldier who comes back alive from conflict always carries some g
's herethose who died.

anna is "I'm leaving this up to Corinne to work out with you further,"

continues. I can't help my grimace. "I get you're hearing what I'm
in myright now, but I need to believe that you believe you did nothing wr
about isneed her assurances on that."

"Roger," I mutter, displeased I'm physically ready to do fieldwo
I'm being held back instead.

ing the "And for God's sake," Kynan says in exasperation. "Work this :
er whatwith Anna. That woman likes you, and she's been through enough
e usingDon't draw it out for her. If you're on board, make your move. If not,
th. Yougo."

were as "Got it." The words are thick and stick to my tongue, because the
shoes, Iof moving on without her causes my mouth to go dry.

been in "Good man," Kynan replies, clapping me on the shoulder. He pi
hinkinghis heel and leaves.

f I hear

ost two

rd with

ff desk

I STAY ON the firing range for another twenty minutes, not needing to i
my aim but mainly to think about what Kynan said. Logically, I can
what he's saying about the circumstances. Frankly, I'll get to where h
me to be the more I'm able to analyze it in normal circumstances.

But becoming friends with Anna and falling for her aren't
circumstances. I'm beginning to think maybe I'm using what happ
Syria as a means to keep Anna at arm's length because I'm scared
deep things have gotten so quickly.

Of course, that's all supposition, which could probably be sorted o
a session or two with Corinne.

I head to my apartment on the fourth floor, intent on grabbing
before hitting work. While Kynan may not have me in the field, he
has me working with Ladd on planning out an operation for the Nev
job I had gone with him to scope out. I need to figure out a time to ta
e again,

Anna, though, because he's right about one thing... I can't leave her home means. The only problem is that I still don't know what to do about her. My heart and body are saying go for it. Take Kynan's words as solid proof. *It's not my fault her husband died*—and let's see where it goes. But she keeps fucking things up by throwing insecurity and doubts into the mix. Kynan reminding me this is all too fucking complicated and we both could be saying getting hurt.

I'm ready to risk a little pain on my part, but it would kill me if Anna somehow, even if inadvertently, do I really want to draw her into a fucked-up complicated mess of a life right now?

I resolve to find her later to set up a time we can talk about this shit out more.

Pulling my keys out of my pocket, I unlock the front door and let her in. I drop the keys on the counter as I cut right into the kitchen and reach for the refrigerator door. At the same time, I catch movement from the corner of my eye just inside my bedroom. I'm stunned to see Anna there.

She's turned halfway, but her head is cocked as she stares at my bed. "Anna?" I ask, trying to get her full attention.

There's a guilty flush on her face as she slowly turns my way. "Hello. Ignoring the fridge, I move through the kitchen into my bedroom. What are you doing in here? For that matter... *how* did you get in here?"

Not that I care she's in here. She's welcome in my place and whether I'm here or not. But my front door was locked.

She flushes again, a deep red staining her cheeks as she holds up the keys she has in her hands. "I have the master keys to the apartment. Kynan's assistant, I'm often the one who has to let people in and do normal things that need to be fixed or updated."

"That explains the how," I reply, tilting my head. "But why?"

Glancing back at the bed, she blurts out, "I want to have sex with you. I'm so stunned I actually retreat two steps away from her. "What?"

Anna shakes her head, her beautiful hair flying. "No, wait. That's not how it came out right. I mean... yes, I want to have sex with you. But first, I told Kynan about what happened in Syria, and he explained how it all happened. And what you did wasn't wrong. It was very right. You saved lives. Jimmy and Sal were horrible casualties of war, but it wasn't you. And well... I just... I want you, Malik. All of you, so I stupidly thought

anging. would come here and talk about it. But then I thought... no, he'll be st
I know and stoic and will probably still blame himself, then he'll take the high
truth—and refuse me. So, then I thought some more and figured... I'll just
y head in bed. Let nature take its course. I'd convince you in all the good way
ie fold, don't blame you. So I got this idea... I'd come here, get naked, and v
end up you in your bed. Except... well..."

"You changed your mind?" I guess.

f I hurt "Not about the sex part," she replies confidently, which makes m
nto my spin. "But about the *getting naked and waiting in bed* part. You see...
a bit of a problem and it's a little embarrassing."

is some I'm so confused right now. I have no idea where she's going with
this. Still, I feel I must say, "You can tell me anything. You should
myself embarrassed."

ach for "Yes, well... I'm going to have to tell you this. Because you see
rner of still breastfeeding. And, well, that produces certain things with my
that might become awkward."

d. I just stare, my face feeling as blank as the inside of my head, be
don't know what she means.

y." "I leak," she mutters, averting her eyes to the side.

"What "You leak?" I repeat, still thick-headed and not understanding.

"I leak milk," she clarifies. "I mean, not always. But I might. An
y time, happen if I get, you know... excited. That's not to say I have had se
having Avery, because I haven't. But I've... you know... taken
a set of myself, and well, my breasts sometimes participate, and there's no gu
nts. As it will happen, but it could. Well, probably not right now as I just pum
out for fifteen minutes ago, so it's probably okay."

Well, fuck. Jesus Christ. Now I understand. As does my dick,
chooses this moment to get caught up in the story. It starts to thicke
ou." thought of Anna pleasuring herself.

"So... anyway," she continues with this very long, drawn-o
t didn't admittedly weirdly captivating story. "I realized I couldn't get naked a
I talked for you in bed, because it would be best to keep a bra on with some p
actually the inside, but I'm wearing a bra and set of panties that are in no way
I saved all. So that idea was ruined—"

ir fault. "Anna, shut up," I mutter, then grab her to me with one hand beh
ought in neck.

tubborn Fuck, we have so much to talk about, but the fact she came here
er roadsex with me and has no qualms telling me about masturbating—and
get himget that image out of my mind now—means I have to just kiss her.

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Fuck, we have so much to talk about, but the fact she came here to have sex with me and has no qualms telling me about masturbating—and I can't get that image out of my mind now—means I have to just kiss her.

We can talk later.

CHAPTER 18

Anna

WHILE THE THREE kisses we had shared before were definitely of an intimate nature, I now know those were still born mostly of friendship and a commonality we shared.

This kiss is completely different, and I feel it down to my toes. The way Malik moves his mouth over mine is possessive, domineering, and demanding. Whatever walls that had been erected due to the circumstances in Syria have been ripped down.

At least for now.

I'm not prepared for how swiftly my body reacts to Malik, nor do I understand how needy I feel. Granted, it's been a long time since I've had sex. Also, I've had a baby and my body is different. Pretty sure my hormones are different, too.

Mostly, I think the deep connection I've formed with Malik has heightened my senses until I'm hyper-aware of every touch and sensation between us. In a matter of moments—with just his mouth on mine—my body is stirred within me a deep, almost painful clutch of need. The apex between my legs throbs. While I've always enjoyed long, slow foreplay and lovemaking, I have the scandalous urge to pull Malik down to the bed and beg him to fuck me.

It almost feels as if my own life depends on him bringing his body to mine—for us to fuse together whatever this is we have in the making.

My fingertips dig into the waistband of his jeans, and I pull hard to drag him closer. A wanton nudge to tell him I need something more.

There's no give in his body, though, as Malik seems merely content to kiss me until I'm seeing stars. A tiny growl wells in my chest. I drop my head, pressing it to the swell in his pants.

Malik hisses. While he doesn't remove my hand from his body, he does pull it with his own and peers down. "If you do that, I won't be stopping."

“I don’t want you to stop,” I exclaim, flexing my fingers so that around his hard length pressing against the denim.

A sexy sound rumbles at the base of Malik’s throat, and he briefly shifts his eyes to perhaps either savor my touch or try to garner the strength to rebuff me.

When those beautiful hazel eyes open and pin on me, I can feel the conflict. “We haven’t talked about what this means,” he says softly.

intimate A cop out.

unique I don’t give him an inch of wiggle room. “There’s nothing to talk about here, Malik. I want you. You want me. I don’t believe you did anything the way to precipitate Jimmy’s death. No one does, except maybe you. You’re going to have to get past it, but I’m not going to ever allow you to let it get between us.”

Malik’s head tips slightly, his brow furrowing. “Anna.”

I shake my head, giving him a fierce glare. “Don’t *Anna* me. I know what I want, Malik. I get you’re troubled, but you take your shot now or you’ve had to leave me go. You either fuck me... or get your hands off me and let me walk out the door.”

It was around the time I told him to take his “shot” now I noticed that his expression changed. His chin lifted slightly, and his eyes darkened. When he told him to “fuck me,” his upper lip actually curled slightly. By the time he’s made it clear if he didn’t fuck me, I was out of here, I could tell he’d already decided to make a stand as well.

in my This is confirmed when he lunges and picks me up bodily from the floor and his hands under my ass as he mutters, “Christ, you’re bossy.”

I don’t even get a chance to laugh or exclaim in triumph before he falls bodily into me. His back is on mine again. A few moments of sweet bliss as his tongue slips past my lips makes me go dizzy, then I’m dizzier yet as we go falling into the bed almost perfectly in the middle but at an angle.

Gone is the restraint he had been showing. The minute he falls onto me underneath him, he starts moving his hands everywhere. To my face, he puts a hand, they hold me in place so he can plunder my mouth, to my collarbone, he puts a hand down over my chest to an aching breast he hesitantly squeezes. Despite the fact that my shirt, bra, and leak pads I have in place, I’m so sensitive there I can’t help but moan from the touch.

“You okay?” he asks, but I like that he does so without removing his hands from me.

ey curlhand.

“Good,” I manage to gasp out.

Malik rolls us to our sides, somehow managing to continue to length to while working his hands underneath my shirt where he struggles for a few seconds with the clasp of my bra. When it pops open, he so see his manages to pull my shirt and bra off in one easy glide of material o head and arms.

The minute my breasts are bare, I have a moment of self-conscious about, when a chill of air hits them. I can feel my nipples pucker before hing to warm hand comes down on one just as his mouth takes mine again going to breasts feel heavy and aching. Thank God I had the foresight to put between hopefully won't have any embarrassing leaks.

Not that he gives me much time to worry about such things because hands are once again roaming over my body. Fingers ghosting gentle over my ribs and across my stomach, then back around to my ass to spread you le hand out there and pull me closer into him. The hard press of his erect talk out my hip has me realizing I need to be doing a little more touching myself.

I make a frenzied grab at his t-shirt, lifting it at the hem. Malik breached his kiss just long enough to get it over his head. I toss it aside but before When I descend on me again, I put both my palms to his chest and hold him back time I can look at him.

I'd also I have no clue what his body was like before he left for Syria or where was rescued. But it's utterly beautiful right now, with taut skin over the floor, muscles. His heartbeat feels so strong and true under my palm. It's believe he's ever had such struggles.

Leaning forward, I inhale his scent—a woody body-wash smell—slipping pressing a kiss to his breastbone. Malik's hand comes behind my head to his he holds me there.

But only briefly before his fingers slip into my hair, curl inward, and a has mea chunk. He pulls my head back, stares down fiercely, and notes, “I think where need the rest of our clothes off.”

The corners of my mouth curve upward, and I nod. “That we do.”

My hands go to the fly of his jeans while his dive down to the belt help but my dress pants. At the same time, I manage to kick off my heels. By the

Malik toes his shoes off, I have his zipper all the way down and my ring his plunging inside.

And oh my God... I'd forgotten the simple eroticism of taking a cock in hand and feeling the hard length covered by satin skin, knowing the type of devastation its beauty could wreak upon me. Malik is a beauty only everywhere, including the—what I'm guessing—is eight inches I'm holding in the palm of my hand. When I give him a light stroke, Malik gives me my rapture.

"Do that again, Anna," he orders.

I do, but I stroke him harder this time. Up and down, feeling the steel move through my grip and forgetting about my need to have him between my legs. Right now, I consider pushing him onto his back and using my hands and mouth to make *him* feel good.

Except he's gone, pulling away from me to stand at the end of the bed. He's stunning, all lean physique with his huge erection jutting out. He grabs at my pants, pulling them, along with my panties, roughly down his big legs.

In the bright light of day in the middle of Malik's bed, I'm completely naked. I have stretch marks and my belly is softer than it used to be, and he's gazing upon me now, I've never felt more beautiful in my life. He moves closer, his knees pressing into the side of the bed, and he reaches for my waist, setting a hand down to rest near my ribs. Lowering his head, he hovers right before mine, he whispers, "There are a million things I want to do to you right now."

A spasm hits me low in my gut over the lust rumbling through his veins. Then I feel his hand between my legs. I spread them without thought.

Malik glides his lips over mine. I open for him, taking his tongue into my mouth at the same time as the pad of his finger rubs along my sex.

He growls, speaking into my mouth. "You're so wet, Anna."

"For you," I remind him.

When a long finger slides into me, I gasp, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. Realizing Malik is no longer kissing me, I let them flutter open to find his body lifted a bit, his head angled so he can see between my legs.

So he can watch his finger gliding in and out of me.

He's absolutely enthralled with the view, and I'm entranced by what he does to me. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen in my life. With his hand, he rubs the tip of his finger over my clit, my entire body jerks, my nerve endings seeming to sizzle from the contact.

man's Slowly, his gaze comes to mine and he gives me a lopsided smile. "I really need to be inside you."

big man "I'd like that sooner rather than later," I admit before I start clapping my hands, holding him to come into me.

moans in "We'll play and explore later, okay?"

I nod, liking that idea very much.

Gently, Malik removes his hand from in between my legs, then scoops up the silk and floor for his jeans. I watch as he nabs his wallet and pulls out a condom. He gives me a look. "It's so sexy when he tears it open with his teeth, then fluidly rolls it out using his thickness. My heart hammers hard in my chest as his eyes meet mine while he crawls onto the bed and moves over my body.

he bed. Lowering himself onto me, he places his hands back on my face. He looks handsome once again, the starting point from which all of our desires seem to flow from. My legs shift, spreading wider, and he settles in between them.

One of his hands goes down between us, and he fists himself. But completely the tip to my entrance, he presses in just the tiniest bit.

but the "Oh, wow..." I moan, feeling my body expand to accommodate. There's a slight sting from his size and perhaps my inactivity, but the pleasure he bends to have him fill me outweighs any discomfort that it might cause. I press my face to his hands to his ass, trying to get him to take me in a hard thrust, but he won't do it. He works himself into me. A little bit in, a slight withdrawal, then a press a little farther.

words, "It's making me crazy. I raise my knees, tilting my hips, then just as "Malik... please."

into my He silences me with his mouth. When he's no more than halfway inside me, he moves his hand to my clit. I see a burst of stars behind my eyes at the first hard press to that sensitive knot. Coupled with the thickness filling me, I know I'm going to completely lose it soon.

back of Biting down hard on my lower lip, I let the sensations of what he's doing only overwhelm me. I revel in the fact it's Malik who is between my legs. He's gentle and slow while at the same time working hard to manipulate my body, giving him what it wants.

catching My orgasm hits out of nowhere. First, it's only a slight tension between my lower belly before bursting into an outward explosion of release between my legs. It hits so suddenly I scream out in surprise as my hips buck and I shout Malik's name tearing out of my throat.

nile. “I “Fuck yes,” he praises as pleasure rumbles through me. With one thrust, Malik seats himself all the way inside my body.

wing at Pelvis to pelvis, he stares down while I pant against the orgasmic pleasure rippling through me. He just watches—and I’m sure feels—w like for two people to share pleasure. I bring a shaky palm to the side face and he leans into it, nuzzles me with closed eyes, then begins to ans theinside me.

n. Sheer bliss overtakes me as his cock powers in and out, long a it downthrusts now that he knows I’ve fully accommodated him. I can fe at mineeverywhere, but mostly so deep inside of me that I know the pla touching will only ever be his from now on.

to kiss “God, you feel so good, Anna,” Malik mumbles, moving his moutl o comethroat. He has a palm back on my breast. As he pinches my nipple, slight wetness there. I can’t even be embarrassed about it. Malik ringingseem to notice as he starts to pound between my legs.

As much as I love the gentleness and restraint he’s shown during c te him.time together—to make sure it’s good for me—it’s this strong man v need torisen from the ashes to claim my body as his own right now that i ess mypleasurable than anything I’ve ever felt before.

slowly “More,” I urge him, my hands returning to his ass.

is in just Malik growls in my ear, fucking me harder. I arch my neck, cl eyes, and hang on for this amazing, thrilling, and beautiful ride.

I beg, Slipping an arm under my leg, his elbow catching me behind m joint, Malik pulls my leg up and spreads me wider. Unbelievably, I r seateddeeper still, and it’s clear that no matter who I’d been with in life prior ny eyesman—husband or any other—I’ve never been fucked so thorough of himdeeply.

For a painful moment, I have a flash of guilt that I’d compared Ji s doingMalik, but I stuff it away for later analysis. They are two different m s beingI’ll never let one diminish the other.

dy into Malik is throwing himself into me. My legs are spread so wide the

When I open my eyes, I find him once again enchanted by the space b in mymy legs. His head is bent, eyes pinned on his thick cock claiming r een mywhen I dare let my gaze fall there, it’s too much for me to bear.

upward, A second orgasm curls inward. I hold on to it for a brief but b moment before casting it outward to share with Malik. Once again, n

ne hardbows and my nails dig hard into his ass. His eyes fly to mine, widening
realizes I'm coming again and it might just be too much for him.

rain of "Oh, fuck..." he groans, planting himself deep and bringing his
/hat it's down to mine. He does nothing but lightly rest it there, panting again
e of hisHis body jerks hard and he starts to groan, chanting, "Yes, yes, yes, y
o movehe unloads.

I move my hands to his back, feeling a ripple move up his spine
nd sureMalik collapses onto me. He's sweaty, his shaft still pulsing betwe
eel himlegs. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tightly to my body. W
ce he's both regain our senses, I hope he's not going to have any regrets about

I know I sure as hell won't.

h to my Malik rolls to his side, taking me with him. Placing a gentle kiss
I feel amouth, he smiles.

doesn't "Hi," I say, my belly fluttering because the intimacy of just lying
each other's arms feels as good as what we just did.

our first "Hey," he replies with a chuckle.

who has "You good?" I ask hesitantly.

is more The smile on his gorgeous face slides a little. "I'm going to have
No undoing what we just did, and I sure as fuck am not going backwa
that."

ose my "It was beyond stellar, right?" I ask, because I need the validation
to know I'm not making something of this connection we have that's
ly kneenot there.

ie goes "Far beyond stellar," he agrees, again putting his lips on me. This t
r to thisrests them on my forehead. When he pulls back, though, I note his exp
ly andis slightly guarded.

"What is it?"

nmmy to A tiny muscle in his jaw ticks as he peers past me to the window
en, andtell he's grappling with something.

When his gaze comes back to me, it's resolved. "I want to keep
y ache.secret."

etween "A secret?" I ask hesitantly.

ne, and "Kynan knows about us," he says. "He came and talked to me a
while I was in the firing range. Told me that you had told him wh
eautifulgoing on."

ly back "I'm sorry," I immediately apologize, but I'm also somewhat put

ing as he this. Is he ashamed of me?

He shakes his head, his palm coming to the center of my chest. “I mouth probably not saying this right. Kynan is cool with us seeing each other. I don’t want to be against me. think you’re amazing, and yes... I have my issues with what happened to you, but I’ll work through that. Kynan has pretty much demanded it.”

before “As have I,” I point out.

been my Malik smiles. “Yes. I hear you loud and clear. It’s just... there’s something about you. It’s bro code.”

this. “A bro code?” I mutter, completely confused.

“You don’t mess around with your friend’s woman. Your brother’s woman. Your teammate’s woman. It’s bro code.”

I stare blankly, the last flush of sweet intimacy fluttering inside me here indissipating as I struggle to understand what he’s saying.

“For example, if Cage stopped dating Jaime for whatever reason, and she was interested in Dozer and Dozer was interested in her, that’s a violation of bro code.”

Even if Cage and Jaime ended on good terms and had no qualms with each other, if the other dated, it’s a violation of bro code for Dozer to date her.”

rd after “I think I see what you’re saying.” I run my palm down his arm, my fingers with his. “And you think you’re violating bro code by being with her? I need me?”

simply “I know I am,” he replies firmly.

“But you’re willing to violate it?” I ask to be sure.

ime, he “Apparently,” he returns dryly. “And clearly, it’s complicated.”

ression “You know this is different, right? Jimmy is dead. I get what you’re saying about bro code because that could cause hurt feelings, but that’s not the case here.”

v. I can Malik doesn’t say anything, and I can see I’m not swaying him.

“I talked to Corinne about this a little bit,” I proceed. “I was having a lot of feelings of guilt... like I was betraying Jimmy. But she asked what I would want, and I know if he’s watching over me in the afterlife, he’d want me to be happy. He’d be sad if I didn’t move on. If I didn’t find happiness, he’d be sad. So I don’t see this as any type of violation.”

at was Malik sighs, pulling me in tight to him. My cheek goes to his collarbone, and I wrap my arms around his waist.

t off by “I don’t want anyone here thinking I’m taking advantage of you.”

murmurs. “That I’m moving in on territory where I don’t belong.”

No, I’m “They wouldn’t.”

other. I “They very well could,” he points out. “I’m just saying... maybe we could just take some time to ourselves for now. This is so complicated... both dealing with such deep emotions over everything we’ve lost, and deal with what we’re gaining. I just—”

My fingers move to cover his mouth, stopping him midsentence. I know there’s a lot of things he still has so many struggles to overcome, and he has already battled a few demons to even take this chance with me. I don’t want him to give up over any other anxieties right now.

So, I agree. “Just between you and me for now.”

“And Kynan,” he adds.

“And Corinne,” I point out.

Malik laughs, pressing his mouth to mine. “And probably my family, too.” My eyebrows shoot upward, and he grins before explaining. “I’m going to tell them about you. And I’m going to tell them about whom they’re coming next week because the Cold Fury has a game against the Pittsburgh Titans, so we thought it would be a good time for a family reunion, of sorts. They’re dying to see how I’m doing so they can assure themselves I’m not wallowing.”

“Oh,” I murmur in surprise. Frankly, a bit of happiness zings through me that he’s going to tell them about me. For all his hesitations, he’s showing some strong faith in us right now.

Or maybe it’s doubt he’s having and he needs their advice, which is why you’re here to tell them about me.

“I’d like you to meet them,” he says, his expression solemn.

“Oh,” I exclaim, my eyebrows shooting farther up my forehead.

“You don’t want to?” he asks, unsure of my reaction.

I give a tiny shake of my head, smiling. “No. I mean... yes. I’d like to meet them if you want me to.”

Malik responds by placing another kiss on me, this one deep and meaningful. “I’d like to see you again. I’d like to have sex again.”

Something stirs deep within me, and I wonder if it’s too late to get back together. “I’d like to see you again. I’d like to have sex again.”

This is answered when Malik pulls away with a sigh. “As much as I’d love to get lost inside you again, we probably should be getting down to work, huh?”

I blink, somewhat in surprise. I'd let the outside world just slip away, and I had completely forgotten about work. I'm sure Kybe wewondering where in the hell I am.

l, we're Grudgingly, I admit, "Yeah... we better get going."

how to "Can I come over tonight?" he asks.

"Absolutely," I say, beaming back.

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I blink, somewhat in surprise. I'd let the outside world just simply melt away, and I had completely forgotten about work. I'm sure Kynan is wondering where in the hell I am.

Grudgingly, I admit, "Yeah... we better get going."

"Can I come over tonight?" he asks.

"Absolutely," I say, beaming back.

CHAPTER 19

Malik

I'VE NEVER BEEN a heavy sleeper, and I actually date that back to my time in the Marine Corps where it was a trained skill. Much of my Special Operations training taught me how to fall asleep in the most inhospitable environments while easily coming awake at the slightest disturbance.

It's no wonder then that the minute Avery starts crying, I come in and wake up, as does Anna. I can feel her jerk in my arms, her head coming to rest on my pillow where she listens for a minute more.

When Avery cries again, Anna pulls away from me.

"She okay?" I ask.

Anna reaches back, presses a hand on my chest, and whispers, "She's hungry. Go back to sleep."

She slips away quickly and quietly through the dark without any help, finding her way from the pull-out couch we're sleeping on into the one bedroom she'd dedicated to her daughter's nursery.

I roll over on the thin mattress, coming to sit on the edge. The hinges creak with the movement, and I know my back will probably hurt tomorrow. I don't know how Anna handles sleeping on this piece of furniture. I have to sincerely admire her desire to be independent. She had told me last night over the dinner she had cooked for me—meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and corn—that her mom had wanted her to move in with her after Jimmy's death.

Anna had moved out until Avery's birth, mainly because she was having pregnancy-related issues due to the stress of it all. But within a month of Avery's arrival, Anna got this apartment and made a go of it on her own. It doesn't mean she doesn't receive help from her mom, because she does. But it makes her feel good about herself to be as independent as she can be. It's her way of showing Jimmy, wherever his soul may be, that she's okay.

I push up off the bed, wondering how badly the neighbors hated

the amazing and quite loud sex we'd had on it after she'd put Avery to sleep. I smile at the not-too-distant memory, because uncomfortable as it is, sex with Anna is on an almost divine level for me.

Reaching out blindly, I manage to grab my briefs from inside the previously discarded jeans. I pull them up my legs for the sake of modesty. Personally, I don't care about staying naked, but in deference to Anna, I cover up. After we'd had sex earlier, then cuddled and talked for days, she slid out of bed to use the restroom. When she'd returned, she'd put on a shirt and panties, as well as a bra. She'd explained it was just easier to deal with the bra especially, given her need for pads to combat the leaking.

I know I should be freaked out by that stuff, but I'm not. I have to constantly remind myself of the no-nonsense way in which Anna handles it. Frankly, it's damn sexy that she's venturing into a sexual relationship with me while dealing with these issues that aren't typical when two people start to get intimate with each other.

Maybe I'm just weird.

Padding toward the nursery, I manage to catch my toe on the metal pull-out. I stifle a curse and hobble toward the nursery, guided by the warm light of the lamp Anna had turned on.

I find Anna sitting in her rocker with Avery suckling at her breast. Done once before, I sit on the floor and lean against the dresser. I manage to sit quietly as she rocks, noting she hums a song to Avery while she nurses. My breasts are sore from her.

It's odd to me how beautiful I find this moment to be. Watching her feed her daughter—Jimmy's daughter. I've not given kids much thought regarding my future. I know I'll have them one day, but it's been neither Jimmy's burning desire nor an abhorrence. I just figured it will either happen or it won't.

It doesn't seem to matter to me that Anna has a child by another man, though. There's no jealousy or desire to have her all to myself. It's coming over tonight would partly be about Anna and me spending time together, developing this new path to our relationship and cementing our bonds—particularly sexually.

But I also know Avery is a part of Anna's everyday life. As it won't ever be a day I'm with her that I won't take a backseat to her needs, and I'm okay with that.

low to Furthermore, there's something about Anna being fully in her element with motherhood that is not only beautiful, but also comforting as well. I know I can handle anything, and her stability helps to anchor me, too.

side my Anna shifts Avery to her other breast. I'm fascinated as she helps Avery find the nipple and instinctively knows what to do. I imagine it wasn't easy at first, but Anna and Avery, she'd seem to be professionals now.

on a t- "Will that hold her through the rest of the night?" I ask in a low voice to sleep "Until the early morning hours," she replies softly, her smile gentle as she gazes at her little girl. "She usually gets up sometime between five and six, which is perfect as that gives me plenty of time to get ready for work." I admire which is perfect as that gives me plenty of time to get ready for work. I get her over to my mom's house.

ing with I shake my head, a little awestruck. "It's amazing how well you juggle with each child."

She waves me off. "Nah."

"Yeah," I say pointedly. "You're amazing."

l leg of Anna's gaze moves from Avery to me, her eyes sober. "You're amazing." I'm glad we're giving this a go.

"Me too," I assure her softly. Despite my fears, some lingering guilt, I'm glad, too. As I'd said, of course, waxing and waning guilt, I'm glad, too.

content "Well," Anna drawls, smiling down at Avery as she pulls her away from the feed. Anna deftly pulls her bra back into place. "I think the monkey is all done."

g Anna In the lamplight, I can see the baby yawn mightily. Anna pushes the baby into the rocker, so I do the same from my position on the floor. There's a part of me that feels like an outsider, yet another that wants to insinuate itself deeper into this family dynamic. I'm fascinated by Anna and Avery's relationship.

The way Anna nurtures her daughter and the way Avery depends upon her mother for everything.

I knew Anna moves to the dresser, which has a thickly cushioned pad covering it, a soft, pink material on top. "I'll just give her a quick diaper change, then we should fall right back asleep."

I've seen babies have their diapers changed before. In the Marine Corps, there had been buds who were married with kids. Growing up, my sister Avery's babysitter, so we sometimes had little humans running around our house. My older cousin, Kathy, started having kids as soon as she reached adulthood.

ment of and they were always around.

ow she And yet, I've never done the task myself.

As Anna lays Avery on the thick padding and starts to unzip the
position her onesie pajamas, I ask, "Can I try?"

actively Appearing startled, she regards me with round eyes.

ry both "Is that weird?" I ask. "Am I overstepping my bounds?"

"God, no," she exclaims with a laugh, shaking her head. "You just
ice. me by surprise. No offense to my stereotyping of you as a man, but
e as she think that's a natural curiosity most men want to fulfill."

nd six. Chuckling, I step in closer to her, shoulder to shoulder as we gaz
rk, then at Avery. "She's part of you. Of course, I'm curious."

I don't dare look over at Anna, but I can feel her body sag slightly
uggle it me, a gentle touch of her arm against mine that indicates my se
touches her.

Under her direction, I manage to pull the onesie off Avery,
thankfully sleepy with a full belly and not overly wriggly. Also, she
nazing sturdier at five months as compared to being a newborn, so I'm not a
breaking her.

doubts, Mostly thankful she's apparently only wet her diaper, so I don't
deal with a stink-filled pile of poop, because call me a sissy but I h
ay from desire to do that right now.

is little Anna gives step-by-step instructions, even guiding my hands to
little ankles to pull her bottom up to remove the soiled diaper. I'm av
ip from it, but I eventually accomplish the task. I don't secure the tabs tight
part of around her waist. The diaper is way too loose, so Anna has to fix it.
myself most part, though, I feel accomplished.

s bond. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" Anna asks.

on her "Ask me that next time when I change her poopy diaper," I reply
grimace.

ered in Anna picks her daughter up, brings her close to her face, and brus
hen she lips across Avery's fuzzy head. I step in close, peering over Anna's s
while wondering what the baby thinks of me staring at her. Probably
Corps, I as she only has eyes for her mom.

was a However, she gives another huge yawn, her tiny fists curling t
ise. My Anna whispers, "Sleepy girl."

lthood, I stay by the dresser as she moves back to the crib, bends, and ther

Avery on her back. There's no blanket in there—Anna having told me it could be a smothering hazard at this age—which is why she dresses front offleecy onesies and keeps the heat at a sufficient level in the apartment.

When Anna turns back to me, I hold my hand out to her. When she sits up, I lead her out of the nursery, whispering, “Let's get you back to sleep. It's going to be long before she's up again.”

Anna follows, her hand gripping mine tightly, but I falter when she says, “I don't—I'm not tired.”

When I start to turn to her, I'm met with her body and her mouth pressed against mine, her arms encircling around my neck and fisting into my hair. My body instantly responds, arms encircling her and meeting her kiss with hungry demand. Palm against palm, I draw her into me, knowing she can feel the evidence of my arousal. I have a feeling we're both going to be exhausted tomorrow, but I give a flying fuck. If I could just halt time and be like this with Anna forever, I'd give up any amount of sleep.

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CHAPTER 20

Anna

“I’M REALLY NOT feeling okay with this,” I say for what feels like the first time as Malik drives us to the restaurant to meet his family for dinner.

Well, part of his family. His mom and dad, as well as his sister and brother-in-law, flew in a day before the Cold Fury/Titans game. I’ll be meeting his brothers tomorrow.

“Relax,” Malik soothes, reaching across the console of his car and taking my hand in his. He looks over his shoulder into the backseat behind me with a smile. “Avery’s a good baby. It will be fine.”

“Yeah, but it’s a fancy restaurant. It’s just not appropriate for me to be bringing a baby there, not to mention meeting your family for the first time with her, and well... it’s just a bit out of the norm.”

I twist in my seat to see Avery’s baby carrier, which is faced away from me for safety reasons. She’s not making a peep, which means she’s peacefully asleep. Riding in a car is like sleep magic for her, and she often drifts off long after the car sets in motion.

“And what if she gets hungry?” I almost whine with worry.

“You pumped,” he says way too calmly and rationally. “You’ll have to bottle out to feed her. More likely, my mom will snatch her away from you on doing it. She’s a sucker for babies.”

I nibble at one of my nails, fretting. This just seems... wrong and complicated, and—

“Anna,” Malik says as we turn into the parking lot.

I shift toward him.

“My parents, sister, brother-in-law—they’re all going to adore Avery. They’re going to adore Avery, too. They’re going to understand the situation as a single mother, Avery is sometimes going to be with you when babysitting through.”

This is the reason for my current upset. My mom was going to wa

tonight, but said she's not feeling well and doesn't want to expose Avery to anything. I do have to wonder if that has anything to do with the fact I received some slight disapproval from her over the fact I'm dating Malik.

I told her about him this past weekend when I asked her to babysit Avery so we could go out to the movies on Saturday night. She wasn't shocked who I was going out with, but merely that I was going out at all.

Her words to me had been, "Isn't it a bit too soon?"

That was before she even asked who I was going on a date with.

When I told her about Malik—a man she hasn't met personally but knows some things about because of him being on the same mission as Jim. I'd been sure she's aware he'd been rescued—she got very quiet on me. It's what she does when she has reservations, but she knows she can't voice them because she lost sway with me long ago.

Regardless, I knew she was not overjoyed when I told her I was bringing Avery to his parents for dinner and asked if she could watch Avery. It didn't soften her up when I told her I'd love to bring Malik home for dinner this weekend to meet her and my stepdad.

Whatever her reasons for being bent out of shape, it culminated in her calling this afternoon saying she couldn't watch Avery. My initial thought was probably to back out of dinner, to which I called Malik and told him of my regrets. He refused to accept them, merely insisted we bring Avery along.

There are many things the man does to make me fall a little bit more in love with him after each event, but this was one that truly endeared him to me. I'd been pulling at me thinking it was a horrible idea, it charmed me to no end that he was so happy to introduce Avery to the most important people in his life as he introduced me. Moreover, I've come to learn a lot about his family because he seems to talk and talk about everything and anything. Deep in my heart, I know they're not going to be put out by me having a baby or by my bringing Avery to eat dinner with us.

"So why am I still so nervous?" I muse aloud, knowing there's a source of my stress that I probably can't blame on bringing Avery along.

Malik pulls into a parking spot, puts the car in park, and shuts the doors. He turns to face me, leaning in close. "Because you like me."

And when that happens, meeting the family is an important step. Or at least that's what I've heard.

I smirk. "Have you done this a lot?"

very to “Never,” he assures me. “Unless you count Melanie Farris in second grade. I invited her to the winter dance, and I thought she was the love of my life.”

I give an empathetic smile. “Sorry that didn’t work out for you.”

“Not me,” he says with a laugh, leaning in just the right amount. “This is working out well for me.”

And just like that... most of the nerves dissipate.

I get a little more gooey feeling when Malik curls his hand around my neck, holding me in place to level me with a serious look. “I’m glad to share you with my family. I hate not being able to shout all this to the world.”

“Bro code and all,” I say with a solemn nod.

He squeezes my neck. “Bro code and all,” he agrees quietly. “But I have to hold back with my family. They would never judge. Never wanting to go without anything that makes me happy. So, while we might not tread a little more cautiously around our work friends, I’m happy you and I can be together as a couple.”

“I’m glad, too,” I murmur. This time, I lean inward. My lips brush with his, and Malik sighs with contentment.

It was

perfect. He



There’s definitely surprise on everyone’s face when we walk into the restaurant with Malik holding Avery’s carrier. I didn’t argue when he took it out of the backseat after unlatching it and didn’t hand it to me. Instead, he merely looped his arm under the handle so it rested in the crook of his arm, then put his other hand to my lower back to escort us inside.

“Babysitter fell through,” is the first thing he said to his mom as he fell on the baby carrier.

Then Marilyn Fournier bent closer to look at Avery, her mouth curving into a delighted smile. Her eyes came to me as she said, “Oh, Anna. You’re beautiful.” Then she stuck her hand out, right over the carrier, and said, “Marilyn by the way.”

That broke the ice. I was introduced to his father, Laurence, his younger sister, Simone—who looked just like a female version of Malik with her hair and hazel eyes—and then her husband, Van Turner. He, ironically, was a former teammate of her brothers, Lucas and Max, but chose to

secondary somewhat early retirement from the Cold Fury to move to Vermont where they're both going to college. I found that to be a relief, walking away from a professional hockey career to go to school and to the love of his life.

to kiss When we're seated—the hostess placing one extra chair at our table where Malik put the carrier to sit between the two of us—I get immediately drawn into lively conversation with his family.

and my I had thought I might get bombarded with all kinds of personal questions about myself, but what I quickly find out is Malik has already told the world. “It's all kinds of details about me. They knew about me dropping out of college, going into the military, about my position at Jameson, and that I don't want to be a Pittsburgh native. They tease me that I'll be rooting for my local Pittsburgh Titans tomorrow at the hockey game, and promise not to have anything against me.”

're here And finally, I know he's said something to them about my ability to be a mother because Marilyn says, “It's just so admirable everything you're doing as a single mom, Anna.”

It overwhelms me, understanding that while Malik might not be able to share me with most of the world—he talks a lot about me to his family but I have no clue if that extends to all of his doubts and insecurities about a relationship with me, but I'll ask him about it when we're alone. I'm nervous to ask if he's told them everything we've recently overcome to be together. Ultimately, it's clear I have no reason to be nervous with these people. They accept me as I am.

elbow, It wasn't like this with Jimmy—meeting his family, I mean. He was so close to his parents or the extended family he left behind in rural Louisiana. He'd gone into the military at eighteen to escape a family riddled with alcoholism and poor choices. They didn't even come to our small wedding. Even with my middle-class suburban upbringing, the Fournier family dynamic is so much more unified than mine. With my dad dying and my mom remarrying, we were never a fully unified family, but there was still love for sure.

younger Still, not like what I see around the dinner table this evening. Like with dark Fournier often puts his arm around his wife's chair, stroking her shoulder as we talk. Marilyn gazes upon her children—Malik and Simone—with an unfettered pride and love. Both of the Fournier parents clearly adore

nt with new son-in-law, Van, bantering easily with him. When the conversation merits it, I'm drawn in, too, with lots of laughter and mirth.

be with "How's work going?" Laurence finally asks Malik after we're w our main courses.

ir table "Good," Malik replies, shooting a wary look at his mom before sa immediately hope to get back to fieldwork soon."

My gaze moves to Marilyn, who I note appears unhappy for the fir questions Her face pinches with anxiety. As if Laurence was expecting it, he hem all over and takes her hand to give it a squeeze.

age and "Must you really go back into that line of work?" Marilyn asks.

I'm a "Mom," he replies softly, but there's no mistaking the gentle cer beloved his tone.

hold it "I know, I know," she replies, holding a hand up and shaking her l know it drives you nuts that I worry, but Malik... I've been throu ies as a deploying to war zones with the Marines and you being captured. I ha e doing hoped that would be behind us once you were rescued."

"We do plenty of things at Jameson that aren't dangerous," Malik able to trying to lighten the mood.

amily. I "And yet, you were taken prisoner and held in captivity for five m having his mom replies, her voice sharp as a blade. Immediately shooti n going worried look, she apologizes. "I'm so sorry, Anna. I'm just a mother." ther. mother."

people. I give her an empathetic smile, because I understand her better th thinks. I'd sent a husband off on the same mission as her son, and he' is never coming back.

uisiana. And then it hits me like a wave of cold water washing over me... A ed with point, Malik might be going out on another dangerous mission. That's ding. means to work for Jameson—to be ever willing to lay your life on t family I'm not sure how I feel about that.

and my With Jimmy, it didn't seem real that something bad could happe a lot of know that's not the case. Now, I know very well that something horr

happen, and my stomach rolls with nausea at the thought of Malik p aurence not coming home.

ilder as Marilyn gives me a sheepish smile, turning it on her son. "Okay e—with done. I've said my mother's piece. Thank you, dear boy, for letting me re their

"I love you, Mom," Malik replies warmly. "You're allowed to wor

Just then, Avery takes the opportunity to wake up. She lets out a screech, then a long, unending wail.

I reach over and quickly pick her up, making my apologies. “I’m sorry. She probably needs to eat and have a change.”

“No worries,” Marilyn assures me. “Been there, done that.”

Without me even asking, Malik reaches down for the small diaper I carried in and starts to rise. I shake my head, grabbing the bag from the shelf. “You stay here.”

I move through the restaurant toward the ladies’ room, intent on finding a tiny bit of privacy to feed and change Avery. My mind keeps spiraling in though, wondering what the first mission Malik will be going on when he gets let back out in the field. Will the fates help protect him since he’s so close to death already? Will the odds be greater or lesser that he’ll live through you because surely God wouldn’t be so cruel as to take two men I cared for really that way from me.

“Want some company?” I hear from behind me. Startled, I realize I’ve been followed. “No,” I quip, having followed me to the restroom. I smile as I use my hip to open the service door, grateful to get my mind off Malik and the potential danger he could pose in a few months.”

“Sure.” Simone chatters while I feed Avery, leaning in close and cooing to her. I worriedly hold her for me when I finish, so I can get all the items out I need to change her diaper. It’s a ripe one.

And as I lay her down on the changing table, Simone makes the first move. “How are things going with Malik?”

I blink in surprise, give her a quick glance, then turn my attention back to Avery’s poop-filled diaper. I don’t even think to lie or put her off with what I vaguely assure. “It’s tough, given what he’s been through.”

“And what you’ve been through,” she murmurs.

“He told you about Jimmy and—”

“He’s told us everything,” Simone says. “He talks to my mom frequently, but I’m a close second. Malik and I are a bonded pair together. Possibly Max and Lucas are in our family.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “It’s just weird for me. He wants to know everything... I’m secret at work.”

“Bro code,” she mutters with an eye roll.

“Yes,” I exclaim with a laugh. “He told you that?”

hungry Simone leans against the wall, then nods. "Like I said, Malik doesn't
back with us. Never has."

am so I finish up with Avery, get her clothes righted, and then Simone
take turns holding her while the other washes their hands. As we're
out, Avery securely back in my arms and Simone carrying the diaper
bag I'd puts a hand on my shoulder to halt me.

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"He's been through a lot. So have you. It's either a good thing
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Simone leans against the wall, then nods. “Like I said, Malik doesn’t hold back with us. Never has.”

I finish up with Avery, get her clothes righted, and then Simone and I take turns holding her while the other washes their hands. As we’re walking out, Avery securely back in my arms and Simone carrying the diaper bag, she puts a hand on my shoulder to halt me.

Looking at her inquisitively, I note her expression has turned solemn. “He’s been through a lot. So have you. It’s either a good thing you’re together, or it could get tougher yet as you two continue to deal with things. Please be gentle and kind with each other. I can’t even imagine your pain, Anna, but he’s my brother and I’m so worried about him.”

Her expression morphs to worry. I know she’s concerned she’s possibly offended me. I nod reassuringly. “I’ll take care of him. I promise. And I’ll always be at the ready to give him whatever he needs, even if it’s space.”

“You’re a good woman,” she concludes.

“He’s a great man,” I assert.

“Together, you two might just be something amazing,” she hypothesizes.

“I sure hope so.”

CHAPTER 21

Malik

THE WAITRESS RETURNS with new beers for the Fournier sibling distributes them. Mom and Dad called it an early night after the game, deciding to return to their hotel. Max and Lucas chose not to fly to North Carolina on the team plane tonight, wanting to spend some time with me. Simone and her husband Van were clearly up for a night of hang out and chilling with a few beers, too.

Although a member of our crew by marriage and not blood, Van popped a bottle up and demands a toast.

“Here’s to the best family a man could be lucky enough to have,” Van says. A quick glance around the table shows me that his words have hit everyone.

We all tap bottle necks before tilting them back. The beer tastes good. I know it would have tasted better if Anna were here tonight. I really want to see Max and Lucas to meet her, but it will have to be another time. She’s not feeling well, so she couldn’t make the game tonight.

“Fill an uncle in,” I say to my brothers. “What’s Christmas going to be like in a few weeks?”

Both of my brothers are married with kids. Max’s wife Jules has three children to the marriage—Annabelle, Levy, and Rocco, ages six, eight, and nine respectively. They’re actually Jules’ sister Melody’s kids, who died and Jules had been raising them when she met Max.

The next fifteen minutes are spent listening to Max talk about dolls and bicycles, but in much more detail than I think any of us wanted to hear. Regardless, I’m anxious to see the kids when I can arrange a quick trip down to North Carolina. Between my time in the Marines and my captivity, they don’t know Uncle Malik very well. If my near-death experience has taught me anything, it’s that I want to strengthen my ties even more than they already are. The Fourniers have always been

tight, but that has to be expanded to the new ones being brought into the marriage.

“Imagine it’s a little easier for you,” I say to Lucas with a nod. He says his wife Stephanie had a little girl, Marianna, roughly fifteen months ago.

Lucas laughs. “She’s a little too young to be writing Santa just yet but it doesn’t mean we’re not buying stuff and putting it under the tree for the kids, all the same.”

“I would expect no different.” I laugh.

“Speaking of Christmas,” Simone interjects. “Are you coming home for the holidays?” She looks at me with such yearning I feel awful for letting her down. “Probably not.”

To my surprise, her expression softens and she smiles. It confuses me. I feel the need to explain. “I’ve been gone from work for so long and I really want to take any more time away.”

Simone twists, spearing Van with a smirk. He returns it, looking at me. “If you say so.”

Max and Lucas seem intrigued, but it’s Max who asks Simone, “What’s missing?”

Shrugging, Simone gives our brother a coy look. “I’m guessing I’m not coming home for Christmas doesn’t have a damn thing to do with work. It has everything to do with a gorgeous blonde who goes by the name of Cass and—”

“Fine,” I cut her off with a loud chuckle. I don’t keep anything from my siblings. “If you must know, I kind of want to spend Christmas with her.”

“This got serious, fast,” Lucas points out, his tone a bit too serious. “I can understand where he’s coming from. He only knows what I’ve told him and perhaps what Simone and Mom may have shared with him. He didn’t have the chance to meet her tonight as I’d hoped. He’s being protective.”

I don’t deny his assertion. “It’s serious. I guess it’s relative as to how fast you’d consider fast.”

I was rescued six weeks ago. I’d been back at Jameson for three weeks when I’d reconnected with Anna.

We shared our first kiss just ten days ago.

Sure... some would say it’s fast.

“I can’t explain it, Luc,” I murmur, gazing down at my beer before looking up at my gaze to his. “But her husband was killed in the same mission when

t in bytaken prisoner. She and I have shared loss stemming from the same circumstances. She understands the current me better than anyone. Santa and his actually includes all of you sitting with me at this table. And I'm sure you know that says a lot seeing as how I love y'all more than everybody else. But it's the world, along with Mom and Dad."

on Santa Everyone is quiet as that sinks in, but not one face staring back with doubt in my claim. They accept what I'm saying as truth. While they may not understand it to the full depths, they do realize they can't truly know me?" I've been through.

down. Lucas nods, his eyes warm with sympathy. "I can see that, brother. You know you can share anything with us. You can tell us what's bothering me, so feeling. You can get things off your chest if you need to. I can't even begin to imagine what you went through for all those months—"

I'm shocked when Lucas goes silent, his words choked off by emotion. It causes my chest to tighten. I reach out to my left where he sits to clasp my hand on his shoulder. I don't dare look at Simone, because I know she's crying. Tears are in her eyes.

It's in this moment I realize I've done a disservice to my siblings. They weren't all there for me when I returned six weeks ago, but they dared to speak, but me to share my experiences back then. I was too weak, sick, and traumatized. Anna and they were there in silent support.

But they must all be carrying around the worst of imaginary nightmares from my wondering what befell their poor brother. While I've been diligently working with Corinne over these last three weeks to battle my demons and my fears, but they're all mired in the ones they've had the entire time I was missing. I should have told him, and that's my bad for taking me this long to realize.

don't get "I think," I begin carefully, scanning around the table. "It might be better to tell you what happened to me. Not just so you understand, but also so you can start to move past this the way I have been working to do. I think that the unknown might be worse than actually knowing."

three weeks "Lay it on us," Max says.

Lucas and Van nod somberly.

Simone blinks back her tears, puts on her big-girl panties, which she's never in her life had a problem wearing with three rowdy and over-the-top lifting brothers, and nods as well.

the I was Over the course of two more beers, I tell them everything. It's not

set of can talk for that long about what I went through as there wasn't that really, that say. I may have been held captive for months, but my routine was there you every day.

What took time was in answering their questions. Honestly, I'm glad they asked them. Because they did so in a way that didn't make me feel vulnerable. There was no pity or even soft-around-the-edges sympathy. They were matter-of-fact in their curiosities because they want to understand what and they knew I'd respond best if this was treated more like a debriefing than a hug-it-out kumbaya session.

Of course, explaining what happened in the firefight before I got caught you've elicited sympathies for Anna.

"It's awful," Simone says in regard to Jimmy. "I suppose she took a risk when he left, but she probably never really thought he wouldn't return. It back."

I shrug as I wouldn't know. Anna and I haven't talked about that, but I'm sure we will at some point. The one thing that helps me keep the guilt is in the knowledge she knows I'm willing to talk about Jimmy with her. They vice-versa. I don't ever want to walk on eggshells around the fact she's not asked another man so greatly she gave her life in marriage to him.

"This thing I have with Anna," I say quietly, commanding everyone's attention again. "It was really complicated at first because I thought it was my fault Jimmy died."

"How?" Van asks in confusion.

Which I need to make note of to tell Corinne about. It's a mile away because it hits me now that the mere fact he has to ask me says where they were when the story of how the firefight went down, I didn't place any blame on my good shoulders.

I clarify how my thinking had been. "I thought it was my responsibility to keep Jimmy and Sal safe. That my choice—rather than engaging the enemy to my front—should have been to merely protect them at the rear because they were my teammates."

"But you understand now that's not the case," Lucas presses. "Right?"
"I think I do," I admit. "I've been told time and again that I did a good job of bearing right things. It still makes it hard to look at Anna sometimes and wonder why I'm weird with her and Jimmy isn't."

Simone reaches across the table to take my hand. "Or maybe it's just like I

nuch to way things were supposed to work out, Malik. I think I'll choose to be the same. Jimmy wasn't supposed to be hers forever."

"Wish we could have met her, bro," Max says earnestly. "She sounds like she had they quite a woman."

"She is," I agree, holding up my bottle in silent tribute to the woman. They're the haired woman who has so quickly invaded my heart. "Next time, though, find me," "Bring her to North Carolina for a visit," he says. "Come see your standard and nephews."

"I'll work something out at Jameson," I assure him.
"So how did you get around the bro code?" Van asks, and Simone chokes on her beer.

Incredulously, she gapes at her husband. "So, there's really a bro code that can't come Van's return look is one of surprise she'd even question it. "Uh.. Everyone knows about the bro code."

"No, not everyone," she insists, turning her attention to me. "Annabeth talked about it in the bathroom last night, but I think it's silly."

"It's not silly," Lucas says staunchly.
"Agreed," Max mutters, holding his own beer up to toast the concept.
"It's ridiculous," Simone exclaims, looking around at all the testosterone surrounding her. "It implies women are property. That just because a woman was my date a man, it makes her damaged goods or something."

"No, no, no," her husband insists. "Got nothing to do with the team, everything to do with jealousy."

Simone cocks an eyebrow at Van, crosses her arms over her chest, and then I told declares, "Oh... do tell."

"Let's just use the Cold Fury as an example," Van begins to explain. "If you and I had dated and broken up, you would not have been allowed to date any other man on the team."

I wince, as do Lucas and Max, because that was not the right way to explain it to Simone, who is as independent as they come.

She puts her hands to her hips, her head swaying left to right with a questioning attitude. "Excuse me?"

"You see—" Van starts to explain, but he's cut off by Simone's glare. "Not feel him in the stomach with a backhand."

"Oh no you don't," she exclaims. "As a woman, I will date who I want, just when I want. I'll bang the entire Cold Fury team if I want—brothers excluded."

believe because eww—and there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do to stop

My brothers and I wince again, as now Van's face turns thunderous and like proclamation she'd bang the entire team. "I'd lock you in a damn room and throw away the key before I'd ever let you do that," he snarls.

golden- She makes a scoffing noise, waving a dismissive hand. "You'd better say if we were broken up."

nieces "There's no way in hell you'd—"

"Okay," Lucas intervenes, banging his hand on the table. "It's the point, you two boneheads. You're married, happily, I used to think Simone won't be banging the Cold Fury. Besides, you are tree huggers who live in Vermont now."

ode?" "The real point," I say to my sister, grabbing her attention before she yeah. murders her husband, "is those in the bro code would never act on it."

same hypothetical—if you and Van had dated and broken up, another woman and IFury member wouldn't go out with you because it violates bro code."

"It's stupid," Simone insists, giving a side-eyed glare to her husband, thinking he's not getting any tonight when he doesn't agree with her. Attention comes back to me. "Please don't let that stop you from staying on this journey with Anna, Malik. You two have something special."

woman Lucas, Max, and Van do not share this same sentiment aloud, as I don't understand why the bro code bothers me. But I know, individually, that if I want my happiness and they'd tell me to go for it.

"I won't," I assure my little sister. "While I'm still sensitive to it at work, and people at work will think when they find out, Anna has insisted I can't let that be an impediment to what we have. She insists Jimmy would want me to be happy no matter what."

to date "So you'll come out to the people at work at some point?" she asks with concern. "Because hiding isn't good."

to state "Soon," I promise. "We will. I think we just want some time to talk to each other first to make sure this is real."

with her "It's real," she insists. "I know it."

"You're a romantic," I reply dryly.

lapping "So?" she challenges. "It's the romance that makes it so great, and that makes it sustainable. That makes it the best of stories that are meant to be told. I want, Don't discount that."

excluded And somehow, the fierceness of her words and the way the rest

up me.” men at the table aren’t rolling their eyes—Van even now nodding in
s at her of his wife—has me feeling she might be right.
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men at the table aren't rolling their eyes—Van even now nodding in support of his wife—has me feeling she might be right.

CHAPTER 22

Anna

I CURSE THE invention of toast as I bend over my toilet and throw all my food into heaving up the doughy ball my body is insisting on expelling from my body.

“Toast is good for nausea,” my mother had said. “It will make you feel better.”

I’m never listening to my mother again.

Granted, it did feel all right for about five minutes before my brother said, “Nice try, Anna. But we accept nothing into this stomach today.”

And so, I’m praying to my toilet again.

We’ve become good friends... my commode and me. It’s supposed to be a good thing through much of the night as whatever stomach bug I felt coming on in the day decided to become a raging party of infection and viral mischief.

When I’d begged off from the hockey game last night, I did so on the grounds of debating it within my heart and head for a couple of hours. I felt yucky but couldn’t tell if I was just having an off day and was perhaps overtired or if I was on the verge of truly getting sick. It’s when low-level nausea hits that you know there was no way I could sit through a three-hour game and be the Fournier siblings after.

Just no way.

I absolutely hated canceling because, most importantly, I wanted to see Malik’s excitement and pride over watching his brothers play hockey. Even though I’d be rooting against them, my intent last night would have been to root for Malik.

For his return to our world where he could have fun, relax, and live a more glorious life.

Malik was disappointed, but he understood. He was even incredibly understanding by offering not to go to the game and coming to hang out with me in my room. I told him he was all kinds of a fool to even suggest missing his brothers.

and the opportunity to spend time with them after. He didn't even need to tell him that, but his offer was flattering all the same.

Overnight, my sickness became worse. The nausea waxed and waned, getting worse over time until finally, in the wee hours of the morning, I became a permanent vomiting resident of the bathroom. It was awful, and I'd never experienced anything like it before.

The worst was trying to be a mom to a baby in between bouts of my effort my guts up and just lying on the couch, suffering the unremitting nausea from my

But somehow, I managed.

By seven, I realized the vomiting had slowed—not that anything was coming up—but the dry heaving was definitely dissipating. Still, there was no way I was going in to work, so I texted Kynan and my mom I was contracting an overnight stomach bug and wouldn't be going in.

Kynan's response was short but effective. "That sucks. Feel better."

My mom was on high alert, and she called rather than texting me.

That conversation was painful because my mom loves any opportunity to help me into "super mom" mode to try to break through my stubborn independence.

She was poised to fly out the door to come to my apartment and take care of me. It was with a gentleness I really wasn't feeling that I assured her I was fine, intended to rest, and I was well enough to handle Avery with

her help.

By the time we hung up, she was sore with me. I had thought it was a moment of solid motherly advice when she'd recommended the dry heaves

to help settle my stomach, but now I'm thinking it was a method of torture. My body wasn't ready for food, so now it's just sitting there in one huge ball while taking forever to come out.

Tears are streaming down my face as I continue to retch. My stomach is pounding from the effort. For a blessed moment, while I flush the toilet, I

remember I've been through far worse in my life than a little stomach ache.

On top of that, I've managed to keep Avery fed and in clean diapers and I'm enjoying a little rest although she admittedly doesn't like the face mask I've been wearing.

I'm near her. I have no clue if I'm even contagious, but I'm not taking any chances with her.

When there's a knock on my door, I'm worried it will wake Avery. She's been down for a few hours and while I love any time with my daughter, I'll take the respite just now from having to change another diaper. The

d me to alone had me gagging behind my mask the last time, and I was barely hold it together before needing to dash to the bathroom.

waned, I push up from the bathroom floor, ignore washing my hands in m I was to make it to the door, but pause to give them a squirt of sanitizer fr d nevercounter. I'm in a pair of wrinkled pajama pants and a stained t-shirt long cardigan over the top. I pull it close around me since I'm bral pukingshuffle to the door.

ea. Looking through the peephole, I'm stunned to see Malik. I had also him this morning. Just to say hello and to inform him I was taking a si ng wasbut I'd call him later.

was no I sigh, knowing I look the worst I could possibly look, but just a ring offthis doesn't run the man off, nothing will. Swinging the door open, feeble smile on my face. "What are you doing here?"

" Malik's eyes widen as he takes me in, eyes running my length e back.before locking back on my face. "Jesus, Anna... you look awful." y to fly "Thanks, babe," I quip wearily with a chuckle as I turn from th ndence."You look great, too."

care of "You need to go to a doctor," he insists, walking in behind me. r I was "I just need to lay down for a minute before Avery wakes up," I c out hermoving right to the couch where I collapse. Curling in on my side, I j blanket I'd been using over me, but Malik's right there, squatting bes t was a couch.

toast to His hand goes to my forehead, where I know he'll find my skin c are. Mydamp. "No fever," he murmurs. "What's going on with you?"

je lump "Just a ton of vomiting and nausea," I murmur, relishing the fee touch. It's nice to have someone care, even though I know my mom head ishave been here had I not been so stubborn. Which makes me wonder. toilet, Iare you doing here?"

ch bug. "When you called in sick, I got worried," he replies, pushing all day,sitting his butt on the edge of the couch. He puts his hand on my back g whentook a very early lunch to come check on you. Is Avery asleep?"

ing any "Yeah," I say, feeling so fatigued now Malik is here. "You think maybe take a little nap?"

ery up. "Of course, you can," he says, his thumb rubbing along my spir ighter,handle Avery if she wakes up."

ie smell "There's some breast milk on the counter. I took it out about half .

able to go to come to room temperature.” My eyelids start to drift closed.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t get you to a doctor?” Malik asks.

My haste “Honestly, the vomiting has slowed down, I think,” I mumble, from themself start to drift.

with a “Have you been drinking liquids?”

As I My eyes pop back open, slightly irritated he keeps asking question
been sipping on some ginger ale.”

Malik smiled. He can see and hear my annoyance. Without regard
ck day, own safety, he bends and presses a quick kiss onto my temple. I’m

horrified because I know my hair is a rat’s nest and I’m pretty sure
admit if like a toilet. But I’ll worry about that later.

I put a “Get some rest,” he assures me, and my eyes fall shut. I barely f
push off the couch and that’s the last thing I remember.

quickly



the door.

THE SOUND OF the door closing wakes me up almost instantly, and I sit
high alert. I cut my gaze across the living room to see Malik coming
counter, carrying a bag of groceries.

pull the Smiling, he asks, “How are you feeling?”

side the I can understand nothing but the fact he’s walking in my door,
having left while I was sleeping, and I snap my gaze over to my daughter
ool and bedroom. There’s a panicked, hysterical quality to my tone. “V
Avery?”

l of his “She’s right here,” my mom says. I shift over toward the kitchen
I would her walking into the living room while cradling Avery in her arms.

“What I’m confused, considering that perhaps this is just a dream, so I look
to Malik for some type of clarification. His expression softens
up and understanding. “You’ve been asleep for almost three hours,” he ex

“So, I “Your mom showed up about an hour ago. So, I ran out and got
groceries—mostly more ginger ale, crackers, and some soup—for you.

I could “Three hours?” I mutter, sitting up more fully and pushing a
tangled hair out of my eyes.

ie. “I’ll “You should have called me,” my mom says, making a tsking noise
throat before smiling down at her granddaughter. “Good thing I decided

an hour come by to check on you.”

I wince internally, knowing her feelings are still hurt while also taking the slight awkwardness of her meeting Malik this way.

feeling But then my mom shoots a warm smile at Malik before saying, ‘good thing your friend came by to check on you, too.’

And when she says the word “friend,” she puts enough emphasis on it. “I’ve never used that word to say she knows he’s so much more than that.”

My jaw sags slightly as my mom seems to be complimenting Malik to his my choice in a man, when I thought she’d think it was all too soon. I don’t hold any comment about that in and merely sag against the cushions.

I smell Malik sets the bag of groceries on the coffee table, then moves toward me. Bending toward me, he asks, “Really... how are you feeling? You feel him pretty hard.”

I take a quick physical stock of myself, noting I don’t seem to be nauseous. “My stomach actually feels okay. I mean, I absolutely don’t want to throw up anymore. I’m exhausted.”

“Hours of vomiting can do that to you,” he quips with a wink. “Can you handle some ginger ale?”

I nod with a wan smile, my mom rocking Avery back and forth while she watches us.

clearly “And maybe a bath?” Malik asks.

fighter’s “Do I smell?” I ask with a grimace.

Where’s Malik laughs with a shrug. “I’ve been trying hard not to inhale deeply, but I’m sure a toothbrush in your mouth wouldn’t hurt either.”

1 to see My mom snorts as she moves across the living room to the nursery where the little girl is almost asleep. I’ll put her down, then go run a bath for Avery.

ok back “Mom, you really don’t have—”

is with She cuts me off with a quick but stabbing glare. “Let your mom explain, okay?”

it some “Okay,” I mutter, and now it’s Malik’s turn to snort. They’re gang-banging

’ on me, so I shoot him a glare, but it bounces off. He just smirks and heads toward the kitchen, nabbing the bag of groceries as he walks back.

unk of My mom comes back out of Avery’s nursery, then goes into the bathroom. When I hear the water in the bathtub turn on, I hoist myself up and shuffle in behind her.

ie in her Leaning against the doorjamb, I watch as she grabs some laundry.

aking inscented bubble bath and pours a few capfuls in. Suds immediately blo multiply.

“Also a Glancing over my shoulder toward the kitchen where presumably is putting away the groceries, I turn back to my mom and murmur, “I’m on the I didn’t call you. I should have.”

“What’s that?” she asks, straightening as she pivots to face me. I know damn well she heard me, but she deserves the apology twice as much as I. “Sorry I didn’t call you. I should have because I was way sicker than I thought and I could have used the help with Avery. It was stupid not to.”

Reaching out a hand to touch my cheek, she gives me a soft smile. “Sweet girl... I respect your need to be independent. Just remember I’m always ready to help you out.”

I nod. “I know.”

She leans in closer to me, lowering her voice. “What I don’t regret is you keeping it a secret you’re seeing someone thoughtful enough to check over and check on you, then let you sleep while he babysits Avery.”

“Mom,” I begin, moving into the bathroom a bit farther. “I was obviously going to tell you. Going to bring him by so you could meet him. But she just been figuring things out ourselves and—”

“I get it,” she cuts in over me, lacing enough mom guilt in her voice. “I’ll second guess ever keeping anything from her again. “That’s a big deal. And, well, what could your mom possibly offer if you needed some guidance—”

“Okay,” I exclaim with a laugh. “I’m thoroughly chastised, Mom.” She snickers and turns back to the bath, dipping her hand in to swirl bubbles and test the temperature. She then dries her hands off and faces me once more, her eyes roaming over me a moment before she sighs. “I just want to help you to be happy, sweet girl. And well... I know a little something about losing a husband and having a second chance at love.”

I feel as if I’ve been slapped, but in an I-totally-need-it kind of way. A revelation to realize my mom knows exactly what I’ve been going through with Malik. I mean, not the same exact circumstances, but my dad died when she was a single mom, and she found love again. Granted, not with a guy who was intimately associated with her husband, but still... she understands the complexity of moving on from one love into possibly another.

My expression turns to one of pathetic apology, and she holds her

om and out to me. I shuffle into them, then drop my forehead to her shoulder wraps me up in her embrace. "I'm sorry, Mom," I murmur. "I need a better daughter."

m sorry "You're an exceptional daughter," she replies softly, a hand going back of my head to hold me to her. "You just need to be knocked down or two from time to time."

re. "I'm We both laugh, and things are fine between us again.

thought, Eventually, she pushes me back and eyeballs my hair. "Put that on top of your head, and get in the tub. I'm going to go grab that girl for you, make sure Malik keeps an eye on Avery, and then I'm going to be back in here while you soak in the tub and you're going to tell me every single detail about how you two fell for each other. You're not going to begrudge me one detail of it, either."

spect is "Yes, ma'am," I reply, smartly knocking off a salute to her.

o come "Here's the ginger ale," we hear from behind us, and we both jump. Malik's voice. He stands just on the other side of the bathroom threshold with an icy glass of bubbling soda and a mischievous grin that holds not one iota of apology he might have been eavesdropping. He then sends an especially smug smirk at my mom and adds, "And she came on to me first. Don't tell anyone else."

ig deal. "Duly noted," my mom replies as she takes the glass from him. She quickly closes the door on Malik, ordering him, "Keep an eye on my granddaughter while I bond with my daughter, okay?"

"Got it," he replies, and the door shuts.

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out to me. I shuffle into them, then drop my forehead to her shoulder as she wraps me up in her embrace. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I murmur. “I need to be a better daughter.”

“You’re an exceptional daughter,” she replies softly, a hand going to the back of my head to hold me to her. “You just need to be knocked down a peg or two from time to time.”

We both laugh, and things are fine between us again.

Eventually, she pushes me back and eyeballs my hair. “Put that mess up on top of your head, and get in the tub. I’m going to go grab that ginger ale for you, make sure Malik keeps an eye on Avery, and then I’m going to come back in here while you soak in the tub and you’re going to tell me every single detail about how you two fell for each other. You’re not going to begrudge me one detail of it, either.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply, smartly knocking off a salute to her.

“Here’s the ginger ale,” we hear from behind us, and we both jump at Malik’s voice. He stands just on the other side of the bathroom threshold with an icy glass of bubbling soda and a mischievous grin that holds not one ounce of apology he might have been eavesdropping. He then sends an especially sly smirk at my mom and adds, “And she came on to me first. Don’t let her tell you otherwise.”

“Duly noted,” my mom replies as she takes the glass from him. She starts to close the door on Malik, ordering him, “Keep an eye on my granddaughter while I bond with my daughter, okay?”

“Got it,” he replies, and the door shuts.

My mom and I both start laughing.

CHAPTER 23

Malik

CORINNE STARES, TAPPING her pen against her notepad.

I return it, drumming my fingers on my thigh.

I'm determined this is going to be our last meeting, and I've just told her so. Didn't waste any time when I entered her office for our eight o'clock Monday morning meeting, either.

"Okay," she drawls, sweeping her hand toward me, palm up. "When you present a case to me about why I should release you today. An attorney. Bullshit me, Malik. I can recognize it a mile away."

She sure as shit didn't need to tell me that. I learned early on in my counseling relationship Corinne wasn't going to be fooled with trite proclamations I've seen the light and been cured of my demons.

Settling into my chair, I take a deep breath and let it out. What do I say to this woman to convince her that I'm ready to return to full duty? I close my eyes, tilt my head back so it rests against the wall behind my chair, and ponder for a moment more.

I really have come a long way over the last several weeks. Many people have given me their viewpoints, particularly on the logistics of how everything went down. Clearly, I'm the only member of the group that stayed in Syria who questioned my own culpability in Jimmy and Sal's deaths. I've read the reports, which do nothing but praise my efforts. I've had Jimmy's wife tell me herself that she doesn't place a single ounce of blame on me.

More importantly, Corinne and I have spent a lot of time talking about my feelings for Anna and how we have let things progress, despite our nascent-as-of-yet unconquered concerns over the bro-code violations.

And yet, when I open my eyes and let them land on Corinne, all I can say with any certainty is, "I'm not sure I'll ever be one-hundred percent convinced there wasn't something more I could have done to save Jimmy and Sal."

While it feels like an admission of defeat to say that, something about that statement causes Corinne to straighten in her chair before leaning forward slightly, as if eager to hear more. “Go on,” she encourages.

“Guilt is something I have to battle on my own,” I say, the words coming out methodically as my gut sort of takes over. “And no matter how people tell me that my perception of things is skewed, it’s something I have to continue to ponder and figure out on my own. I think what I have a chance is it might never go away.”

“And you want to be released?” she queries with a raised eyebrow. I can tell she thinks I have more to offer in the way of explanation.

“What I think,” I continue, feeling more confident in my analysis, I moved on. I have accepted that bad things happen to good people, and in any situation, my training took over and my actions were appropriate. I don’t regret the scenario. More importantly, I’m moving on with a woman who has a chance with me—warts and all—and she’s the one who has more to lose than I do. I’m involved. I think the mere fact I was drawn to Anna, and she to me, is all the proof you need I have truly let go of my demons and I’m ready for whatever life throws at me next.”

Corinne settles back into her chair, watching me with a questioning expression. Then her eyes fall to her notepad, where she jots a few words down.

When her attention comes to me, she says, “I’m going to recommend that Kynan you immediately be returned to full-duty status. I still want to see you though. Once a month for a check-in to see how you’re doing.”

Her eyes come to me, steely and filled with challenge. She expects to fight her, but I won’t. I’ve come to enjoy talking to Corinne. She’s given me some good advice, especially where Anna’s concerned.

I merely incline my head. “Thank you.”

My hands go to the armrests of my chair to push out of it, but Corinne’s voice stops me. “One more thing, Malik.”

I freeze, raising an eyebrow curiously.

“The bro code is stupid. It doesn’t exist. It’s not fair or nice to keep things hidden away like a dirty secret because you’re afraid some of the guys won’t like it. Out yourself as a couple.”

“Is that a direct order that will affect my duty status?” I ask hesitantly. Not that I’m opposed to it, but frankly, I haven’t given it a lot of thought.

out my lately. Had a lot of other things to work through.

forward “Not at all,” she replies with a thin smile. “I’m telling you as a
that Anna won’t put up with it for long. You want to do something
coming your girl, then you have her on your arm proudly. Let Anna have
v many experience of falling in love again.”

; I have That hits me deep.

accepted Is Anna falling in love with me?

Pretty sure I’m falling hard for her, and I don’t want her to ever do
v, but I We’re both good communicators. We’ve talked through some majorly
shit. But despite it all, she’s going to judge me by my actions as well
“is I’ve the fact I’ve been shy about letting people know about us somehow c
, in this message that she’s not good enough? Not important enough?

for the Something to be ashamed of?

accepted The thought horrifies me.

anyone “Fuck the bro code,” I announce as I pop up out of the chair and h
and we the door. “I’ll hire the goddamn Goodyear blimp to blast a message.”

of my “That’s sweet,” Corinne says with a laugh. “But I’m pretty sure
not that high maintenance.”

shrewd I stop, turning slowly to face Corinne. “She’s not. Anna is fa
r things appreciative of the subtle overtures.”

“You’ve really come to know her well,” Corinne murmurs with
nend to blink of her eyes.

ee you, A satisfied smile plays at my lips. “I recognize so much of myself
how could I not?”

s me to Inclining her head, Corinne merely says, “I’ll send you an email
ven medate for us to meet next month. I can’t wait to see how well you and A
doing at that time.”

My responding grin is all she needs to know about how I feel rig
orinne’s but I still say, “Looking forward to it.”



p Anna
s might I BRIEFLY WONDER if I should schedule an appointment, but my excite
get back to normal outweighs professionalism. I tap on the door to k
sitantly, office—a brief glance through the glass walls tells me he’s alor
thought necessarily interruptible as his head is bent over documents on his de

again... too excited not to come to his office unannounced.

woman His head lifts when he sees me through the glass and beckons me
rice for his hand. "What's up?" he asks as I open the door.

the full I slide in, shut it behind me, and take a seat before his desk. "Corinne
released me to full duty."

He seems neither surprised nor delighted by this, his face an im
blank canvas.

ubt me. "And so," I drawl, waiting for him to come to the same conclusi
/ heavygoing to put forth. "I'm ready for an assignment."

l. Does Kynan straightens in his chair, then immediately sinks back down
onvey aHe puts his elbows to the armrests and steeples his fingers toge
contemplation, his eyes never leaving mine. "And you believe you'r
to get back in the thick of things?"

"I'd prefer you not coddle me on my next assignment," I reply, ne
lead for answering his question but putting forth my own expectations. "I need
trust me."

Anna's "And do you trust yourself?" he queries.

His question irritates me. It's something Corinne would want to k
r morepart of her assessment, but he's the boss and I get why he's asking.

"All I can tell you is that after a lot of reflecting, listening to y
a slowothers, and talking things out, if I were in the same exact scenario as I
Syria, I would trust my training and my gut instincts, and I'd act in th
in her,manner as I acted then."

The point being, even knowing I could have probably saved Jimi
with aSal by moving to their rear and being vigilant, it wasn't the right mov
nna areknow it now. I would have battled the clear fight in front of me
training and instincts told me to do.

ht now, Now Kynan has to believe that.

He gives me a solid nod of acceptance and leans forward again, t
through a stack of folders on his desk. Finding what he's searching
opens it up and scans the first page. "I'm sending a group down to Ft
tomorrow. The Army is going to let us join them in some MFF t
ment to operations. I want you to go as, given your background, you'll be
Kynan's resource for leadership."

ie. Not I struggle to not let my face break out into a wide, goofy grin beca
ask, but part of me that thrives on danger, speed, and adrenaline is already ch

at the bit for this opportunity. MFF, or military free fall, is a tactic in which Special Forces troops insert into enemy territories in as covert a way as possible. It allows for aircraft to fly above the range of where surface-to-air missiles can shoot them down, but it provides added danger to the mission because the troops must jump out of said plane at extremely high and dangerous altitudes. Most likely be practicing both HALO jumps—high altitude, low opening—and HAHO jumps—high altitude, high opening.

The HAHO jumps are my favorite, meaning the parachute is deployed within seconds of the jump, allowing a soldier or marine to fly silently into it. HAHO jumps are sometimes up to thirty to forty miles—sometimes up to thirty to forty miles—to reach an insertion point. HAHO requires skill, solid use of GPS and terrain navigational skills, and a healthy dose of luck. It's what makes it so exciting.

"We have a potential mission coming up soon that will require a lot of skill," he says, and my joy at jumping out of planes plummets.

Oh, not that I'm not still excited about that—it's just the mention of the word "mission" has me going into hyper-alert, super-focused mode.

I tell him to know I'm ready, willing, and able to meet whatever the demands are.

"Some American tourists have been kidnapped in Colombia," he says to me. "The ELN?" I ask.

He nods. The Ejército de Liberación Nacional—or National Liberation Army—is known for kidnapping tourists and carting them around the countryside until ransom is paid. "Some rich banker out of Dallas and his family wanted a thrilling jungle adventure for their vacation. Well... they got it."

"When do you think this will go down?" I ask, because there seems to be a rush seeing as how he wants to send me on a free-fall operation.

"These guerilla groups know how to extract the most out of their victims for, they demand," Kynan says with a wry smile. "They'll cart that family around the jungle for a few weeks, keeping contact to a minimum so as to cultivate the members' desire to throw as much money as possible at them in a state of desperation. It's a supreme negotiating tactic."

Kynan continues, explaining the situation more. Right now, the focus is on working with a contract negotiator, choosing not to involve our government or police forces as the kidnappers most often demand. The negotiator

used to work back and forth with the guerillas, coming up with an amount way as acceptable, then the ransom will be paid. We'll be hired to go in as sec e-to-air make sure the exchange is carried out as promised and the family i en who safe. As a contingency, we'll be at the ready to use force to res s. We'll hostages if for some reason the ransom exchange is compromised.

ning— “And you're going to let me go on this mission?” I ask.

“You said not to coddle you,” Kynan replies dryly.

pulled “True,” I admit, my eyes locked on him.

ntly for “Cage is going to head up the mission,” Kynan says, pulling a do joint. It out of the folder he'd been studying when I came in. “You'll be set i whole command. Here's the summary report on what we know so far information will be updated as we get it and emailed to you. Even thou ree-falls sending you guys down to Ft. Bragg to get some practice jumps in, yo to be at the ready to move at a moment's notice.”

1 of the “Understood,” I say with a nod.

I want “It could mean you spend Christmas in the Colombian jungles,” nd may draws, a last-ditch effort to make sure I'm committed. “Sure you w rather have that time to spend with your family?”

ays. My eyes have already dropped down to the document he'd hande shake my head as I start to read. “I'm good.”

eration “Sure you wouldn't rather stay here with Anna?” he presses. “I jungled better than cuddling with your girl around a lit Christmas tree.”

and his That gets my attention, as his words penetrate and the words on th hey got are forgotten. I glance up to find Kynan watching me like a hawk.

Well, fuck yeah, I'd like to spend Christmas with Anna. It's a i doesn't time and, well, I could use more of that in my life after what I've training through. But I just committed myself to Kynan and this mission, and certainly can't let him think I'm not ready to get back in the thick of th

ransom “I want in on this mission,” I say flatly. “There will be und the Christmases.”

ate the I'm not sure what kind of reaction I expect from Kynan, but I swe hem in bit of disappointment I spot in his return stare.

I brush it off. I don't have time to pander to his sense of romanticis mily is Anna and me. We're making it work because we have ex rnment communication skills and well... we just get each other. I know mo tor will anything Anna will understand above all others how important it is fo

that is get back out there and prove myself to my teammates.
urity to Also, to prove myself to, well... myself.
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Also, to prove myself to, well... myself.

CHAPTER 24

Anna

“ANNA, ANNA, ANNA,” I hear my name called from across the security of Jameson. I pivot, seeing Cage jogging my way as he winds through desks.

“Hey,” I exclaim, a welcoming smile on my face. He’s been gone last several days out to Vegas to work with the team out there for a seminar.

He glances around, appearing a bit dodgy if I have to admit, and nips by the elbow. I was on my way to the staircase, intent to head up to the floor to meet Malik for lunch—and by lunch, I mean sex in his apartment but he steers me toward my office.

“Hey,” I challenge, trying to pull away from him.

“Sorry,” he mutters, clamping down on me tighter. “But I really need to talk. It’s an emergency.”

It’s not the words so much that has me submitting, now hurrying to match his. It’s the tone of his voice that has me realizing he *really* needs to talk.

He sounds almost... panicked.

I precede him into my office. He pulls the door shut behind him, immediately starting to pace back and forth.

Which, in my small office, is basically taking two steps before needing to turn around. He can only get about two more in before changing direction. He’s more or less just circling in place.

“What’s wrong?” I demand.

He jerks, focuses in on me, and I can see that whatever it is, his gaze starts to slide away.

“Cage,” I snap, wanting to keep him in the moment. “Tell me what’s wrong and I’ll help you fix it.”

I’m imagining all sorts of horrid things. He killed someone, inadvertently.

of course, because Cage would never do so intentionally unless it was his line of duty. Or he knows a terrible secret, one I should know, but he's not sure how to tell me. Or he, by mistake, walked in on—

“I got married,” he blurts out, and my entire body locks solidly in surprise.
“You what?”

“I got married,” he mutters, now dropping into the chair before he can sag, sagging so completely into it I’m afraid he’ll never re-inflate.

“Got married,” I repeat the words, hoping they’ll sound more convincing coming from my mouth instead of his. Nope. They don’t sound right.
“To whom?”

“To Jaime,” he practically moans.

Well, of course to Jaime. Who else would he marry on a whim other than the woman he’s been seeing and lying to? A nagging suspicion takes hold and I demand, “You told her the truth about what you do, right?”

He shakes his head, the expression on his face miserable.

“What in the hell were you thinking?” I screech, then immediately lower my voice as I know sound carries through these glass walls. I march toward him, bend at the waist and get in his face as I hiss, “You cannot marry a woman unless you are in love with her and she knows the absolute truth about what you do for a living.”

He gives me a sheepish look. “Well... I got half of it right.”

That catches me off guard, because while I’ve been moderately convinced by the way Cage has been falling for this woman, I had not expected his admission he was in love.

“You love her?” I ask for clarification.

“Regrettably, I do,” he mutters, rubbing his forehead with a sigh.

I frown. “Why regrettably?”

“Because she’s going to absolutely hate me when she realizes I’ve been lying to her for this long and then let her tie herself to me legally while I’m leading a double life.”

My hand flies out, grabs his arm, and I start to pull him from the chair.
“Which is why you need to get your ass out of here right this moment and tell her the fucking truth.”

Cage jerks over my liberal use of the “F” word since it’s not necessarily part of my vocabulary, but he settles his weight deeper into the chair. In a statement he’s not doing any such thing. “I can’t.”

s in the “Why not?”

ie’s not “Because I’m leaving for Ft. Bragg tomorrow on a training mission. There is absolutely no way I can tell her something like this a shock. leave. If I do that, she’ll be in the wind. She’ll leave my ass so fast it will spin.”

im and “You can’t continue to lie to her,” I grit out.

“Well, no shit, Sherlock,” he yells, sitting up straight in the chair. His realistic expression then turns to one of miserable suffering, and he holds his head in supplication. “But I need some time and a well-thought-out speech to give this on her. I’m thinking maybe I can kidnap her, take her somewhere she can’t leave, and then force her to love me for who I am.”

I just gape for a long moment, taking in the lunacy of what he’s just said. And when I simply can’t hold it in for another second, I bust out laughing. Cage stares in shock and snooty judgment.

It makes me laugh even harder.

“You’re not being a good friend,” Cage mutters.

A snort escapes before I clamp down hard on my mirth, swallow my laughter and bestow him with an empathetic smile as I admit, “You’re a little truth-pickle, and I’ll help you figure it out.”

“Thanks,” he grumbles.

“Where does she think you’re going tomorrow?”

“A car auction in Georgia,” he says.

“And you get back when?”

“Friday.”

I can work with this. “Okay, that means you have the whole week to suggest you butter her up with a really nice, romantic dinner. Take her to a restaurant, treat her to flowers and some wine. Get her back to... um... where have you been living?”

“Her place for now,” he admits with a sheepish smile. “Can’t we just bring her to my apartment here at Jameson?”

“Okay, you go back to her place, sit her down, and tell her you’ve cleaned up, go to hiding something from her, and you need to come clean.”

“Am I telling her the truth, truth?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t even know what that means, but yes, you’re telling her the absolute truth. Don’t hold a single thing back, including the idiotic reasoning for doing it. But then you also tell her the truth about”

you feel about her, and you want to be married to her because you love
on,” he “She’ll hate me,” he asserts.

nd then “Then if she does, she’s not meant for you. I’d hope she’d still lo
y headdespite you being a dumbass. If she’s as great as you’re always saying
then she’s going to be pissed, but she’s going to forgive you.”

“You think so?” he asks hopefully.

air. His I give him what I hope is a confident smile. “Hey... bonus is you a
rms outhave a really cool and sexy job. My theory is if she loves you a
1 to laysalesman, she’ll love you’re a high-speed security agent.”

ere she Cage laughs, finally straightening in his chair. Confidence filters
his expression for a moment, but then falters a bit. “All’s well and g
saying.long as we don’t get sent to Colombia.”

ing. “Colombia?” I ask, curious as to what mission might be on the h
Kynan hasn’t said anything about it to me yet, which means this r
something newish. I usually help in the planning stages.

“Yeah, some American tourist family was taken hostage by a
ring thegroup. Ransom is being negotiated, and we’ll go in for the transfer w
I’re in aall arranged. But that could happen tomorrow or two weeks from no
never know with those nut jobs. At any rate, Kynan just put the final g
us together today. Malik’s going to be joining us, too. I’m glad he’s
back in the saddle.”

My entire frame locks solid, a jolt of pure fear sizzling through m
mention of Malik’s name. I know I’ve been feeling generally wary ab
and potential future missions, but now that one could be on the im
kend. I horizon, my body is reacting in a way as to tell me that I’m abs
er out,terrified at the prospect of him being put in danger again.

re y’all “Malik’s going?” I ask hesitantly, hoping the quaver of fear in m
isn’t recognizable.

ry well No such luck. Cage tilts his head, examining me speculatively. “
mean... that’s what Malik does for this organization. He’s former
ve beenForces, so this is right up his alley.”

“Yeah, sure,” I reply, moving around my desk to take a seat bef
legs give way.

you are “I know you and Malik have become close friends lately,” Ca
ig yourhesitantly. “But you shouldn’t worry about him.”

ut how “We’re more than friends,” I blurt without having had any real ir

her.” to do so.

“More than friends?” he queries with raised eyebrows.

“Lovers,” I clarify, and Cage winces. “What?” I demand.

“Just... bro code,” he mutters with disdain. “That’s wrong.”

“It’s so not wrong, you jackass who is lying to his wife,” I snarl. “I have a connection, and it’s deep and built upon something we both share. It’s actually something you would never understand. Don’t ever diminish what we share as a car something as mundane as a violation of bro code. And, for your information, Malik has been hesitant to take this farther with me for exactly that reason. I’d appreciate you not ever saying anything about it to him because it’s a good thing I need—”

“Okay,” Cage exclaims, coming up out of his chair to cut me off. “You two are deeply involved, and bro code isn’t a consideration at all. He must be important to me, and I am not going to let anyone here had better—”

He cuts me off again, holding up a hand. “I got the message long ago when it’s clear. I’ll crack skulls on anyone who dares to invoke bro code. Got it. You w. You”

“Thank you,” I reply stiffly.

“Wow,” Cage says, sinking back down into the chair but in a group of getting way, his problems momentarily forgotten. “You have it bad for him, you?”

I shoot him a pointed look. “You have no idea. And now I’m stuck out him all these feelings of worry about him going on a mission.”

“But it’s his job,” Cage points out carefully.

“Yes, I know that,” I snap. “And well, when Jimmy went to Syria, I would say to myself, ‘It’s just his job,’ I don’t think I really thought about it. I’ve never thought a bad voice could happen. But now I know it can and did, and that changes my mind. I’m now wondering if I can handle being with a man whose job is to kill people. Yeah. I death on a routine basis.”

I expect Cage to blow me off because first and foremost, he’s a man more than that, he thinks nothing of going out on dangerous missions. I’ve lost more lives for that stuff. It makes him feel alive, and he has a passion for it. I know why I hate to even bring it up to Malik because he loves doing this kind of work.

Instead, Cage leans forward in the chair, bending and planting his feet on his thighs so his hands hang loosely between his knees. He regards

a conundrum. “You know the chances of something bad happening are minimal.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter to me,” I reply resolutely.

“Have you talked to him about this?” he asks.

“We’re shaking my head, I pick up a pen on my desk and start twirling it with my index and middle fingers. “I’ve just had this low, uneasy feeling over the last few days, and I really wasn’t sure what to make of. But now you’ve told me he’s been selected for training and slated to go on a hostage exchange in a dangerous country, it sort of made me terrified now. This is the first time I’m voicing this stuff to you.” “Then I’m going to hand you the same advice you just gave me: you need to talk to him about this.”

“I get it. “And what? Tell him I don’t want him going on dangerous missions anymore? Take away a career that makes him happy? Make him hate me?” “I doubt he’ll hate you,” Cage offers.

“If I make him give it up, he will.”

“He ponders this. “Maybe you’ll find a happy medium?”

“And what exactly would that look like?”

Cage shrugs as he stands from the chair. “I have no clue, Anna. I’ll suggest something you and Malik are going to have to figure out on your own. I don’t suggest you talk to him and soon, seeing as how he’s going on the training mission with us tomorrow to Ft. Bragg.”

“He’s going on that too?” I exclaim. Before he can answer, I ask, “What kind of training?”

“Military free fall,” he replies with a grin. “It’s going to be brutal and awesome.”

I roll my eyes. Having been stationed at Ft. Bragg—which is where all the HALO and HAHO jumps happen—Jimmy—I know all about HALO and HAHO jumps. Jimmy did plenty of jumps there’s a small worry about a loved one’s chute not opening and plummeting 17,000 feet to the ground. But I’d rather have Malik jump out of a plane every day for the rest of his life than going into the jungles of a violent Latin-American country to rescue hostages from guerillas.

“It seems we really do need to talk. I have no clue if I even want to give this up for me. Maybe I just need him to acknowledge my fears. Maybe I just need his reassurances he’ll be okay.”

“But I remember Jimmy telling me the same thing before he left. I told him I’d be safe and they had the entire operation planned out with

ing are precision it would be a cakewalk.

Jimmy had lied to me.

Malik probably would, too, just to keep me from worrying.

The real question is simply going to boil down to the fact of whether in my life my life caring for someone who has an incredibly dangerous job which I could die on any given day.

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Jimmy had lied to me.

Malik probably would, too, just to keep me from worrying.

The real question is simply going to boil down to the fact of whether I can live my life caring for someone who has an incredibly dangerous job and could die on any given day.

CHAPTER 25

Malik

I HAVE TO admit I haven't felt this wholly good in a long damn time. It certainly has been returning to me in pieces... a feeling of life could potentially be good again.

Starting with my rescue in the cold desert night, to being reunited with my family, to the simple pleasures of eating good food.

Being back at Jameson, and, of course, to meeting Anna.

Getting to know Anna.

Bonding with Anna.

Being with Anna.

All steps along the way to healing and taking back control.

It seems as if the last piece of the puzzle has been put back into place. A complexly shaped piece where all the edges had to align just perfectly. But when Kynan accepted I was ready to go back on full duty—when he essentially says he trusts me with the lives of the team again—then that's the final pivotal moment where Malik Fournier could say he had his life back in its entirety.

It's with this amazing feeling of accomplishment I make my way from the fourth floor to the second with the intention of seeing Anna. After my meeting with Corinne this morning, then Kynan, I hit the gym for a workout followed by a quick shower. I had considered getting packed for the training excursion to Ft. Bragg tomorrow, but figured I'd have time for that later.

For now, I just want to see Anna to tell her the good news. That I've been released by Corinne and Kynan has me back on the team roster with the boys.

After I jog down the floating staircase, I jump the last two steps to reach the second floor. I turn left, my gaze immediately landing on Anna through the glass wall of her small office. Cage is in there, sitting in her chair.

looks like they're having an involved discussion. He shrugs as he stands by the chair, which means whatever they're talking about is probably worth listening up.

I head that way, Anna's eyes moving past Cage to me as I approach. She smiles—short and wan—which means Cage has probably worn her out with some long-winded and highly ridiculous travesties he has going on with his girlfriend.

ne. It's Pushing the glass door open, Cage cranes his neck my way. I give a slight chin lift, and he smiles back.

ed with Feeling so damn good with how my morning has gone down, I do realize there's an audience of one in Anna's office. I move past Cage, around the desk, and bro code be fucking damned, I lean toward her. One hand on her neck, I hold her still and bestow upon her one righteously hot kiss.

Anna gives a soft gasp of surprise. When I pull away, I look toward her in defiance. I dare him to say something to me about it.

Instead, he just regards me impassively.

I straighten, look to Anna, back to Cage, then to Anna once again.

place, a "I told Cage about us," she murmurs guiltily.

r to pop "No worries." The easygoing tone has her eyes narrowing slightly. Giving my attention to Cage, I ask, "How was Vegas?"

when he hat was Cage flushes, which is a bit weird.

fe back Anna says, "Cage got married to Jaime."

I do a double-take, my jaw dropping. "You did?"

y down He nods and I find myself smiling broadly, sticking my hand out to shake.

a. After Cage takes it, looking like he just swallowed something nasty and then a hard frown in confusion, glancing back at Anna to try to figure out why he's so put out.

ve been Anna nods her head at Cage, her lips pressed flat. "Genius though she hasn't told Jaime the truth about what he does for a living."

the big My mouth hangs open as I swivel my head his way. "She still doesn't know? And you got married?"

o reach "Stop with the recriminations," Cage retorts. "I already got an earful through your girlfriend there."

; and it Yes, it pleases me to hear Anna referred to in that way. I start to chastise myself though and offer Cage an apologetic incline of my head.

ds fromdude. I assume Anna has already managed to read you the riot ac
rappingtelling her the truth as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, and I’m going to do it as soon as I can get some downtin
ch. Sheher. Leaving tomorrow for Ft. Bragg doesn’t make that an ideal tin
ut withnow.”

with his “Agreed,” I say, then immediately take off on a tangent. “So, who
going with us tomorrow?”

e him a I can’t contain the excitement of getting back in the saddle aga
nothing says a rousing good time like free-falling out of a plane.
n’t careadrenaline junkie like me, being a recon marine satisfied so much of n
nd herDuring my active-duty time, I’d trained in all kinds of jumps, in
behindHALO, HAHO, and static line. I did water and scuba training, high
driving, and, of course, the ever-dreaded but no-less-bad-ass SERE
d Cagewhere they teach survival, evasion, resistance, and escape techniques.

“Ladd McDermott... he’s former CIA but was an Army ranger
that, so he’s done all this stuff before. And Jackson Gale. He’s forme
SEAL like me. And Bodie Wright from the Vegas office is going to
too.”

lightly. “I haven’t met Bodie yet,” I say, although I’ve met his wife, Rach
runs the Vegas branch of Jameson.

“Super cool dude,” Cage replies. “Oh, and Kynan might com
There’s no bigger adrenaline junkie than him. That fucker once jum
Angel Falls in a wingsuit.”

for him “No shit?” I ask, seriously impressed. As much as I love the fee
free-falling, that’s a level of crazy I don’t ever intend to pursue.

bitter. I “Hey,” Anna says from behind her desk, and we turn to face her.
’d looka ton of work to do, so why don’t you two let a girl have some peace?”

I scrutinize her beauty. She has a genial smile on her face, seem
ere stilllegit want to get to work. This I can understand now that I’m allowed
the thick of things.

doesn’t “Okay,” I reply, moving back to her side. I bend to give her a sc

Pulling back just slightly, I ask, “Can I come over tonight? I’ll pick u
ul fromtakeout.”

She smiles with a nod. “Sounds great. I’ll be home with Avery
rd dulysix-thirty.”

“Sorry, “Awesome. See you then.” Another brush of my lips across her

about Cage and I are heading out of her office. When we clear her door, I glance over my shoulder at Anna, but her head is already bent over some document on her desk and I'm apparently forgotten.

Right I follow Cage out among the pit desks, intent to follow him to his desk where we can talk more about our trip to Ft. Bragg tomorrow. Then I'll hear someone else at a desk that had been assigned to me to read up on the situation in Colombia.

But Anna's voice stops me in my tracks as she calls my name. I see her standing in the doorway to her office, one hand on the jamb. "A minute to talk?"

I jerk slightly in surprise at her expression. She looks... distressed. Without a thought, I pivot on my heel and walk away from Cage and his school discussion. "Sure," I say.

As I approach her, she drops her gaze and moves into her office. I step in before her, letting the door shut behind me.

She doesn't take a seat behind her desk. Instead, she turns to rejoin us, with one arm crossed over her stomach, the other hand hovering around her throat. "Listen... about your trip to Ft. Bragg..."

"Yeah," I cut in, throwing a thumb back at where Cage is probably at his desk by now. "Sorry... got really excited about that. I didn't even have time to tell you about it, but when he started talking about the trip and you seemed so surprised, I just started prattling."

She shakes her head, waving her hand. "Yeah... no... I knew a little about it. I wasn't surprised."

"Good," I blurt out, unable to contain my excitement. "Because I've been pumped about going. About training again. And well, I was going to tell you about it tonight, but Corinne and Kynan have released me back to duty."

"That's really awesome," she says. While her eyes are shining with excitement, her voice seems a bit reluctant.

I'm wondering if she's just not getting the importance of this to me and trying to explain. "It means that not only have I accepted the way things turned out, but also that Kynan has trust in me to get back on my feet around again."

"Yes, I totally get that," she rushes to assure me, reaching out to touch my hands. "And that is more important to me than you'll ever know."

ze back “Then why do I get the distinct impression you’re really not all the
ments about it?” I ask hesitantly.

Her gaze falls away a moment, down to her desk. She nibbles
desk so lower lip. It’s the classic sign for wanting to say something, but not qu
d to the how to.

own in “Anna,” I say, putting my hand under her chin to force her attentio
to me. “You can tell me anything. Talk to me about anything. You
turn to respect every fucking word that comes out of your mouth, and you’ll
“Got a get judgment from me.”

I hate I have to even say that, because she knows it’s true. Esp
since she’s given me the same tenfold.

and our Resolve fills her eyes as she nods. “You might be going to Colomb
the trip to Ft. Bragg.”

I follow I sigh, finally feeling the true depth of her angst and from wh
actually coming. “Yeah... I was going to talk to you about that tor
gard mewell. I knew it would cause you some worry.”

und her “Some worry?” she repeats, a question that has enough bite to it th
tell I’ve minimized her feelings without intending to. Before I can
/ sitting validate, she grits out, “I would say I might have a bit more than ju
n think worry.”

I didn’t “Of course, you would—”

“I don’t want you to go,” she says resolutely, lifting her chin in
bout it, and crossing her arms over her chest. “I don’t want you doing this
dangerous work.”

n really I’m stunned at the finality in her words, as well as the notion she
talk to even levy them my way. I get her being scared. I get her wanting
to full about it. I get that she’ll need reassurance and a bit of faith in me.

But an outright denial?

h pride, I try to choose my words carefully. “Anna... I took this job with J
for exactly this type of work. I was done with military life and wante
re. I try autonomy back, but I still wanted to make a real difference. You kn
ned out about me from the start. We talked specifically about it one night.”

ut there She nods, sadness filling her eyes. “I know. I understand that abc
but I’m not sure I fully understood it until just now.”

ake my I move into her, putting my hands to her face and tilting her head
bit to see her. “What do you mean?”

t happy “When you and I started hanging out... talking... getting close. And when I started having feelings, and you reciprocated... I knew this is the job on her of work you wanted to do. But I don’t think it really impacted me about it sure that meant, because back then, you were on desk duty. We were in a protective little bubble where you were safe and I was probably being on back. But now you’ve been cleared, you’re going on a training mission, and I know I have been placed on a team to rescue hostages in Colombia. And well, I’ll never last time you went on such a mission, people died. You almost died well...”

pecially Her words trail off and she pulls out of my grasp, turning her back. “Now it’s real and terrifying,” I finish her last thought for her.

ia after Anna’s shoulders hunch forward. She shakes her head, her entire demeanor saying she’s ashamed of herself for feeling this way. “I’m here it’s sorry.”

ight as I move in close to her again, my hands going to her shoulders. Leah places a kiss to the back of her head. “This is a lot to take in. You’re saying that I can’t come to give up something I have a passion for. Asking me to change my rush to team.”

st some Anna turns, dislodging my hands from her shoulders. Her head tips as she looks at me with beautifully solemn but resolved eyes. “I’m not asking you to give it up. I’m just saying I don’t think I can be with someone who does this type of work. And I want you to be happy, to be able to pursue your type of passion always.”

A strangling sensation overwhelms me as if I can’t breathe. It’s not what I’d dare for her to say, “I don’t want you to go,” and then perhaps we can talk to talk through some more.

But for her to say she doesn’t think she can be with someone who does this type of work is a whole other type of resolution.

ameson Before I can reply, she adds, “I lost a husband to this job, and it devastated me. And now I’ve fallen for you, and the risk is very real and new this again. I just need you to know... my heart can’t take another loss like this. I can’t go through it again. And I see how you are with Avery, and I know that you, where this is going between you and me. We’re creating a family, and I certainly don’t want to let her lose another dad.”

back a Fuck do those words hurt. Because she’s right. Anna and I are moving forward, right toward creating a new family together, and Avery will be mine.

and later, I could ask for clarification on exactly what she means. Hope
he typenitpick her feelings and argue with her in what I know would be
ut whatattempt to bring her around. I could demand she be braver for me, but
in thisfucking douche thing that would be, giving she lost her husband to th
g naïve.of work already.

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She nods with a grateful smile. "I actually appreciate that, M
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Hate the fucking truth of it.

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Still... it doesn't mean we're supposed to be together.

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I could ask for clarification on exactly what she means. Hope I can nitpick her feelings and argue with her in what I know would be a futile attempt to bring her around. I could demand she be braver for me, but what a fucking douche thing that would be, giving she lost her husband to this type of work already.

In the end, I can't think of one thing I could possibly say to bring her around to giving me—giving us—a chance this way.

“I have to think about this,” I finally say.

She nods with a grateful smile. “I actually appreciate that, Malik. I mean... I don't want to put any pressure on you. I want you to be happy, but I want me to be happy too. It's just... despite how perfectly we've come together, I think we have one imperfection between us that is our doom.”

Fuck, I hate her saying that.

Hate the fucking truth of it.

And I also love her for being honest about it. If I ever wanted proof of why we are perfect together, it's because of the transparency we've always had between us.

Still... it doesn't mean we're supposed to be together.

CHAPTER 26

Anna

I BUSTLE AROUND my small kitchen, cleaning counters that don't need and re-washing breastmilk bottles for the third time. My mom sits at the small kitchen table, a sleeping Avery cradled in her arms. I don't even suggest she go put her down in her crib as my mom would simply laugh at me for such a ridiculous thought. In other words, grammys should have and will take unfettered access to cuddle their grandchildren at all times.

It's a bit atypical my mom is here at my apartment tonight, but I know I'd confided in her this morning when I dropped Avery off that I was in trouble in paradise between Malik and me, she just invited herself over for the evening. Even offered to bring Avery to me after work rather than swing by her house, which is the normal routine.

I didn't argue because, first, she saved me over half-an-hour commute time, and two... well, I just needed someone to talk to.

Except I haven't said a word yet, instead occupying my time and I know my thoughts to myself rather than share them with my mother. Because I can't speak them aloud, there's a chance she'll tell me I'm being stupid with my fears, then there's a chance I'll have to actually confront them.

And well... I'm terrified to actually face the things that scare me about Malik and the dangers in his job. By confronting them, I might just conclude I'll need to be a bit braver to have him, and that's something I'm just not sure I want to do.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on yet?" my mother finally asked, knowing there'd come a point where she'd force me to do something.

Now the ball is in my court. I can tell her everything is fine, which I know is a lie because I told her that all was not well and I'm acting like a basket case, or I can fess up with my feelings and open the door to her advice.

I set down a bottle I've been drying for a good minute, lay the towel

the sink faucet, and put a hand to my hip as I face my mom. “So, I think things were a little rocky with Malik and me this morning.”

She nods, clearly not needing the reminder. She wants the meat and potatoes of the issue. Her gaze moves briefly down to Avery before coming back to me with her brows lifted in question.

“He’s been cleared for full duty,” I say. “He actually left to go with Bragg this morning for some training.”

And then I wait for her brows to knit, her face to pinch with worry, then her eyes to soften in sympathy.

Except she just stares blankly.

“He’s going to be doing more dangerous operations,” I say, filling my face with an apparent blank she has.

Mom gives me nothing. Not even a flicker she’s bothered by this request on my behalf. I can’t figure out if she’s being purposely obtuse or she’s trying to strong-arm me into facing my fears.

“Mom... he could die,” I finally blurt in exasperation. “I could lose him after having just gone through the horror of losing someone I love.”

“So, you love Malik?” she asks, apparently her only curiosity. Her question is starkly brazen, and she’s making me confront an issue that is as big as my heart.

What exactly are my feelings for Malik?

I had yet to fully poke around them because it was easier to justify my things down by telling him I couldn’t be involved with someone in the office of work.

My mom is not going to be so kind as to let me continue to ignore it. Now her expression is a bit hard, definitely determined to make me peel away the layers and examine some hard truths.

“Do you love him?” she asks bluntly.

I blow out a long breath, turning my gaze down toward the sink. I really feel about Malik? I mean, he’s so different from Jimmy.

My husband was always going at top speed, and he was an excellent multi-tasker. He always handled everything because he was just going well... everything. I depended on him for so many things. While he was on soft words, he was big on important actions. I knew I loved him and would make the effort to just slow down to be with me, present in the moment.

old you Malik is the same in that he's a man's man, same as Jimmy had be probably typical for most military, but the differences are stark. Malik at-and-to talk to and while he'd never hesitate to step in and take care o comingnecessary, he gives me space to let me try it myself. It's a level of re didn't have with Jimmy, because he was just content to do it all for me o to Ft. One of the biggest differences is with the level of intimacy. Jimmy considerate lover who made me feel good about myself always. Any ry, andtouched me, I'd melt and submit.

Malik, though, is something else. I don't want to wait for him to me. I want to pounce on him at all times. We could be having a g in thediscussion, yet the back of my mind will still be buzzing with how all attracted I am to him.

I feel bad right this moment even acknowledging that, but there it ying tosexual chemistry I have with Malik is just something I hadn't really existed before.

Regardless, it's not their differences that have me confounded be think it's possible to connect with two very different men for very d But thereasons. Rather, it's the one constant they both had that has my stor at's justknots, and it's their line of work.

More specifically, that they do work that's so dangerous it cou them their lives.

It could cost me my heart again.

My mom waits patiently for me to answer her question... do Malik?

I can only tell her this. "I think the mere fact I'm so terrified of losi ne peelin the same way I lost Jimmy that it means I do. And I never thought that for someone again, you know? I thought Jimmy was my one chan by some grace, I was given another. And he's precious to me, M How doprecious the thought of losing him makes me want to shut myself awa thankful for the time and memories we've made. I'll hold them close, xcellentthem, and pull them out to remember. But I won't be hurt again."

"You'll be hurt if you let Malik go," she challenges.

I lift my chin. She's right, but she's also wrong. "Not in the sam when heTrust me on this, Mom. The pain of loving someone and them dyin a givenworse than just having a taste of love and letting them go."

She watches me, pondering my words, before giving a very slow s

men. It's her head. "I'm disappointed in you, Anna."

is easy I blink in surprise. I had thought I'd stopped wanting my mom's approval of me a long time ago. I'd even taken very deliberate actions after Jimmy's death to prove to myself and the world I could be just fine, could provide for myself on my own.

My was a And yet, that proclamation of disappointment from my mother had sunk deep in the gut, mostly because she's saying I'm not being true to myself and I know she's right. If I were being the brave, independent woman I thought I had no qualms tackling widowhood and single motherhood on my own, I most certainly could push past these current fears. Haven't I already faced around the worst and lived through it?

And therein lies the problem.

is. The I'm not sure losing Jimmy was the worst.

known I bounced back from that. It was painful and hard as hell to slog through it. Losing a husband and giving birth to our daughter without his support was a terrible cause.

different But this connection I have with Malik is different. Deeper, stronger, and much more intimate.

If I were to take that plunge and just let myself fall madly in love with him, and he was to die, I'm not sure I could survive it.



I love MUCH LATER, AFTER the pep talks with my mom are done and she leaves him, Avery is asleep and I'm tucked into my pull-out bed in the living room. I'd feel my phone to scroll through my texts.

ice, yet, Malik left this morning. I've not seen him since our talk in my room. So yesterday. He said he needed time to think, so I gave him space. In my mind, we were already over so the pain of heartbreak had already settled in, to be my mother confusing me all to hell tonight by making me consider my options.

Like bravery, sacrifice, and risk.

the way. He had sent me a text this morning, though. It was beautiful and far and it has confused me even more. He'd simply written, *I'll miss you.*

I'm not sure in what context he meant that.

hake of Would he miss me while he was gone to Ft. Bragg for training?

Would he miss me after we'd broken up because I couldn't handle the approval of loving someone like him?

He died to Was it his way of saying we were actually over as of now?

Avery I hadn't responded because anything I could say would seem trite, was the one who made the bold proclamation I couldn't handle what hits me for a living. He's also the one who said he needed to think things through by himself... He's the one who was torn between his job and me.

Who admitted, that stung a bit, but, deep down, I understood it.

My own, I I look at his words.

I missed the *I'll miss you.*

My fingers move across the screen, a panicky feeling overtaking me. Have I lost him already because I unilaterally decided I couldn't handle the reality of being with him?

Through My words are short, but true to my heart.

When I miss you.

Not past tense. Not a premonition of how the future will unfold.

But how I feel, right now, in this moment.

I miss you.

I wait with him I wait a few minutes for him to reply, but he doesn't. It's late, and there's a good chance he's asleep. He would have had an exhausting day.

Or he could be out with the guys, having some beers to celebrate a jumping out of planes.

Which is totally cool, too.

And I nab The point being, I don't take his lack of response to mean he's done with me. Malik isn't that type of man. If he said he wants some time to think about our future together, it means he's going to think about it and then we're going to talk about it.

In my mind, I put my phone on the table and turn out the light, accepting my feelings despite still very uncertain as of yet.

Or other

simple,

Would he miss me after we'd broken up because I couldn't handle the fear of loving someone like him?

Was it his way of saying we were actually over as of now?

I hadn't responded because anything I could say would seem trite, given I was the one who made the bold proclamation I couldn't handle what he did for a living. He's also the one who said he needed to think things through.

He's the one who was torn between his job and me.

Admittedly, that stung a bit, but, deep down, I understood it.

I look at his words.

I'll miss you.

My fingers move across the screen, a panicky feeling overtaking me. Have I lost him already because I unilaterally decided I couldn't handle the reality of being with him?

My words are short, but true to my heart.

I miss you.

Not past tense. Not a premonition of how the future will unfold.

But how I feel, right now, in this moment.

I miss you.

I wait a few minutes for him to reply, but he doesn't. It's late, and there's a good chance he's asleep. He would have had an exhausting day.

Or he could be out with the guys, having some beers to celebrate a day of jumping out of planes.

Which is totally cool, too.

The point being, I don't take his lack of response to mean he's done with me. Malik isn't that type of man. If he said he wants some time to think about our future together, it means he's going to think about it and then we're going to talk about it.

I put my phone on the table and turn out the light, accepting my future is still very uncertain as of yet.

CHAPTER 27

Malik

WHEN THE PLANE touches down on the runway in Pittsburgh, a sensation ripples through me.

A sense of homecoming, and it's been years since I've felt that.

It used to be flying home to visit my folks in Montreal produced a bubbly feeling of excitement, but now it's the fact Anna lives and makes her home here that has me reveling in it.

Pretty sure the message being spoken through feelings is Anna is home now.

Kynan helped me to figure it out. Can't say as I'm surprised as I've been told by others he has a known history of meddling in his employees' affairs.

It all happened over beers after our first day of jumps in Ft. Bragg. Kynan decided to join our training group, him being former British Special Forces. While he didn't go out on missions anymore, he wasn't about to pass up a chance for some thrills, which as owner of the company and the man with the congressional connections that made this training mission with government troops possible, it gave him the absolute right to tag along.

Since deciding to toss out concerns over bro-code violations, unwilling to let that stand in the way of my happiness—and, more importantly, of my relationship with Anna—I'd had no qualms with talking about her. So, when Kynan asked me about things were as we'd sat around a large table in some dive bar in Fayetteville drinking beers, I'd told him the truth. "Not good."

This led into a group discussion between Ladd, Jackson, Bodie, and me about what we do for a living and how it affects the ones we love. Bodie's recently been in the thick of things, having his own brush with the law as a POW on a Jameson mission. That was before I joined the company, and it didn't stress his relationship with his wife, Rachel.

But that's apples and oranges. Rachel is an agent with Jameson, and

has been on her own hair-raising missions. She's built for the risk of and death because it's part of her job and her passion.

Anna isn't built that way.

Bottom line, as my gut was swimming with way too much beer, my head overwhelmed with choices that needed to be made between local duty, I figured out what I needed to do with Anna.

When I'd sobered up the next day, it still seemed like a great suggestion Kynan had offered me.

When he got word the negotiations in Colombia were complete and the hostage exchange was a go, I didn't have a single regret about declining the mission and returning to Pittsburgh to talk to Anna. Kynan ended up staying with the men in my place, and I am pushing forward with settling my happiness.

I have the Uber driver take me to Jameson, since it's a Thursday. Anna should be in her office. It's probably not appropriate to have a discussion we need to have in our place of employment, but fuck it.

This absolutely can't wait.

I have the driver let me off at the entrance to the underground parking deck, then use my passcode generator to open the steel rolling gate, then walk through the parking spaces to the entrance door. A quick eye scan to confirm my identity and I'm in, heading toward the freight elevator that will take me up to the second floor.

When I alight, I immediately run into Corinne.

"Hey, stranger," she says genially.

"Can't talk," I reply curtly but with a friendly smile. "On a mission, make sure true love wins the day."

Corinne just blinks, mouth slightly agape, before she manages to respond. "True love, huh?"

"Finally figured it out," I admit to her with a cheerful grin.

"And that is?" she prompts.

"Anna was why I was spared."

"That's some pretty philosophical thinking."

"But no less true," I say, stepping around while waving goodbye.

And that's when my eyes land on Anna. Sitting at her desk, hunched over her work. It's not my imagination, there's a morose look on her face. I know I'd be an egotistical bastard to think I'd put that expression there, but I know

danger I think I did.

I put some speed in my step, reaching her door and knocking. Her head tips up, eyes looking blank before a slow smile breaks across her face. and my Unsure why I'm here, but happy nonetheless. "Hey."

ave and "Hey back," I murmur, stepping into her office and closing the door behind me. "I missed you."

olution "And I missed you," she replies, no ounce of hesitation in her voice. A woman who told me but a few days ago she couldn't handle my lifestyle.

and the Doesn't matter, though. If she needs me to give it up, I will.

ing the I'll do anything to keep her.

o going "Told you I needed to think," I press on, wondering if I should keep my distance and take a seat or if I should move closer to her.

Because my first words knock the smile off her face and her eyes flash with wariness, I decide to move closer. I navigate through the two chairs, slip under her desk, and perch my butt on the corner of it. "The rest of the team is moving down to Colombia. Kynan took my place."

The wariness remains. A flush of guilt is added to it, making her cheeks pink. It kills me she feels guilty that I didn't go on that moving exchange, even though I know deep in her gut she's feeling all kinds of relief I didn't.

ake me Reaching out, I touch her face with my palm. "Don't feel bad about this."

She shakes her head, almost dislodging my hand, but she immediately brings hers up to cover it, holding it close to her cheek. "I don't want to give up the things you love. I'm scared, yes, but I'll find a way to deal with it. You need to be happy, and part of that includes a dangerous job. We'll work on it."

umble. Fuck, how I love this woman. I know she's terrified, and she has every right to be. Her husband died doing the very same type of work I was doing. How could I ever ask her to live with that type of constant fear?

"Well, it seems we have a problem," I say, pulling our hands away from her face and tugging her up from the chair. I rise from the edge of the desk, pulling her in close to me. "You want me to be happy, and I don't want to be scared."

ad bent "I won't be scared," she says quickly—an absolute lie. "I promise."

ace. I'd Chuckling, I lean in to press my mouth to hers gently. When I pull away, I admonish. "Little liar. But I think I have a solution."

Anna tilts her head, questioning me with those beautiful eyes. Her face could get so used to looking at them day in and day out.

“I talked to Kynan, and he actually offered me sort of a unique job here at Jameson,” I say.

“What’s that?”

“He wants me to be Director of Tactical Training,” I reply with a smile. This smile, pulling her in even closer and wrapping my arms around her back until she’s forced to tilt her head back to see me. “He’s hiring guys with very diverse backgrounds, but not all have Special Forces training like I’ve had such as free-fall diving, scuba, evasion and rescue, deep my explosives, etc. He wants to implement our own training rather than work up with the government, and he wants me to head it all up.”

Anna’s mouth drops open. “For real?”

I nod and continue. “It will keep me here for the most part. We can be based out of Pittsburgh, but I’ll need to do some traveling, which means I’ll be able to stick close by you and Avery, and I’ll get to do fun stuff like jump out of planes and blow shit up. But, most importantly, I won’t be going on active missions with a high degree of risk, in and out of you.”

She shakes her head again, trying to pull away from me, but I hold her tight, deciding I’m never letting her go again.

“I don’t want you to give up the things that make you happy,” she says to me. “I swear I’ve done a lot of thinking over the last few days. I can cope, I want to promise I can handle this so you can—”

I cut her off with a hard kiss, bending her backward. My tongue immediately reacts when my tongue touches hers. It’s been a long time without her.

When I finally let her up, she looks slightly dazed, and I press my advantage. “You need to listen to me, Anna.”

I wait a moment for her to focus on me. When I feel like I have her attention, I say, “You are what makes me happy. Being with you makes me far happier than anything I could ever do for a job or a career. I’d give up my job and a million others like it for just a day with you, so please trust me.”

“I’m not sacrificing anything right now. The new job offer by Kynan is a bonus, meaning I can continue with Jameson because I like these people, it’s not what’s important.”

Yes, I It's at this moment—when I feel her body literally sag against me
eyes fill with relief—that I know this is the right decision for us bo
position would have easily given up her own peace of mind to give me my hap
but I'm glad I'm not asking her to do that.

“I love you, Anna.” These are really the only words that can ade
atisfied explain the reasons I'm doing what I am. “I want to make a life wi
r lower With Avery. And I want to make it our best life, which means I'm cho
a lot of path that makes me happy while making you happy as well. It's a win-
training us both.”

istance, If I had expected her to swoon over these words—perhaps fall in
pairing faint as she proclaimed the same back to me—I'd have been wrong.

Instead, she wrenches from my grasp and turns her back on me.

For just a second, I consider I have gotten everything wrong. Every
an do a thought I knew about Anna and how she might feel about me... I sei
g. That perhaps I misinterpreted something.

o all the But then she wheels back around, hair flying and an incredulous l
t of all, her face. “You love me?” she asks, eyes wide with wonder and voic
ference with hope.

I frown, because had she not just heard me? “Of course, I do.”

resist. I She squeals with excitement—which frankly scares me for an in
and then she's leaping into my arms. I mean, in a full-on assault w
insists. going around my waist, so I have no choice but to support her with my
Malik. at her ass and her arms locked tightly around my neck.

Then she kisses me. While we've had some great lip locks in the p
y body the best one yet.

vo days When she pulls back, she stares through shiny, happy tears. “I lo
too, Malik. So much. And when you just told me you loved me, I thou
ess my feel guilty. It's why I pulled away because I expected to feel bad a

Like it would be a hurdle to get over—having another man love me
ave her didn't feel it. Not one bit. Only happiness and peace, and I know
ikes me would want the same thing. I just...”

up this She averts her eyes, lower lip trembling a bit, but when her gaze co
it me... me, she murmurs, “I want to make a life with you, too. I want to live i
s just a life with you, Avery, and hopefully more kids.”

ple, but I can't help myself. Wanting to have her best life with me, letting i
dad to Avery, and wanting me to be a dad more times over... I let out

as her war cry as I twirl her around and around. She tips her head back, laughing. She When I come to a dizzying stop, I note several people out in the happiness, watching us. Giggling, Anna says, "Secret's really out now."

"Fuck the bro code," I mutter, then dip my head to kiss her hard. My life is beginning now. I'm never going to waste a single moment of my life worrying about anything other than making Anna happy.

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a war cry as I twirl her around and around. She tips her head back, laughing.

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"Fuck the bro code," I mutter, then dip my head to kiss her hard.

My life is beginning now. I'm never going to waste a single moment worrying about anything other than making Anna happy.

EPILOGUE

Anna

“CAN YOU ADMIT it’s a little cramped?” Malik mutters as we gaze at the small Christmas tree we’d just finished decorating in my apartment.

“I can totally admit it.” No sense in starting a fight over something we both agree on. There was only one spot available to place the damn tree. We had to unfold the bed from the living room couch, the bottom corner of which now pushes into the prickly plastic tree branches.

Of course, that’s Malik’s side of the bed so his feet are going to be cramped for them tonight when we go to sleep.

“But it’s... cozy, right?” I offer instead.

“We’re getting a bigger place,” he insists as he turns away from me and walks into the kitchen.

It was just five days ago when we declared our love for each other. Tonight is Christmas Eve, so I’m trying not to push his buttons too hard. In the past five days, he’s been wanting to move things along quickly. His original order of business was to demand we move in together.

I really didn’t have an argument about that, and I didn’t feel it was a problem soon in the slightest. Jameson apartments were out of the picture. I was about to raise Avery in an apartment on the top floor of the place I was currently in. Not to mention there was no more room there than here.

And, in all honesty, I don’t have a problem with moving out of this place. Getting something bigger, maybe a little bit outside of the city with a view would be nice.

But it’s Christmas, and we have plenty of time to decide where to go and when. For now, I’m enjoying the fact it’s snowing outside, and Malik, Avery, and I will be spending our first Christmas together.

I follow him into the kitchen, only to find him pulling milk out of the fridge. He next grabs some cocoa from the cupboard, and I know he’s going to make us two mugs of hot chocolate so we can settle into our

Christmas Eve together.

It's so sweet and thoughtful that I decide to stop pushing him about the living situation. I move in behind Malik, wrapping my arms around him. Because he's so tall and there's no hope of me putting my chin on his shoulder, I merely press my cheek into the middle of his shoulder. "How about we go out to look next weekend after we get back to Montreal? Maybe find a house with a yard?"

Malik turns to face me, putting his arms around me as he grins. "Not handling me, are you?"

"Just a little," I admit with a smirk. "But we do need a bigger place."

"I could cancel the visit home," he suggests. "And we can start right away."

Laughing, I shake my head. "Not about to cancel a visit with my parents."

"No, that wouldn't be a good thing," he agrees before pulling away. "I can finish making our hot chocolate."

Malik and I had made plans to take Avery to Montreal as the Fournier family is going to manage to be home at the same time. Her mother called me herself with the invitation, and she insisted I bring Avery as well. I didn't mind traveling with her.

I don't, and I'm excited to meet what I'm sure is going to become my family by marriage. That might seem as if I'm a bit sure of myself, but the last five days have produced more than just talk about a bigger place to live. We've talked about our future, which has included discussions about marriage and children and whether we're dog or cat people.

We're both actually, and we intend to have a house full of furry friends in a nice place.

No one at Jameson seems to think it's odd, either. Malik is a bit skeptical because his supposed bro-code theory was a bunch of hot air, but, secretly, he's relieved he doesn't have to defend his own honor over loving me.

"I know some of this seems fast," he says quietly before bending to get a coffee pot from the bottom cabinet. When he rises, he glances over his shoulder at me. "I'm going to take my time, though, before I propose."

My body locks tight. Even though we've talked in loose terms about living our lives together with children, I haven't even considered an official proposal. All of this just seems so natural and right—mainly because

horrors Malik and I have shared—that I never thought twice about the solemnity of how we get from being in love to hitching ourselves together figuratively, spiritually, legally, and such.

“I have nothing holding me back,” I say. It’s an assurance I need from him that my period of mourning for Jimmy is complete. Now he’s in a special place where I can visit him—almost daily—and keep his memory alive for both Avery and me. “You’re But the rest of my heart is ready to be occupied by Malik—full time when he’s ready.

“I have nothing holding me back either,” he assures me. “I just want to know that it will come when the time is right for us both. I’ll know the right time for me to ask, because I’ll know, deep in my heart, that you’ll say yes.”

“Then I trust you to know when that is,” I murmur. Malik smiles—and I know we are on the same page. From the nursery, Avery lets out a small cry. We both go still, listening to see if it happens again.

It does, so I start that way. But Malik stops me. “Let me get her.” For a moment, we just stare at each other before I incline my head and my steps into me, then hands me the pot. I’m now officially on hot-chocolate duty. He dips his head, kisses my mouth, and then moves off to the nursery to get our daughter.

So, one day, when he does ask me to marry him, I know the answer will be a yes without any hesitation.

Can Cage Murdock save his marriage? Their whirlwind romance led to a quickie wedding, but the honeymoon is about to be cut short when she finds out he’s been keeping a *big* secret. [Click here for details on Code Name Rook](#)

Want more from alpha hero Cage Murdock? Before coming to Pittsburgh he worked with the Jameson team in Vegas! [Click here to read Wichita Choice](#)

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About the Author

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New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy ro

and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something about everyone.

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ws and A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to a very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderful and naughty dogs.

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