



Mi Vida



SEAL
TEAM ALPHA

DEFENDING

Destiny

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVE LONDON

DEFENDING DESTINY

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Defending Destiny

1. Thorne

2. Destiny

3. Thorne

4. Destiny

5. Thorne

6. Destiny

7. Thorne

8. Destiny

9. Thorne

10. Destiny

Epilogue

Seal Team Alpha

Also by Eve London

About Eve London

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Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up this copy of *Defending Destiny*, part of the Seal Team Alpha series. I can't wait for you to meet Thorne and Destiny. If you love their story and want to learn more about my books (and get a free novella!) you can sign up for my newsletter here: <https://www.evelondonauthor.com/sign-up-for-my-newsletter/>

XOXO,

Eve

DEFENDING DESTINY

Where bluebonnets bloom and hearts collide, a festival's fate and forbidden love intertwine under the Texas sky.

Destiny

I'm in the fight of my life—trying to save my family's land from a developer who's willing to do whatever it takes to steal it right out from under me. My only hope is to raise enough money during this year's bluebonnet festival, and time is running out. When Thorne shows up, I feel like I might have found a hero. After a few days together, it's clear the connection between us is stronger than I ever imagined. But with every moment of joy, a shadow looms, knowing that the future of the land I love hangs in the balance.

Thorne

I didn't plan to spend my time on leave playing babysitter to my best friend's little sister, but when he calls in a favor, that's exactly what happens. The second I see the curvy brunette, I realize I've stumbled onto something unexpected—a place that feels a lot like home and a woman who might just be worth more than a promise made to a friend. As I join forces with Destiny to save her land, I'm drawn into the battle as if it were my own. But when she discovers the truth about who I am, I have to fight for the future I never knew I wanted until now.

THORNE

Driving into Hartsville, fields of bluebonnets stretched out on either side of the highway as far as I could see. The rolling hills provided a much different landscape than the arid deserts of Iraq that I'd grown used to over the past few years.

I swallowed hard. There'd been a time when I couldn't wait to get away from Texas, and now I'd agreed to come back. If it hadn't been for the promise I'd made a friend, I might be hiking another portion of the Appalachian Trail while on leave instead of serving as an incognito bodyguard to my best friend's little sister.

My phone rang through the speakers of the SUV I'd rented.

"Hey, Mike," I answered. "I'm pulling into town now." He was probably checking up on me to make sure I hadn't already bailed on my unofficial assignment.

"I'm not stalking you. I just got some additional info on the company Destiny's up against and wanted to pass it on." He was totally checking up on me and just didn't want to admit it. After spending eight years in the military together, I could tell when he was lying.

Instead of calling him out, I played along. "Tell me what you know."

He'd already filled me in on the corporation that had been trying to force him and his sister to sell the land that had been in their family for generations. It was a classic David versus Goliath story. Big business was trying to move in on a small town. It was happening all over Texas and there wasn't much that could be done about it since most landowners were happy to sell off acreage they weren't using for big bucks.

Mike's sister wasn't like most landowners. She'd been holding onto the family ranch like a rat terrier with a steak bone. According to Mike, she'd been doing a hell of a good job too. Until a development company decided they wanted to raze the old homestead and had started harassing her to sell.

"The corporation making the offer is a shell company. I'm still digging around to find out who's behind it, but my gut is telling me something's not right. Destiny's going to shit bricks. She'll never give in now." My buddy let out a sigh of frustration. "I wish I was there to help."

He was only a few months into a two-year assignment he'd taken overseas. That's why he'd sent me. I had thirty days' leave before I had to decide if I was going to extend my commitment to SEAL Team Alpha. My CO had forced me to take the time off and told me I needed to get my head straight if I wanted to come back. We all had our demons. Mine had just been fucking with me extra hard lately.

"I wish you were too." Then I'd be free to get lost somewhere off the grid for a few weeks instead of spending the weekend as a glorified babysitter.

"Did you figure out what you're going to tell her?" Mike had made it clear he didn't want his sister to know he'd sent me.

"Yeah. One of my foster brothers works with the refuge that's bringing in the animals for the petting zoo. He said I could pitch in with that."

"You're going to be scooping up pig shit? Damn, now I really wish I was going to be there." He let out a loud laugh.

"The only reason I'm even entertaining the idea is because I owe you."

He got serious. "I appreciate it, man. You're the only one I trust to take care of things in my place. If I'd known how bad things were, I never would have taken this assignment."

"I can handle it." I'd served multiple tours of duty in the Middle East. Surely, I could keep an eye on my best friend's little sister while she fended off a bully developer.

"If this festival doesn't go well..." Mike's voice trailed off.

"It will. You take care of yourself, and I'll take care of things here." I eased my foot off the gas as I passed the sign welcoming me to Hartsville. The land Mike's family owned sat just on the other side of town. That's where the bluebonnet festival was taking place, though there were several events scheduled in the small downtown area as well. "I'd better let you go. I'm almost there."

"Stay in touch."

“You know I will,” I promised.

“And watch out for Destiny’s right hook. She packs a hell of a punch when she wants to.”

“Got it.”

Never one for long goodbyes, or any kind of goodbye at all, he ended the call before I had a chance to ask what made him think his sister might have a reason to punch me. He’d warned me she thought she could take care of herself and wouldn’t take kindly to the thought of him sending someone to look after her. I’d have to take his word on that, because even though Mike and I grew up in the same part of Texas, we hadn’t met until our first day of basic training.

After that, we went through BUDS together and were assigned to the same SEAL team for a while. He’d left after eight years to pursue a lucrative opportunity in the private sector, right before everything turned to shit for me.

I shook the bad memories off for now. They’d come back to haunt me just like always. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I loved what I got to do for a living. That one percent fucked me up, though. It was all part of the job—the bad came along with the good—but it was getting harder and harder to live with myself.

Hartsville looked like most small Texas towns. People waved to each other when they passed on the street. Mom and Pop shops outnumbered the big-name retailers. American flags waved in the gentle breeze. It was the kind of place where people didn’t have to lock their doors at night and knew all their neighbors.

I’d envied Mike when he talked about growing up in a home with two loving parents and a little sister who adored him. Even under the circumstances, I was looking forward to finally setting eyes on the place he’d talked about so often.

After cruising through a few blocks of the charming downtown area, I reached the town limits and pulled into the parking lot of an abandoned dairy where I was supposed to meet my foster brother, Henry. When I’d called him looking for a way to get involved with the bluebonnet festival, he’d been more than happy to hand over responsibility for the petting zoo. We’d been raised around enough animals on Mama Mae’s ranch that he knew I’d be able to handle things for the long weekend.

“Thorne! Long time no see, brother.” Henry got out of the truck and

pulled me into a huge bear hug. I clapped him on the back and peered inside to see if I was finally going to get to meet the missus. Henry shook his head. “Devyn’s back at the farm taking care of a malnourished moose we just took in.”

“A moose? In Texas?”

“Yeah, some fucknugget from up north thought it would be fun to bring a baby moose along with him when he moved south. When he got tired of the heat, he moved back, but the moose was too big to fit in a trailer to take with him. He left it in an outdoor pen to fend for itself.”

My chest tightened. Hearing stories like that made me wonder about the future of humanity. “Please tell me you don’t have anything inside that trailer anywhere near the size of a moose.”

Henry laughed. “Not even close. The only one who might give you a little trouble is Shirley. She’s been a little extra lately.”

“The infamous Shirley. I guess if I can’t meet the woman who married you, Shirley’s the next best thing.” Henry had kept me up to date on Shirley’s story. The one-legged emu even had her own social media accounts and more followers than the governor of Texas.

“I’ll ride over with you to help get you set up. After that, you’ll be on your own.”

On my own was exactly how I preferred things. “Sounds good. Let’s get moving.”

He tossed me the keys so I could be the one behind the wheel when we pulled in. Posing as the petting zoo attendant would keep Destiny from suspecting I was really there to keep an eye on her and fulfill my promise to her brother.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled off the two-lane road and navigated down a shady drive.

“Those pecan trees look like they’ve been there for a long time,” Henry commented.

“They probably have. This land’s been in Mike’s family for hundreds of years.” I eased the truck to a stop next to a metal outbuilding. “If things go the way they’re supposed to, it’ll stay that way.”

“You’re doing a good thing, Thorne.” He held my gaze for a long beat before he opened the passenger door. He’d been fully informed of my plan to keep an eye on Destiny during the bluebonnet festival. “I’m going to open up the trailer to give the animals some air while you figure out where we’re

supposed to go from here.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go find Destiny and see where she wants us to set up.” I climbed down from the truck and surveyed the surroundings. The main house sat a few hundred yards up the drive. Stakes stuck up out of the ground with rope strung between them to block off parking areas. A huge banner hung over the open doorway of the pole building, welcoming everyone to the bluebonnet festival. Figuring that would be the best place to start, I headed in that direction.

A woman stood at the other end of the building. She had her back to me and was bending over something on the table in front of her. Worn work boots stretched halfway up her calves and she had on a pair of cutoff jean shorts that left way too little to the imagination.

I cleared my throat. “Hi. I’m looking for Destiny.”

“Well, you found her.” She stood and faced me, an expectant grin on her full, pink lips. “What can I do for you?”

This was Mike’s little sister? The family picture he carried around with him didn’t do this woman justice. She was taller than I expected, with the kind of curves that might make a man drop to his knees and thank god for sending him an angel. Amber eyes peered up at me from under the brim of a faded Rangers baseball cap.

Staring at her, I almost forgot why I’d come. Then she tilted her head like she wondered if I was capable of speaking or if I planned to just stand there and stare at her in silence for the rest of the day.

“Hey, I’m Thorne. I’m here to set up the petting zoo for the festival.” I held out my hand as I introduced myself.

She slid her palm against mine, her slim fingers wrapping around my hand in a surprisingly firm grip. “Nice to meet you. Thanks so much for taking part this year. I’m pulling out all the stops and hoping we make it the most successful festival yet.”

Reluctantly, I released her hand. I wasn’t a guy who easily got rattled. Working in demolitions had taught me how to keep my cool in even the most nerve-wracking situations. But smiling back at Destiny, I could already tell I was in trouble.

DESTINY

I could feel Thorne's eyes on my ass as he followed me over to the barn where I planned to house the animals for the petting zoo. I wasn't sure what it said about me that I didn't mind. I might have even added a little extra wiggle to my step. It wasn't every day I received a visitor as hot as the ripped tall drink of water behind me. Who was I kidding? I'd never seen a man like Thorne anywhere near Hartsville, not that I'd been looking.

Putting together this year's bluebonnet festival was like working multiple full-time jobs. For the past six months, I hadn't had time for anything unrelated to the festival. The sleepless nights and hours of planning would be worth it, though. They had to be. Losing the land that had been in my family for hundreds of years to a sleazy developer wasn't an option.

"How many stalls do you think you'll need?" I stopped at the entrance to the barn and waited for him to catch up.

"Um, I'm not sure." His dark brows knit together like I'd asked him to do some complicated mathematical equation.

"Well, how many animals did you bring with you?" I cocked a hip while I studied him. With his close-cropped hair and clean-shaven cheeks, he looked more like one of my brother's military pals than someone who managed an animal refuge. After a quick glance at his stiff jeans and barely broken-in cowboy boots, I wasn't even sure he'd ever even been inside a barn.

His lips split into a conspiratorial grin. "I've got a confession to make, Destiny."

"What's that?" I leaned against the big barn door and waited for his big revelation.

“I didn’t load the animals this afternoon. My brother’s in the truck. He owns the refuge, and I’m just helping out. They can’t afford to have someone spend the long weekend here since they’re short-staffed back on the farm.”

“That makes sense. I was starting to wonder.” He might be cute, but I didn’t have time to coddle a city boy who wanted to play cowboy for the weekend. “Are you sure you’re up for this? We’re expecting a big crowd, and if you’re not used to being around the animals, then —”

He pulled himself up to his full height and looked me straight in the eyes. “I can handle it.”

Oooh, the confidence in his tone was super sexy. The way his eyes flashed with slight annoyance that I dared to question his abilities had me biting back a smile. I’d find out soon enough if he was in over his head. I just hoped he’d be man enough to admit it if he needed help.

“Okay, then. Let’s go find out what your brother sent you with, so we know where to put them.” I nudged my chin toward the truck and trailer parked in the drive. Thorne headed that way, and I got a turn to study his backside as he stalked away.

The jeans might be stiff, but they still molded to his muscular thighs and cupped his ass just right. I resisted the urge to fan myself. He might be easy on the eyes, but I was more interested in finding out if he could indeed handle himself.

I’d listened to too many hollow promises since my dad died last year and saddled my brother and me with a debt we might never get out from under. Mike felt bad about taking an assignment overseas, but the only way we’d been able to hold on to the land was because of the money he transferred into my account each month. If we wanted to keep it in the family for generations to come, we needed the festival to bring in the crowds.

I tried to press the pause button on the worry running through my head. It would be right there waiting for me as soon as I let down my guard. As we approached the truck, a man stepped around the side of the trailer. Thorne introduced me to his brother Henry, who rattled off the name of each animal they’d brought with them.

I was about to help them unload the animals and get them settled when a shiny black SUV pulled up in the drive. Unfortunately, I recognized the vehicle and the suave douchebag wearing a suit who climbed out of the backseat. He’d paid me multiple visits over the past several months.

And I’d turned him down every damn time.

Gonzo must have recognized the sound of the truck. The big mastiff was half deaf but could always tell the difference between a friendly visitor he could watch from his favorite spot on the front porch and an unwelcome intruder who might need to be run off the property. He trotted up next to me, ready to get involved if needed. He'd been my constant companion for the past eight years and I'd be totally lost without him.

"Ms. Taylor. It's nice to see you again." The lawyer wore a light gray suit with a starched white shirt underneath and a bolo tie wrapped around his neck. My fingers itched to pull it tight and strangle him with it.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him, daring him to take one step closer. "Wish I could say the same, Mr. Dartman."

His eyes flickered to Gonzo, who sat down at my side. "I was in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by one last time. My offer still stands. You could accept it now and save yourself a ton of work this weekend."

I was desperate to tell him exactly where he could shove his offer. My mama always told me I could catch more flies with sugar than vinegar. When I was younger, I'd always wondered why I'd be interested in catching flies at all, but her advice had served me well over the years.

"Well, that wouldn't be very neighborly of me at all. As you're well aware, the bluebonnet festival brings in thousands of visitors to Hartsville every spring. I can't imagine the disappointment everyone would feel if they showed up to find the whole festival cancelled." My eyelashes fluttered as I tried my best imitation of a wide-eyed ingenue.

A slick smile spread across his thin lips. "Let me help you. I've got Shattered Souls on standby. Accept my offer and we can have them here in time to play the main stage on Saturday night. Go out with a bang and all. What do you say?"

I was a huge fan of the up-and-coming band and would give just about anything to see them play live. Anything but the deed to my family's land.

"You heard the lady." A deep voice came from behind me. I turned to catch Thorne crossing his arms over his massive chest and eyeing Mr. Dartman like a cockroach he was about to squash under his boot.

"I didn't catch your name." Mr. Dartman thrust out his hand.

"That's because I didn't give it to you." Thorne didn't budge. The lawyer's diamond cufflinks sparkled in the sun while his hand dangled uselessly in mid-air.

A tiny part of me was glad to have back up, but a bigger part of me was

pissed that a man who had no idea what was going on would interfere on my behalf. The damn lawyer didn't take me seriously as it was. He'd be even less likely to if he thought I'd brought in a man to help me out.

"Well, any friend of Destiny's is a friend of mine. Maybe you'll be that good friend who can talk some sense into her." Dartman pulled his hand back and brushed an invisible speck of dirt from his lapel.

"We're not friends, Mr. Dartman, and I'd appreciate you leaving my private property." I made my eyes even wider and blinked a few more times.

He shifted his gaze to Thorne and shook his head. "She's passing up a once in a lifetime opportunity. Be that good friend, son."

Heavy tension rolled off Thorne. Thick enough, I probably could have sliced it up like a loaf of my mama's banana nut bread. He moved with slow precision. One second, he was standing next to me, his body as still as a marble statue. The next, he had his hands fisted in Dartman's suit jacket and was forcing the asshole back toward his SUV.

"Let's get a few things straight because it sounds like you're confused. First, I'm not your son, and Destiny's not your friend. Next, she asked you to get off her land and if you're not gone within sixty seconds, I'll have no choice but to view you as an intruder."

My heart jumped. Seeing him come to my defense and manhandle Dartman had heart emojis popping up over my head. His actions also transferred some of my rage to his broad shoulders. Why couldn't the sleazy lawyer look at me with the same fear in his eyes? I'd been trying to run him off for months, but like an annoying toenail fungus, he kept coming back.

In less than two minutes, Thorne had him scrambling to get back into his vehicle and head down the drive. The SUV peeled out so fast that it left a dust cloud the size of downtown Hartsville behind him.

"There." Thorne waved his hand in front of his face to dissipate the dirt still hanging in the air. "Think he got the message?"

I rounded on him, my hands on my hips, my chest heaving. "What the hell was that? He'll probably send the sheriff out here next to arrest you for wrinkling his suit. You can't go around threatening people on my behalf."

"He won't get the sheriff involved." Thorne looked more amused than threatened.

"You don't know this guy. He's been hounding me for months to sell this land. Every time I turn him down, he comes back with a bigger offer." I wasn't about to open up to the bully of a man next to me about how hard

things had been since Dad died. He might have scared Dartman off with the threat of brute force, but he'd be back. And if this festival didn't bring in the crowds I needed to raise enough money to pay the back taxes, I might not have a choice but to take the lawyer's offer.

THORNE

I'd fucked up. I shouldn't have come on so strong. Seeing that asshole threaten her had rage boiling up inside my chest. He was lucky he got away with a wrinkled suit instead of the long overdue ass kicking he obviously deserved.

After the lawyer left, Henry and I got the animals settled in the barn and Destiny showed me the small cabin where I'd be staying for the weekend. It made sense to stay on the property instead of driving back and forth from the motel in town to take care of the animals. Plus, it put me onsite so I could keep an eye on things and make sure that guy didn't return.

I knew men like him. They thought the rules didn't apply to them and that the end always justified the means. That's what made him dangerous. I didn't like the way he looked at Destiny, either. He was toying with her and knew she'd never willingly accept his offer. That meant he had a backup plan. I needed to figure out what it was so I could put a stop to it before he had a chance to set it in motion.

But first, I had to head up to the main house for dinner. I'd showered and changed into a clean pair of jeans and a button-down shirt. We were only going to share a meal together, but that didn't stop the anticipation of seeing Destiny again from prickling my gut.

I still couldn't believe the gorgeous, confident, spitfire brunette I'd met earlier was Mike's little sister. If I'd known what I was getting into, I wouldn't have been so quick to agree. Not only was she stunning, but she had a backbone of steel and a passion that probably followed her right into the bedroom.

Oh, hell no. I wasn't about to let my mind wander into forbidden territory. Mike was like a brother to me. That meant I should view Destiny as the little sister I'd never had. Just like one of the guys.

I tried to picture horsing around with her like I used to with her brother. Instead of putting her in a headlock or kicking her ass in a competitive three-on-three game on the basketball court, the only images that came to mind were of me running my hands over her curves and spreading her thick thighs to find out just how sweet she would taste.

Mind over matter, asshole. I could do this. I'd imagine her as a female CO instead. They were ballbusters who had to work twice as hard to get half the recognition as the men who served with them. Unlike some of the other guys who thought women had no place in the military, I had nothing but respect for them.

Satisfied that my plan would keep my mind from wandering into the gutter, I headed toward the main house. The smell of meat on the grill made my mouth water. Music from the back patio had me detouring from the front door to walk around the side of the house. It sat a little higher up than the surrounding fields. A blanket of blue covered the hillside below while the sun hovered on the edge of the horizon.

"Try putting a price on a sunset like that." Destiny came up behind me, her voice soft and full of reverence.

Wispy clouds hung in the air and reflected the colors of the setting sun. The sky looked like it had been painted on. "I wouldn't know where to start."

She handed me a cold bottle of beer. "You can start by telling me how someone who has military man written all over him ended up working at his brother's animal refuge."

Mike warned me she was a smart cookie, and it wouldn't take her long to figure out there was more to my story than I initially let on. I was a firm believer that it was best to stick as close to the truth as possible to avoid getting caught up in a trap of my own lies.

"I'm on leave. Henry needed help, so I figured I'd spend my time pitching in at the refuge." I took a long draw from the bottle, hoping that would satisfy her curiosity.

"My brother was a Navy Seal."

"Once a SEAL, always a SEAL. They're good guys." I raised my bottle in a silent toast to Mike and hoped she'd move on.

"He loved it." She tipped her beer back and swallowed.

My mouth went dry as I watched her throat bob up and down.

Destiny's eyes took on a faraway look. "He'd probably still be with the team if we hadn't needed the money to start chipping away at the back taxes we owe on this land."

That was new information. Mike said he was tired of living out of a duffel bag and not being in control of his own time. I knew his dad left a bit of a financial mess when he died, but had no idea of the extent of it.

She shook her head and offered an apologetic grin. "Sorry. There's a lot resting on the success of the festival this weekend. I won't bore you with the details."

"You're not boring me at all. How can I help?"

"You already are." She set her beer down on a table and moved over to the grill. "This is the first time we're bringing in a petting zoo. First time for a lot of things. I'm hoping the extras will bring in even more people and that we'll raise enough to pay off the taxes we owe and keep that wolf of a lawyer from sniffing around."

I stopped myself from offering to take over at the grill and watched while she flipped two big steaks. "I'm sorry for stepping in earlier. Obviously, you can handle yourself."

"Yeah, I can. I've been doing it for long enough." She lowered the lid of the grill and nodded toward the sliding glass door leading inside. "If you're up for eating outside, I could use some help grabbing a few things from the kitchen."

"Just tell me what you need." As much as I wanted to save her and the land she and Mike loved so much, I needed to offer help on her terms.

"Come on." She entered the house with me right behind her. Close enough to catch a whiff of her musky perfume. The scent conjured up images of candlelight and white satin sheets. I forced them out of my head and tried not to focus on the way her ass sashayed back and forth in those tight jeans.

The kitchen reminded me of Mama Mae's place, where it had always been the heart of the home. Wide wooden planks covered the floor and a sunny shade of yellow on the walls provided a cheery backdrop. Mike had always talked about celebrating the holidays around a big round table loaded with his mom's homemade cooking. I'd always envied him those memories. Growing up at Mama Mae's was the next best thing to having a place where I truly belonged, but I'd still ached for a family of my own.

Destiny moved around with a comfortable grace. She plated a couple of

baked potatoes and opened the fridge to hand me a bowl of salad she must have made earlier.

“I hope you didn’t go to any trouble on my account.” She had enough going on without worrying about feeding me three squares a day.

“No trouble at all. Tomorrow is when the real work starts, so I hope you won’t expect any home-cooked meals after tonight.” She set the plates down along with a basket of bread before heading to the grill to grab the steaks.

“If I can survive on MREs, I’m sure I’ll be able to find something to eat over the next couple of days.”

She slid a perfectly cooked steak onto my plate. “I’ve got multiple food trucks coming to set up tomorrow and the café in town is hosting a bluebonnet cake decorating contest during the festival, so I’m sure you won’t go hungry.”

“Is there anything else I need to know about the festival?” The bite of steak I slipped into my mouth practically melted on my tongue. Destiny was hotter than a pin-up model *and* she could cook? I knew guys who would consider her the perfect catch. Guys who weren’t best friends with her big brother and might actually have a fighting chance with the bombshell brunette.

“Hopefully, Henry shared the important details. We kick off tomorrow night with a local band. You’ll need to have the petting zoo set up by three when I open the gates. The festival runs from nine to eleven over the weekend. If you don’t have help, I’ve got some volunteers coming who can take over for you long enough for bathroom breaks or for you to grab a bite to eat a couple times a day.” She held out the breadbasket. “These are my brother’s favorites. Homemade yeast rolls from our great-grandma’s recipe.”

She was seducing me with food, and she had no idea. I took a roll and swiped some butter across the middle before biting into the fluffy cloud of carbs.

“Is there anything you need from me?” she asked. The question was innocent enough, but my mind immediately traveled way beyond the friend-zone.

“Nothing I can think of.” Or nothing I could say out loud. My job was to keep an eye out and head off any attempts by the soul-sucking corporation who was trying to wrangle the land away from my best friend’s little sister.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Hopefully the festival would bring in the crowds she was anticipating,

and the low life would stay away.

The conversation turned to small talk. Destiny asked me about my time in the service, and I avoided providing any direct answers that might make her suspect I had an ulterior motive for showing up at the festival. By the time she brought out a plate stacked high with brownies, my belly was full enough to burst. That didn't stop me from biting into a heavenly square of chocolate.

"Thank you for dinner. I can't remember the last time I ate so well." The compliment was genuine. If I died tomorrow, I'd go knowing I'd been treated to a dinner worthy of being my last meal.

"You're welcome. I don't do much cooking anymore. Not since Dad died and Mike moved away. It's not much fun to cook for one." Her shoulders lifted in a slight shrug, and she peeled the corner of the label away from her almost-empty bottle of beer.

Mike hadn't mentioned it, but there had to be a man in her life. She was the whole package: beautiful, strong, capable, a miracle worker in the kitchen, and with enough spark inside her to set blaze to a bonfire.

Sensing the conversation might be inclined to take a turn more personal and willing to do anything to avoid it, I picked up her plate and set it on top of mine. "Thanks for a wonderful meal. The least I can do is clean up the kitchen for you."

Her eyes widened. "You don't have to do that."

"You didn't have to cook for me either." I flashed her a grin from across the table. "Maybe I love doing dishes and you'd be doing me a favor by letting me indulge in an activity I enjoy so much."

Her laughter sounded like music to my ears. "Okay, soldier. Knock yourself out."

DESTINY

There was something incredibly hot about watching the brawny man fill my kitchen sink with soapy water. My ovaries might have done a little shake and shimmy when he rolled his shirtsleeves up to expose strong, sinewy forearms. I sighed and enjoyed the arm porn. I'd always been a sucker for a man with muscles, and Thorne had enough to fuel my fantasies for days.

His hands disappeared under the suds, and I imagined he was caressing my skin instead of scrubbing my mama's old Fiestaware. Get a grip, girl. It had been too long since I'd been in the company of a good-looking man. And way too damn long since I'd enjoyed myself with a live partner instead of my battery-operated "O-getter."

To avoid the risk of grinding my hips against the barstool where I'd perched while I enjoyed the show, I got up to clear the rest of the table. Thorne might look like my personal fantasy man come to life, but I couldn't afford to split my focus. Not now when the stakes were higher than they'd ever been.

I set the salad bowl on the counter next to the sink and reached up to put the steak seasoning on the top shelf. This kitchen had been designed by my dad's side of the family—the ones who'd been blessed with height and long arms. I wasn't vertically challenged, but I still had trouble reaching the top shelf.

"Need some help with that?" Thorne took the bottle of spices and easily slid it onto the top shelf. His arm reached overhead, pretty much trapping me against the cabinet. A clump of suds that clung to his hand dropped onto my hair and slid down my forehead. "Oh, hell. I'm sorry."

He tried to wipe them away, but only spread them around. I laughed out loud at the way his brows furrowed. “It’s okay. Let me just grab a paper towel.”

“Here.” He reached behind me for the roll but knocked it over. Both of his arms stretched around me, holding me in an awkward hug while he grappled to rip a sheet from the roll.

Being held in an almost-embrace pebbled my flesh. This close, I could see the promise of a five o’clock shadow, feel his warm breath on my cheek, and smell the intoxicating mix of his cologne or aftershave or heck—maybe just his fresh-from-the-shower signature scent.

Needing to add some levity to the moment, I swiped a clump of bubbles from the sink and plopped it in the center of his forehead. “Now we’re even.”

He blinked, stunned. Then he scooped up an even bigger blob and set it on top of my head. “You really want to go there?”

I had no intention of telling him exactly how far I wanted to go with him. Instead, I ducked out of his loose embrace and raced to the opposite side of the kitchen island.

Thorne loaded his cupped hands with bubbles just as my phone rang on the counter in front of me. A quick look at the screen showed the name of the owner of the café. Taffy had to be up before the crack of dawn to get started on the homemade biscuits she served each morning. For her to be calling after nine o’clock, something had to be wrong.

The bubbles sailed through the air and smacked into the side of my face as I lifted the phone to my ear. “Hey, Taff. Is everything okay?”

Thorne’s contagious grin slipped away. He grabbed the dish towel from its hook and handed it to me.

“Oh, honey. I’ve got bad news. Real bad.” The older woman’s voice shook.

“What is it?” I perched half on, half off the barstool while I wiped the suds from my face. Taffy wasn’t one to make a big deal out of nothing. She was as down to earth as they came, which meant whatever had her scared enough to call me after her bedtime had to have her shaking in her cozy hand-crocheted slipper socks.

“The company that’s been trying to buy you out has sunk to a whole new level. They’re planning a huge concert tomorrow night featuring Shattered Souls. Can you believe it? I know they’re only trying to draw folks away from the bluebonnet festival, but the nerve of some people. Why, I’d like to

wrap my hands around that lawyer's neck and show him what happens when someone crosses one of our own."

All the hope I'd been holding inside my chest escaped like air whooshing out of an old balloon. Deflated, I looked up to see Thorne studying me. Worry lines bisected his forehead. He didn't need to see me break down. I turned my back to him and stepped into the living room, hoping he wouldn't follow.

"Where did you hear that?" Maybe Taffy was confused. In my heart, I knew Mr. Dartman had screwed me over, but I held out hope that somehow she'd heard wrong.

"It's all over the social media. And get this... it's the worst part... tickets are free." She let out a defeated sigh that stretched on forever. "What are you going to do, honey?"

I paused, waiting for inspiration to strike. Nothing happened.

"Destiny? You still there?"

"I'm here. I just don't have an answer." Victory had seemed so sure, so definite, that I hadn't seriously considered what might happen if they sabotaged the whole festival. "I need some time to think. Can I give you a call in the morning?"

Taffy clucked her tongue. "Of course. You just say the word and I'll spread it around for you. Everyone wants to see you succeed."

Everyone except Mr. Dartman and whoever he represented. He'd held those cards pretty close to his chest.

"Thanks. I'll talk to you tomorrow." I disconnected the call and let my arms fall limply to my sides. It couldn't end like this.

Thorne's hands skimmed over my upper arms. "Everything okay?"

I'd been strong. Since Mom passed a few years ago from cancer, then Dad died from a broken heart, and Mike left to take that job, I'd been managing everything on my own. I'd done a hell of a good job, too. But having to stay strong and being all on my own had taken a toll. Local folks like Taffy had done what they could to help, but there'd been no one to really lean on. No one looking out for me or propping me back up again when plan after plan failed to deliver.

The temptation to sink into Thorne's strong arms almost had me turning around and burying my cheek against his chiseled chest. Instead, I wiped a few tears away that had escaped my lower lids and pasted on a shaky smile.

"That asshole Dartman just announced a free concert tomorrow night.

He's bringing in Shattered Souls to play on the other side of town. I can't compete with that. Looks like opening night of the festival might be a bust." I attempted a nonchalant shrug that felt more like the first sign of an impending seizure.

"Come here." Thorne held out his arms.

I was tempted to take the comfort he offered, but I couldn't afford to entertain any weakness. Once I let doubt creep in, it would set up shop and tear me apart from the inside out.

"I'll be okay," I said as I turned away. "I just need to make sure the rest of the weekend is a huge success or figure out a way to keep that concert from happening."

His cheeks reddened as his arms dropped. He wasn't a man who looked like he got turned down very often. "Yeah. Let me know if I can do anything to help."

"I will." He'd finished the dishes while I'd been on the phone. My mama's colorful plates were stacked up in the drying rack and the counters sparkled. "Thanks for doing the dishes. I guess I'll see you in the morning?"

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

Shaking my head, I moved through the living room toward the front door. "I'm going to soak in the tub and see if I can come up with any last-minute ideas. I'm not sure what time you need to get up to feed the animals, but I'll have coffee on by six if you need some caffeine to get you going in the morning. The kitchen door is always unlocked, so help yourself."

He seemed reluctant to go, but I couldn't wait for him to leave. I wouldn't be able to hold off my breakdown much longer.

"I'll see you in the morning, then."

I nodded as he stepped onto the front porch and gently closed the door behind him. His boots clomped down the steps and I finally let the tears squeeze past my clenched eyelids. There had to be a way to stop Dartman and his evil plan. I'd come too far to let him take everything away from me now.

THORNE

*I*t almost killed me to leave her when she was hurting. I could see the pain in her eyes and feel the heavy weight of her disappointment like a sucker punch straight to my gut. She might need to brainstorm some ideas, but I was a man of action. As soon as she'd rushed me out the door, I dialed up my buddy Dylan.

He answered before it even had a chance to ring on my end. "Gonzo. Hey, man. Have you made up your mind already about going back?"

Dylan knew what went down and the guilt I carried with me. He was the one who'd encouraged me to take my leave and think about things. I'd ignored him, figuring I knew better, but then my CO made it clear taking leave wasn't as much of a suggestion as it was a direct order.

"I've got plenty of time for that. Right now, I'm stateside, trying to scare a bully attorney with big dick energy away from snatching up a beautiful woman's land."

"Dude, is that code for something? Is this connection compromised?" Dylan teased.

I gave him a quick rundown of the promise I'd made to Mike. The two of them never met, but they'd heard enough about each other through me that I trusted Dylan to give me some solid advice.

"So, you need to shut down his concert and divert everyone back to your girl's flower festival," he summarized.

"They're bluebonnets. As in the state flower of Texas, dumbass."

"That's what I said. What do you have to work with?"

Straight to the point. That was one of the things I'd always appreciated

about him. “I was going to head over and stake the place out. If they’re planning on setting up a whole stage area, I figure they’ll have to work through the night.”

“Knowing you, you’re probably tempted to blow shit up. I’d strongly advise against that.”

“Just because I’m the demo man doesn’t mean I think explosives are always the best answer.” Though our training had ensured we were well-rounded frogmen who could handle anything our opponents tossed our way, I’d developed an interest and an ability in demolitions. Plus, I wasn’t going to lie, sometimes it was a lot of fun to blow shit up.

Dylan laughed. “Remember that prank you pulled on our first deployment to Afghanistan?”

“When we got Bridger to dress up like a turkey for Thanksgiving?”

“No, man. When we spliced and diced the PA system to broadcast him having phone sex.”

“I was young and stupid then.” Damn, we’d done some twisted shit together. Same with most of the guys I’d served with overseas.

“I’ll give you younger, but I’m not sure you’ve gotten much wiser in your old age.”

“Aw, fuck off, Dylan.” I missed the guys, especially the ones who wouldn’t be coming home like Bridger. My CO might think he’d convinced me what happened wasn’t my fault, but I blamed myself more than anyone for the accident that had taken his life.

“Back to the slicing and dicing. Why don’t you fuck with the wiring?”

I’d thought about that, but it wouldn’t take an electrical genius to figure out what had happened and repair or replace the faulty wiring right away. “I need something better. Something that will make it impossible for the show to go on.”

“You think they’ll be running a generator to power everything?”

“Probably several. Dude, you’re a genius. Are you thinking a little dish soap in the tank might do the trick?”

“Bingo. I’m sure you would have come up with that on your own if given enough time.”

I wasn’t convinced of that, but I was grateful for his willingness to help me brainstorm. “Thanks, man. Hey, how have you been?” He’d done a number on his shoulder and had been sent stateside to recover.

“My brother got me an appointment with the best surgeon around, Des

Boker. The doc worked a miracle. He didn't just fix my shoulder; he gave me back my edge. The only thing I need to figure out now is whether I go back or take retirement—twenty years is enough to get the pension. I thought I could stick it out to thirty, but now I'm not so sure.”

That was rough. Both of us had a big decision to make. One neither of us was looking forward to. “Let me know what you decide, and I’ll keep you posted on how things go here.”

“Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“For fuck’s sake, don’t get caught.”

We said goodbye and ended the call. I had no intention of getting caught. I’d figured I might have the need to do some recon while I was in Hartsville, so I’d made sure to bring some gear. As soon as I got back to the cabin, I changed into black pants, a long-sleeved black shirt, and pulled out a black ski mask.

Forty-five minutes later, I crouched down next to a flatbed truck that a group of guys had just emptied. Dartman must have known Destiny would turn him down. There was no way the set up they’d put together hadn’t been in the works for at least a couple of days.

A wide stage sat toward the back of a large, cleared field. Lights hung from scaffolding that stretched across the front. The set up rivaled some of the multi-day music festivals I’d attended way back in high school.

I found a spot where I could lie low until I figured out how they’d laid everything out. Then I waited.

Around two, the crew turned off the lights, packed up their crap and headed out. The red taillights had barely disappeared down the dirt road before I headed to the tent where all the power lines converged. I was no electrical engineer, but I knew enough to completely fuck over their wiring. Hopefully, the second they flipped on the power, the circuit board would overload, and they’d be out of business for a while.

Next up, I located the generators they’d placed around the perimeter and added a bottle of Mama Mae’s favorite dish soap to the fuel tank of each. Once those bad boys fired up, the lines would fill with bubbles. Even if they got the wiring sorted, they wouldn’t be able to have much of a show without any power.

It was almost five when I cut the engine and steered the truck to a stop in front of the cabin. I’d barely gathered my stuff together when someone

knocked on the driver's side window.

My pulse spiked as I looked over to see Destiny standing next to the truck. It wasn't light enough to make out her expression, but she didn't look happy to see me. I gave her a quick wave, then opened the door and climbed down to stand next to her.

She had on a short robe that drew my eyes to her thick thighs, and her feet shoved into a pair of cowboy boots. "Where've you been?"

"I'm sorry. Is there a curfew you didn't tell me about?" I tried to play it off. The less she knew about where I'd been and what I'd been doing, the better off she'd be.

"You've been gone for hours. Gonzo woke me up just in time to see you pull out of the drive. Please tell me you weren't anywhere near the Oliver's place." Her arms crossed over her stomach, pushing her breasts up in the process. Damn, it was hard to think straight with her standing there looking like she'd just crawled out of bed.

"Who are the Olivers?" My expression stayed neutral as I passed her and entered the cabin.

"Don't try to bullshit me, Thorne. You're wearing black from head to toe, and you just tried rolled down the drive with the engine off. What are you up to?"

I was too tired to try to come up with a believable excuse. "Did you think of a way to shut down Dartman's concert?"

The fire in her eyes faded. "Not yet."

"Let's just say your problem might take care of itself." I pulled the long-sleeve tee over my head. I'd worked up a sweat sneaking around the stage and was ready for a quick shower. I wasn't about to shed my pants in front of her, though. She looked too damn delectable already.

"This isn't your problem." Her messy bun slid to one side as she shook her head. "I don't want you to get into any trouble on my account."

I reached up to brush her hair away from her cheek. "You don't have to do this alone, Destiny. Let me help you."

Instead of turning away, she nestled her cheek against my palm. "I don't know whether I should cuss you out or kiss you."

Need raced through me, making a beeline for my cock. I shouldn't have tilted her head up, but I did. Shouldn't have stared deep into her beautiful brown eyes, but I did that too. And then I did the one thing that I really, really, really shouldn't have done.

I kissed her.

She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed me back.

Her arms stretched up to clasp behind my neck. Feeling her skin glide against mine sent heat hurtling through my belly. The last thing I wanted to do was pull back, but I needed to end this. She was my best friend's little sister—the one woman in the world I could never have.

Even knowing that, I'd never wanted anyone more.

Her lips parted and her tongue pressed against the seam of my mouth. I wasn't used to letting someone else take control, but Destiny wasn't asking for permission. She demanded entrance, and I was helpless to stop her. Being with a woman who knew what she wanted was more than a turn-on—it was intoxicating.

Drunk on desire, my hands roamed up and down her sides. The robe slid off her shoulder. She shivered in the early morning chill, so I wrapped my arm around her and led her into the cabin.

It wasn't much warmer inside. That's why I tugged her toward the bed and pulled the covers over both of us. I just didn't want her to be cold. The argument was weak, but at the moment, so was my willpower.

Her robe fell away from her shoulders, exposing the silky thin-strapped nightgown she had on underneath.

"You're beautiful, Destiny." I mumbled the words into her mouth without breaking our kiss. I'd never wanted a woman more than I wanted her.

But she wasn't mine to have.

"We shouldn't be doing this." I tried to peel my hands off her, even as my tongue slid against hers.

"Yes, we should." Her fingers drifted to the waistband of my pants. Moisture leaked from the tip of my cock. I wouldn't last more than a few seconds inside her. Based on the way I was ready to fuck her palm, I didn't think I'd make it long enough to slide deep into her slick heat.

She pushed my pants over my hips, and I cursed myself while I kicked them off. If I stopped now, she'd wonder why. I wouldn't be able to lie to her. I'd have to tell her Mike had sent me. She'd be pissed at him and even angrier with me. My mission would end in failure. There was no easy way out.

I was a bastard for considering the alternative, but I had to examine every possible solution. If I gave in, what would the worst possible outcome be? Mike could find out. He'd hate me. He'd try to kick my ass the next time we

met up, and I'd let him. But Destiny would be okay. That was the main point of my mission. God, I'd tell myself all kinds of lies to justify my actions.

Her fingers closed around my cock. All the blood in my brain diverted to my crotch. I couldn't think, couldn't talk, couldn't do anything but feel.

At that moment, I made my choice.

DESTINY

Something inside Thorne shifted. One minute he was trying to pump the brakes and the next, he had one hand fisted in my hair and the other sliding my nightgown up over my hips. I arched into him while I ran my palm up and down his thick shaft. Everything about him was super-sized, right down to his cock.

He took charge of the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth while his fingers slipped past the thin waistband of my panties. It was like he'd been holding back and finally decided to stop fighting the heat between us.

His lips skated down my cheek and over my neck. Heat pooled in my core. I wanted him, and I wasn't shy about letting him know. My nightgown slid over my bare breasts, the friction of fabric over my nipples too much to take. Thorne sucked one hardened bud into his mouth through my nightgown. The warmth of his mouth on my skin, even through the thin fabric, had me aching for more.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to, Destiny." He lifted his gaze to tangle with mine. "You say the word and I'll stop."

"What if I want you to keep going?" I scratched my nails over his closely cropped hair—a telltale sign of a military man. He wore it a little longer on top, but not nearly long enough for me to grab onto and bring his mouth back up to mine.

His lips quirked up into a smile full of sinful promise. Then he ducked his head and trailed kisses all the way down my belly.

My hips lifted as his tongue circled my clit. He pinned me in place with a firm palm on my belly. "Patience, you little minx."

“I’m a lot of things, but patient isn’t one of them,” I warned.

“Then you’d better hold still so I can get back to work. If I have to use both hands to hold you down, I won’t be able to do this.” His finger slipped into my slit.

Damn, that felt good. But instead of easing the pulsing ache, his touch just made my need grow stronger. “Is that all you’ve got, soldier?”

His throaty laugh added fuel to the flames of my desire. “You’re desperate for me to fill up that needy pussy, aren’t you, minx?”

Nodding, I tilted my head back. “Yes. That’s exactly what I want.”

He added another finger to the first. His thick fingers slid in and out. He knew exactly where to touch me and easily found that elusive spot that most men didn’t even believe existed. The promise of release pulsed deep inside me. “That’s so good, Thorne. I need more. I need you.”

His shoulders nudged my thighs apart. The thrill of anticipation pebbled my skin. Then his tongue slipped inside my folds.

I tightened my grip on his hair, willing him to drive deeper. He delivered. The man ate my pussy like his life depended on it, like it was his sole purpose in life, like it had become an Olympic event, and he was determined to win the gold medal.

My entire body tensed, then I came so hard my legs shook. My teeth chattered. My scalp tingled. His tongue took me to another dimension and held me there while my cells rearranged themselves. I fell back onto the mattress, totally spent.

He wiped my release from his chin, then kissed his way back up my body and sealed his mouth over mine. His heavy cock rested on my belly, reminding me he was still fully engaged.

I could have returned the favor and sucked him off, but I was greedy and selfish and wanted to feel that big boner inside me.

“Condom?” I asked, expecting a man with his level of skill to have protection at the ready.

“Negative. It’s not like I planned on seducing the bluebonnet queen this weekend. You?”

I was a strong believer in taking precautions, but it had been a long damn time since I’d needed protection. I shook my head. “No. But I’ve got an IUD and a clean bill of health. You?”

“No IUD, but I’m clean as well.”

A giggle escaped my lips. The man could make me laugh almost as hard

as he could make me come. The combination was too tempting to deny.

“Do you want to ride or be ridden, soldier?”

He rolled onto his back and easily lifted me onto his lap. “Can’t we do both, minx?”

If I hadn’t already been smitten, he would have just sealed the deal.

“Ladies first.” He gave me a lazy grin, then nudged his hard-on into my leg. “I guess you’re riding bareback today.”

“Do your cheesy lines usually work?” I planted my palms on his chest and lifted my hips to ease down on his rigid cock. This was what I’d been craving—the full feeling of having a man seated deep down inside me. But Thorne wasn’t just any man. He was everything I’d envisioned my perfect man to be, right down to the warmth in his eyes and the cleft in his strong jaw.

“You’re the only woman I’ve ever used them on, so I’d have to say yes.”

My heart couldn’t take much more of his disarming charm.

“No more talking, soldier.” I swiveled my hips, grinding my pelvis into his, well on my way to my second orgasm.

He shook his head, like he was tolerating my attempt at taking charge. His hips bucked, sending him deeper. With every thrust, my eyes rolled a little farther back in my head. When he reached up and cupped my breasts, I almost came. Then he rolled one nipple between his thumb and finger. A bolt of heat shot straight through my core.

I didn’t think it could get any better until he pushed up and sucked my other nipple into his mouth. That’s when I shattered around him.

We stayed like that for several minutes—me straddling his hips while the fog of my orgasm slowly lifted and his cock still hard and seated deep inside me. When I felt like I’d finally caught my breath, he flipped me over onto my back and hovered over me.

“You’re so cute when you try to take charge.”

I tried to think of a sassy reply, but my brain hadn’t had a chance to reboot and come back online. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means it’s my turn now, minx.” His tongue skimmed over his lip. “And I’m just getting started.”

My core quivered at the implied promise in his tone. He’d already given me two orgasms. Was the man trying to break me? I couldn’t wait to find out what he had in store.

It didn’t take more than a minute for him to have me balancing on the

narrow edge of another release. This one started from a place deep inside my core. I was used to seizing the hint of a possible release and pursuing it frantically, like chasing a unicorn through a dense forest. It was always one step ahead, just out of reach. But this... whatever journey Thorne was leading me on... it was deeper, stronger, more intimate than anything I'd ever experienced before.

Our bodies moved in sync like we'd rehearsed and performed this sensual dance together hundreds of times before.

"You almost there, Destiny?" His voice sounded was part question, part strangled moan.

"Almost. Just... oh, like that. Just like that." His swollen cock hit that magic button. Jackpot. Bells jangled, and lights exploded behind my eyelids. The payout went on and on and on while he strained, tensed, and went totally rigid. The walls of my sex pulsed around him, milking him dry.

"Fuck, minx. That's so fucking good," he mumbled into my mouth.

I couldn't answer. I was too full, too sated, and way too far gone to form words.

AFTER, he held me against his chest, his hand slowly running over my hair. The first rays of the morning sun peeked through the blinds. I needed to get out of bed. After all, today was a big day. All the work I'd been doing to ensure the success of the festival had been leading to this weekend. But I didn't want to move.

I didn't want to break the comfortable cocoon the two of us shared. Once I walked out the door of Thorne's cabin, there would be last-minute details to deal with and fires to put out. Life would be so much easier if I'd allowed myself to take Dartman's offer. Even after paying off what we owed on the ranch, Mike and I could split the funds, and each of us would have more than enough to start over.

"What's running through that beautiful brain of yours?" Thorne asked.

I propped my chin on top of my hands and lifted my head to meet his gaze. "You don't want to know."

"Wouldn't have asked if I didn't care about the answer." He lazily lifted a brow. "Are you feeling okay about opening the festival this afternoon?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Now I was curious about what he was thinking. Thorne seemed to always be one step ahead. Maybe he worked on military

strategy or something similar. Whatever he did, I was glad he was on my side.

“When Dartman realizes he’s not going to get the crowd he was going for tonight, I’m assuming he’ll try to retaliate.”

He made it sound so serious. “It’s not like we’re at war. He made me an offer, and I declined. Then he tried to lure away the customer base I’ve spent years acquiring, and karma gave him a swift kick in the ass.”

“Is that what you’ve decided to call me from now on? Karma?”

“What would you rather I call you? Angel of Deliverance?” I was feeling feisty after the three orgasms he’d delivered.

“Nah. Demon Slayer has a bit of a ring to it, don’t you think?”

I traced the ridge of a long scar just under his ribcage. “Is that how you got this? By slaying demons somewhere far, far away?”

His smile faded. “No. I got that one from a kid who caught me by surprise.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” I’d learned from having conversations with my brother about the missions he’d been on, that it was best not to pry.

“There’s not much to tell. It was during my last deployment. One of the guys I was with always had a soccer ball with him. There was this group of kids that would come around every day about the same time. Most days, we’d take a break and kick the ball around with them for a while.”

He looked over at me. “We thought it would be good to build rapport. You know, most people think everyone over there is the enemy, but sometimes they’re just kids who want to be able to be kids for a while. I let down my guard. One of them pulled a knife out from under his shirt and tried to fillet me with it. Missed my abdominal aorta by less than a few millimeters. My buddy Bridger wasn’t as lucky.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. If I’d been paying closer attention instead of playing soccer, I might have noticed the knife. Bridger might not have come home in a box with an American flag draped over it.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything at all. Just held him tight and tried to let him know without words how sorry I was for the loss he’d suffered.

“I need to get up and feed the animals. I’m already going to be getting an earful from Reggie. If he doesn’t get his breakfast served by six o’clock sharp, he’s going to be spitting at me all day.”

“Who’s Reggie? I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“He’s a llama. A full-on drama llama to be exact. I’d much rather stay here in bed all day with you, but we both need to get moving, minx.” He leaned down to press a lingering kiss to my forehead. “Can I see you later?”

Reluctantly, I slid out of the bed and searched for my discarded pajamas. “I’ll be around.” No need to make our early morning tryst into anything more than it was.

Thorne wrapped his fingers around my arm and pulled me back toward the bed. “I don’t want to just see you around, Destiny. I’m asking if we can make plans to spend some time together.”

My cheeks bloomed with heat. I probably looked like a blushing schoolgirl who just found out the hottest boy in the class wanted to ask her to the Homecoming dance. “I’m sure we can make something work.”

“Good.” He pulled me close and kissed me.

I wasn’t going to get much work done today if I was walking around with my head full of hearts. So, I pulled back and offered him a hint of the smile I felt inside my heart.

“See you later, soldier.”

THORNE

Opening night was a hit thanks to the Shattered Souls concert being cancelled at the last minute. I barely saw Destiny after she left the cabin. After I got my stuff done, I wandered around and helped some of the local vendors set up their booths. I'd been expecting a pasture or two full of bluebonnets and a couple dozen kids who wanted to pet a baby goat, but what Destiny had pulled together far exceeded my limited vision. At one point, I tried to do a quick estimate of the number of parked cars I could see, but gave up when a busload of tourists pulled up and blocked my line of sight.

I barely saw Destiny while she raced around the festival and made sure everyone had what they needed. When I did, she had a smile on her face as wide as the Gulf of Mexico and that big beast of a dog shadowing her. I still couldn't believe she'd inadvertently named him after me.

The animals cooperated fairly well with the number of kids and adults who stopped by. Shirley was the big attraction. I kept telling Henry he needed to start taking paid endorsements for the beady-eyed emu. She'd come a long way since they'd first rescued her, and even with the prosthetic leg he'd made her, she showed no signs of slowing down.

Reggie had to be put in time out in the trailer. I couldn't come within ten feet of him without him launching a glob of spit my way. I'd accidentally stepped on his foot earlier, and the damn llama held onto a grudge longer than Mama Mae had been hand knitting helmet liners for the Army. I texted Henry to see if he had any tips and he suggested Reggie and I look into couples' therapy together. Not fucking funny. I slipped the long-necked dude an extra handful of chopped carrots and hoped he'd forgive me.

Finally, after the last set of taillights faded away, I went looking for Destiny. The food truck vendors were cleaning up their rigs and heading out. All the local craft booths had been shut down for the night. It was almost midnight, and I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours, but as soon as I saw her, the weariness seeped out of my bones.

"Did you have a good day?" I shot a quick glance around before I slipped my arms behind her back and drew her in close.

"The best day. Based on the numbers coming in, I blew away my goal for day one within the first few hours." Her happiness was contagious, and I returned her wide smile.

"That's great, and you've still got two more days to go." I'd taken breaks throughout the day to walk the perimeter of the festival. Families and couples had snapped pictures in the fields, throngs of festival goers waited in long lines to grab a bite to eat, and I hadn't seen anything that appeared out of place or gave me reason to believe Dartman was making plans to strike back.

"I don't know what you did last night, but thank you." Her hands clasped behind my neck, and she pulled my head down for a kiss.

More than happy to oblige, I cradled the back of her head in my palm, tilting her chin up at the perfect angle to let me kiss her long and deep.

"Do you want to sleep up at the house tonight?" Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She hadn't been so shy this morning when she mounted me like her favorite bucking bronc and rode me to her release.

"Do you want me to sleep up at the house tonight?" I was all for it, assuming there wasn't going to be a lot of sleeping going on.

Mike always said we could sleep when we were dead. There was too much to experience during the short period of time we had on this earth. A pang of guilt cut through my stomach. He probably hadn't intended his advice to apply to his best friend banging his little sister.

"Maybe I need to rephrase the question." Her brown eyes sparkled as she stared into my eyes. "Would you like to share my bed tonight?"

"Will there be sleeping involved?" I teased. "You didn't let me have a nap this morning. I get pretty cranky if I don't get eight hours a night."

She tilted her head and focused her gaze on my lips. "Eight hours of what, exactly?"

Why the fuck did the only woman I'd ever been tempted to hold on to forever have to be Mike's baby sister? I ought to shut this down before it went any further.

“You’re killing me, minx.”

“Death by orgasm? Wouldn’t be such a bad way to go.”

I couldn’t resist her any more than I could turn down one of Mama Mae’s home baked care packages. Especially when she sent caramel kisses. She’d gotten the recipe from some bakery out in Montana, and I’d had to hide them from the other guys when they hit the mail drop.

“How could I say no to that?” I rested my arm on her shoulder, and we headed toward the house. “Hey, where’s Gonzo?”

“Probably checking to make sure no one dropped anything around the food trucks. That dog’s so food motivated, it’s not even funny.” When we reached the front porch, she pushed open the door and invited me in.

“Maybe you ought to start locking your doors, at least while the festival’s going on.” Though I’d only met him once, Dartman didn’t seem like the type of man who’d go down without a fight. He was planning something. I could sense it like a storm brewing off in the distance.

“No one’s going to get past Gonzo, but if it makes you feel better, I can flip the deadbolt for you, soldier.” She turned the lock and headed toward the hall. “You coming?”

Her shirt landed on the floor behind her. Then she stepped into the hall and tossed her bra in my direction as she turned the corner.

Hell yeah, I’d be coming. Both of us would.

“Right behind you, minx.”

I WOKE up to the sound of breaking glass. I’d been curled around Destiny, my body playing big spoon to her curvy backside.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“Sounds like someone’s in the house. Stay here.”

“Take this.” She pulled open the drawer of her nightstand, then handed me a snub-nosed revolver. The moonlight filtering in from the window caught the pink glittery handle.

“We need to talk about your choice of firearms when this is over.” I pulled back the hammer as I crept out of her bedroom and down the hall. A set of bright headlights shone through the front window. I rushed to the front door to try to catch the license plate of the vehicle. Before I could get a good look, it backed over a flower bed and took off down the drive.

“Who was it, and what did they want?” Destiny bumped into me from

behind.

I turned around to see her wearing my t-shirt and holding a long wooden baseball bat in one hand.

“I’m not sure, but they’re gone now. Where’s the light switch?”

She flipped on the overhead light. The main glass pane in her big picture window had been destroyed. Shards of glass covered the hardwood floor.

I rushed back to the bedroom to pull on my boots so I could wade through the destruction. A gray cinderblock sat underneath the coffee table.

“Looks like I found what they tossed through your window.” I picked up the heavy block and carried it over to Destiny. “There’s something tucked inside. We should call the police so they can check for fingerprints —”

Destiny had already ripped open the plastic bag. She held up a blue collar with a set of tags dangling from the front.

“Gonzo. They’ve got him. What am I going to do?” Her fingers gripped the collar so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

The evidence had been compromised, but all that mattered was Destiny. I set down the brick and pulled her into my arms.

“I’ll find him, baby. I promise.” And when I did, I’d make sure whoever had him felt the wrath of my years of military training.

“He would have barked at a stranger. It doesn’t make sense. I didn’t hear him at all, did you?” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

I swept them away with the pads of my thumbs. “I’m not sure I would have heard a helicopter landing on the roof. I was dead to the world. We need to get the local authorities involved. Do you have a personal relationship with anyone on the force?”

She sniffled and pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. “My dad was best friends with the sheriff for years. He retired, but his son got elected last year. I guess we could call him, but what’s he going to do about a missing dog?”

“Let’s get the number.” I walked back to the bedroom with her. If Dartman was involved in doing something to Gonzo, he was going to go down.

She handed me the collar while she pulled up the sheriff’s number on her phone. A piece of paper wrapped around the buckle. She probably hadn’t noticed it.

“Hold on a sec.” I unrolled it, my gut twisting tighter and tighter with every letter I revealed.

NO COPS. IF YOU WANT TO SEE YOUR UGLY OLD DOG AGAIN,
SIGN THE FUCKING PAPERWORK. YOU'VE GOT UNTIL MIDNIGHT.

THE NOTE LOOKED like it could have been featured in an old television cop show. Each letter had been cut out of a magazine and glued to the narrow strip of paper. I doubted the lawyer in the custom-tailored suit had gotten his hands dirty by flipping through the pages of a Better Homes and Gardens and playing with a glue stick.

“Let’s not call your sheriff friend just yet.” I didn’t want to make her more upset by showing her the note, but she pulled it out of my hand.

Her eyes went wide as she digested the threat. “They’re going to kill him? Oh my god. What kind of monsters am I dealing with?”

“Nothing’s going to happen to Gonzo. I’ll make sure of it.” I rubbed small circles on her back as she clung to my shoulders. I was used to fighting battles on the other side of the world. I’d never had to use my training to defend a target so close to home.

“How?”

“I’m not sure yet, but give me an hour or two and I’ll have a plan.” Working under pressure was one of my strengths. That’s what made me so good at my job. Well, usually. I sure as hell hadn’t been good at my job the day Bridger died. There was no time to dwell on the ghosts from my past. Not when a woman worthy of building my future around stood in front of me with tears in her eyes.

“I can’t lose him. He’s been with me through everything. When my mom died, then when my dad passed, and Mike had to move away. To some people, he’s just a dog, but to me...” She bit down on her bottom lip and tilted her head back to stare at the ceiling. “I just can’t lose him, okay?”

“You won’t. Let’s get this mess cleaned up, and I’ll make a few calls.” I pulled on my pants but left my shirt right where it was. It looked better on her than it would ever look on me.

“No cops though, right? Word travels fast around here. I can’t take a chance.”

“No cops,” I assured her. “Now show me where you keep the broom and dustpan.”

DESTINY

J paced the front room, stopping every few passes to stare out the broken window. Thorne was rummaging through my dad's maintenance shed in search of something he could use to cover it until I could get it properly fixed. I was supposed to be getting ready for day two of the festival, but all I wanted to do was climb back into bed, pull the covers over my head, and cry.

I was tempted to call Mike, but he wouldn't be able to do anything from so far away. Even if he hopped on a plane, he wouldn't arrive until after the midnight deadline passed. No, it was up to me to figure out a solution that would save my dog and the land.

Even though I'd lived in Hartsville my entire life, I had to be careful about who to trust. Thorne said everyone could be a suspect. He also told me my place might be bugged and whoever was behind taking Gonzo might be listening in on my calls and watching any incoming emails or texts. I'd never felt so isolated.

At least I wasn't alone. He didn't have any stakes in the outcome of the war over my land, but he'd promised to be by my side through it all. Even called in a favor and had his brother coming over to manage the petting zoo today so he could replace Gonzo as my shadow.

Tires crunched on the gravel outside. The food trucks had started to arrive. I dragged myself off the couch and into the bathroom to try to make myself look somewhat presentable. Thorne thought we should go about our business like nothing had changed. If anyone asked about Gonzo, I was supposed to say he'd gotten into something bad in the trash last night and I

was keeping him inside for the day.

“The window’s patched up enough for now. How are you holding up?” Thorne came up behind me and moved my hair out of the way to press a kiss to my neck.

My red-rimmed gaze met his in the bathroom mirror. “I don’t know if I can do this. What if they hurt him?”

He spun me around and put his hand under my chin. “He’s going to be fine. I’m on this, Destiny. I won’t let anything happen to you or your dog. You’ve got my word.”

Unlike other men I’d met who made promises they had no intention of keeping, I believed him. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’m waiting to hear back from a guy I know out east. He’s trying to figure out who’s behind the shell company Dartman represents. If we can figure that out, we might be able to tell who’s got Gonzo.”

“And if we don’t figure that out?”

A dark look passed over his eyes. “Then I’ll initiate Plan B.”

A sense of apprehension seeped through my veins. “What’s Plan B?”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that.” He stared into my eyes. “You’ve got this, minx. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met—my current team included—and you’re going to do just fine. If Dartman calls, let it go to voicemail. Once I hear back from my contact, you can call him back and depending on what we find out, we’ve got a couple of ways we can force this to go down.”

“If anything happens to him...” my voice trailed off as a wave of fresh tears threatened.

“Do you trust me?” He nudged my chin higher, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“Yes.” I answered without hesitation. I’d barely known him for twenty-four hours, yet I felt closer to him than I’d ever felt to anyone before.

His warm fingers shifted down to gently wrap around my throat. “Good. I’ve got you, baby. Just do what I say, and we’ll have Gonzo back here before you know it.”

He leaned over and swept my mouth up in a kiss. I could taste the promise on his lips. He was with me.

I TRIED to hold myself together while I sat on the back patio and waited for

Thorne. A few professional photographers were already holding sessions in the fields. The early morning photos I captured of the bluebonnets each spring were some of my favorites. The way the light played over the blooms made them look like they were from another world. The thought that I might not get to see them next spring brought another round of tears. I couldn't lose this place.

It didn't take Thorne long to take a quick shower. He joined me on the patio with two thermal mugs of coffee in his hands.

"Thank you. I completely spaced making coffee this morning with everything going on." For a moment, my thoughts focused on Gonzo.

"You're welcome." Thorne clanked his mug into mine. "We got good news. My guy traced the shell company to an offshore account that's tied to a company in Delaware. There weren't many details, but he hacked into—" Thorne scrubbed his hand over his chin. "Never mind. The less you know, the better off you'll be. Bottom line is, I know who you're up against."

"Who?" I gripped his arm. Heat danced across my cheeks. "Tell me who it is."

Thorne lowered his voice. "It's Mr. Oliver."

"No." The blood drained from my face. "My neighbor?"

Thorne tilted his head while his lips screwed into a tight frown. "How well do you know him? Is there some reason he might want to run your family off?"

"The Oliver family's been here as long as mine. They own the land on the east side of town, and we own most of the land on the northwest side. Our properties butt up against each other past the creek that runs through a pasture over on that side." It didn't make sense. He and my dad had worked this land together since they both inherited it from their own fathers. Then it came to me. "The bluebonnet festival. Ever since my parents started the festival, he's been different."

"Different how?" Thorne asked. "Tell me everything you can think of. You never know what inconsequential detail might be the one piece of information that will tie everything together."

"He hates it. Says people pull off the main road by the pastures he uses for grazing his cattle and traipse through his acreage to get to the fields. My dad added more signage to direct people to enter the festival grounds up here by the house, but some folks just won't listen." But would he really go to such great lengths to shut down the festival? Back when my dad ran a couple

hundred head of cattle, he'd help with spring calving, and I'd never seen him mistreat an animal.

"What are you thinking?" Thorne asked.

"If Mr. Oliver really is behind this, it would make sense as to why Gonzo never barked. He's been coming over here for as long as I can remember." I didn't want to believe the man my father had considered a good friend would go behind his back and try to steal his land away, but it seemed like the most plausible explanation.

"Can you call Dartman and say you're ready to sign the papers? Tell him you're swamped with the festival and won't have time until the concert starts tonight. That would put him here around nine. I need it to be dark enough outside to provide me with some coverage."

"What are you going to do? I can't have you taking any more risks for me."

Thorne cupped my cheek in his hand. "I'll be fine. While he's here, I'll head over and see if I can locate Gonzo on the Oliver's property. If I find him there, I'll get the sheriff involved. The note on the cinderblock, details about the shell company tying back to him, and proof that Gonzo was locked up over there ought to be enough for them to take him into custody for questioning."

"You really think this will work?" A sliver of hope edged into the center of my chest.

"It's better than Plan B." Thorne shrugged.

"Are you ever going to tell me about Plan B?"

"Like I said, the less you know, the better."

"Okay, I'll give Dartman a call." I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and dialed the sleazeball attorney. It only took a minute to set up the meeting. He was more than happy to meet me at the house since I was smack dab in the middle of the bluebonnet festival and told him I couldn't get away.

"Now what do we do?" I was too nervous to walk around and pretend like everything was okay.

"Now we wait. Why don't you we go check on the vendors and you can introduce me to everyone? That ought to keep your mind off what's going to go down later and if Dartman has someone keeping an eye on the place, seeing us together out and about will make him think we're not up to anything."

"You sure you're up for putting yourself smack dab in the center of the

small-town gossip mill?” Once people saw us walking around together, they’d jump to conclusions. And once they jumped to their own conclusions, nothing brought the lovely people of Hartsville closer together than sharing a juicy piece of gossip with someone who hadn’t heard the news.

He reached for my hand and twined our fingers together. “I grew up in Broken Bend, remember? You’re the one who’s going to take all the heat. If you’re okay with that, then nothing would make me prouder than walking around this festival holding your hand, minx.”

I wasn’t naïve enough to think there might be a future for the two of us, but that didn’t stop me from hoping. Also didn’t stop me from tightening my hand in his and leading him to the first stop on our little tour.

First, we stopped at a food truck that had driven up from San Antonio. Their website had hundreds of glowing reviews and they even had a group of fans who followed them from one event to the next as they made their way around Texas. Thorne ordered a breakfast burrito with chorizo and salsa. I opted for something sweet and picked out a giant chocolate concha.

Next, we stopped by a local artist’s table who specialized in mixed media paintings of my family’s bluebonnet fields. My mom had always loved her work, and we had one of her larger pieces hanging over the fireplace in the living room.

“Is this the artist you were talking about?” Thorne set his food down on the edge of the table and picked up a small canvas with a single bluebonnet stem set against a beautiful sunset.

“She’s the one.”

“These are amazing,” Thorne said.

I sipped on my coffee and nibbled on my concha while she told him all about her process. Thorne asked her to set the small painting aside and told her he’d come back for in a bit.

“I didn’t figure you for a man who would appreciate the fine arts,” I told him as we moved on to the next table.

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know.” He arched a brow. “I’m an international man of many mysteries.”

“Austin Powers, right? I love those movies.” For a split second, the debilitating worry about Gonzo lifted.

Thorne’s eyes softened at the edges. “Maybe we can watch one of them together when this is all over.”

“I’d really like that.” I hadn’t wanted to ask what his plans entailed, but I

hoped he'd have a little extra time to spend in Hartsville after the festival ended.

Taffy rushed over as we approached the area where she'd set up her bluebonnet cake decorating competition. "Entries are coming in from as far away as Amarillo. Promise me you'll stick around to help me with the tasting part of the judging process later?"

Dozens of cakes rested on the tables behind her. All of them had some sort of bluebonnet motif worked into the decor.

"These are awesome, Taffy. I'm sure you won't have any trouble finding volunteers to do the taste testing. Who else do you have judging?"

"Oh, Chuck Oliver stopped by, so I asked him to help."

My stomach clenched, and I squeezed Thorne's hand. "I haven't seen him at the festival yet. Was he here today?"

"No." Taffy waved her hand in the air. "He was here last night. Felt absolutely awful about that stunt the concert organizer pulled. Trying to lure folks over to a free concert with your festival going on... his dementia must be getting worse. He said he didn't even remember signing the contract to let those folks lease his land, but when they pulled it out and showed it to him, there it was in black and white."

I glanced over at Thorne, who appeared to be deep in thought. Then he turned to Taffy, his hand still wrapped around mine. "Does Mr. Oliver live alone?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Well, his son has been staying with him for the past couple of weeks. I never thought that boy would be back. Of course, he's not really a boy anymore, though you wouldn't know it by listening to him. He came into the café the other day and pitched a hissy fit because our espresso machine was broken."

"Charles Oliver, Junior," I said to Thorne. "He and my brother were friends in high school until they had a massive falling out over..."

"A girl," Thorne finished for me.

"How do you know that?"

His eyes went wide, then he laughed. "It's always about a girl, isn't it, Destiny?"

"Are you going to introduce me to your,"—Taffy cast an obvious glance at our joined hands—"special friend?"

Thorne let my hand slide out of his and held it out to her. She didn't waste any time before grabbing onto it with both of hers. "I'm Thorne. I

came to help my brother with the petting zoo, and I guess you could say Destiny and I hit it off.”

Her smile widened. “Are you planning on sticking around after the festival ends? Hartsville is a great place to live. Maybe even raise a family.”

Thorne didn’t falter at all. “I’ve heard that.”

“We’d better finish making the rounds.” I needed to get him away from her before she offered to make us one of her three-tiered wedding cakes. Plus, Thorne and I had to talk about the info she’d inadvertently divulged. If Mr. Oliver’s son had been in town for a while, he might be the one pulling Dartman’s strings.

“I’ll find you later when it’s time to start taste testing.” Then she turned her toothy smile on Thorne. “I really hope we get to see more of you in town.”

He responded appropriately without giving anything away, then took my hand again. Looking out over the tents and tables and all the people filtering onto the festival grounds, I really hoped this wouldn’t be the last bluebonnet festival. And even more importantly, I hoped with all my heart I’d have Gonzo back before the night came to an end.

THORNE

I asked Destiny to go over the plan again. She rattled off the exact sequence of events we'd talked about.

"That's my good girl." My cheeks heated. "Sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I meant good job. You're obviously not my girl. Not even a girl at all. You're a woman."

She smirked. "Thanks for the anatomy lesson. I actually kind of like hearing you call me your good girl."

The heat shifted from my cheeks to tease my cock. "I'll keep that in mind for later."

"You really think this is going to work?" Destiny's flirty tone gave way to a nervous energy. Worry filled her beautiful eyes and formed a tiny crease between her eyebrows.

"Yes. There's no doubt in my mind we're going to get Gonzo back and prove Oliver's son is the one who's been threatening you." I finished stashing the gear I needed to execute my plan into a small black bag. I'd changed into the threads I'd worn on my stakeout last night. "As soon as I find Gonzo and text you, I want you to run—don't walk—out the back door where Henry will be waiting." My brother didn't have a military background, but he was the only one I trusted to get Destiny to safety once Dartman and Junior knew we were onto them.

"I know. We've been over this a million times." She put her hand to her head.

"You're going to do great." She'd been handling the situation like a pro. Probably could have made a hell of a Navy SEAL, but her brother never

would have stood by and let her follow in his footsteps.

My phone rang on the bed behind her.

“Do you need to take that?” She reached over to pick it up, but stopped suddenly. The way her entire body stiffened let me know something was wrong before she even said a word.

“What is it?” I looked past her and saw Mike’s picture flash on the screen. Fuuuuuuuuuck.

“That’s my brother.” Destiny grabbed the phone and held it up to show me. “Why is my brother calling your phone?”

“I can explain. We know each other. He knew I was going to be in Texas working with my brother, and —”

She shook her head and pressed the button to put her brother on speaker.

“Gonzo, hey. Thought you weren’t going to pick up there for a second.” Mike might have been halfway across the world, but his voice came through loud and clear. “Dude, you there?”

“Gonzo?” Destiny said, her voice low.

“Destiny?” Mike asked. “What are you doing answering Thorne’s phone?”

“You’re Gonzo?” She advanced, shoving the phone at my chest as she came closer. “You’ve been here for two days, and you didn’t think it was important to let me know that you’re the guy my own brother considers the brother he never had?”

For a man who was used to being able to handle any possible situation, I was at a complete loss as to how to respond.

Mike let out a deep sigh. “It’s my fault. I asked him to check in on you. I know you told me you had things under control, but that lawyer was escalating. You’ve always been strong. I just didn’t want you to have to do things on your own this time. I figured Thorne could keep an eye on things.”

Destiny didn’t look at the phone. I wasn’t even sure she’d heard her brother’s piss poor explanation.

Her eyes pinned me in place and blazed with rage. “You fucked me and didn’t have the nerve to tell me you were my brother’s best friend. The man I named my damn dog after.”

“What the hell is going on over there?” Mike dropped the apologetic tone. He was pissed, and he had every right to be. This entire situation was turning into a clusterfuck and was going to ruin the operation we’d planned.

“Your best friend fucked your little sister. That’s what’s going on.”

Destiny dropped the phone back on the bed. “You lied to me, Thorne. You’re not in the Army.”

“I never actually said I was in the Army. You just started calling me soldier. I liked it, so I never bothered to correct you.”

“Wait. You literally FUCKED my little sister?” Mike yelled.

Destiny closed her eyes and shook her head. “I trusted you. I trusted BOTH of you.”

“Dammit, Gonzo. I ask you to do one simple thing—check in on my sister. Make sure she doesn’t get fucked over by the lawyer who’s trying to steal our land, but you’re the one who fucked her over instead?” He was losing his shit, and rightfully so. I’d have to make good with him, but at the moment, my top priority was Destiny.

“I’m going to have to call you back, buddy.” I picked up my phone.

“Don’t you fucking dare—” Whatever he was going to say next was lost when I disconnected the call.

“Destiny.” I reached for her, but she stepped back.

“Don’t touch me. The only reason I haven’t punched you yet is because I still need you. That prick has my dog... god, I’m going to have to change his name. He’s almost eight years old. How’s he going to learn how to respond to a new name?” Her eyes took on a wild shine.

“I’m going to get your dog back. Let’s get through the meeting with Dartman, make sure Gonzo’s safe, and then I’ll tell you everything.” I needed her to calm down if we had any hope of pulling off our plan.

She nodded, her jaw so tense I was worried she might crush one of her molars. “I swear, if anything happens to him... if I lose our land over this...”

“You won’t. It’s a good plan, minx.”

“Don’t call me that.” She shook her head. “Don’t you ever call me that again.”

“I’m sorry.” Fuck, I was so incredibly sorry. I should have come clean with her that first night when she made me dinner.

“I don’t accept your apology. Maybe if you get my dog back, I might convince my brother not to kill you. But after tonight, after this is done, I don’t ever want to see or hear from you again. Do you understand?”

My heart shattered. Like someone sawed open my chest and struck it with the world’s heaviest hammer. Emotion clogged my throat, making it impossible to do anything but nod. If that’s what she wanted, if that’s what she needed, that’s what I’d do. I owed it to her.

Destiny took in a deep breath and pulled herself together. “Dartman’s going to be here in less than an hour. You’d better get going or we’ll be behind schedule before we even get started.”

The warmth I’d found in her arms had disappeared. I didn’t recognize the hard shell of a woman that was left behind. And it was all my fault.

Focus on the mission, Gonzales. The only chance I had at winning her back was to come through for her tonight. I shut everything else out, then grabbed my phone and the bag holding my gear. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

I paused before walking out the door, hoping for some kind of response, but I got nothing. Mama Mae always said that actions speak louder than words. Hoping the plan held and that I’d be able to come through for Destiny and she could see how much she meant to me, I climbed into the truck and wound my way through the lines of cars trying to find a parking spot for the big concert.

I wished I had some of my team with me on this mission. Bridger would have had something to say about the way I’d handled things with Destiny. He’d probably call me a variety of names and tell me I should have known a woman like Destiny wouldn’t tolerate a man getting caught up lies.

He was the one who’d wanted to be a family man. Always talked about going home after that last deployment and finding a girl to settle down with and make babies. I thought he was a sucker, but now that I’d met Destiny, I saw the appeal. Waking up with her in my arms the past two days had proven to me I didn’t have to be alone. Destiny had shown me there was another way. That’s what I wanted... to build a life with someone... to put down the kind of roots I’d never had... to be loved.

But first... I needed to save a dog.

I passed the Oliver ranch and left my truck on the side of the road, then backtracked on foot. The only light on in the house appeared to be coming from a back bedroom. I moved closer, trying to catch a glimpse through the window. An older man sat in a recliner, his chin resting on his chest. From what I could tell, he looked to be asleep and there was no sign of Gonzo.

When I’d scoped out the place the other night, I’d noticed several outbuildings. Hoping they might have penned the dog up in one of the barns or storage sheds, I started with the one closest to the house. A small padlock didn’t stand a chance against the bolt cutters I’d brought. Too bad it was filled with lawn equipment.

Moving on to the next building, I glanced at my watch. Dartman was probably just arriving for the meeting with Destiny right now. No doubt she'd be able to handle herself. Still, I wished I'd been able to stay with her. I had no luck in either of the next two buildings. I was running out of places to check.

The small barn was empty except for a rundown tractor and a bunch of ancient equipment. That left the big barn. I crept toward it, hoping I wouldn't startle any of the animals inside. Soft light filtered through the huge door. I stepped inside and breathed in the familiar scent of hay and manure. I hadn't been back to Mama Mae's in forever, but I felt like I was back in high school, mucking out stalls with one of my foster brothers.

A big chestnut mare stuck her head over the side of her stall. I took off my glove to run my hand over her velvety soft nose. Destiny had a couple of horses, though she'd told me she didn't get to ride nearly as much as she liked. Maybe when all of this was over and I'd groveled my way back into her heart, we'd be able to indulge in a few long trail rides together.

I pulled my hand back. No use getting too far ahead of myself. If Gonzo wasn't here, I'd be starting from square one again. There was no sign of him in any of the stalls. I was losing hope. I thoroughly searched the rest of the barn. Even crawled up in the loft and found a protective mama cat and a litter of newborn kittens. But no Gonzo.

I'd been so sure he was here. Usually, my instincts were right on. I must have missed something. Maybe they had him locked in a bedroom in the house. I circled back and peered through the window again. The older man hadn't moved. I walked around the house, using my flashlight to look in the windows of each room. Unless they had the dog in a closet, he wasn't there.

Fuck. I'd promised Destiny I'd find her dog. Even though she was pissed as hell at me, she still trusted me to come through for her. I wanted to punch something or let my frustration out by yelling at the moon. Then I noticed the door to a storm cellar, half buried in overgrown weeds next to the foundation.

I pulled on the handle. The hinges creaked, but the door opened. Someone had been down there recently. I fired up my flashlight and slowly moved down the steps. The TV must have sat just overhead. I could hear the monster truck rally the guy had been watching like I was in the same room.

The narrow beam from the flashlight danced over shelves full of forgotten jars of canned green beans and tomatoes. An old wash basin sat in the corner and cobwebs stretched across the beams overhead.

A soft whimper came from behind me. I swung the light around and caught the edge of a metal cage. Gonzo pawed at the door. His tail wagged a mile a minute as he recognized I'd come to save him.

"Hey, boy. Damn, am I glad to see you." I pulled out the leash I'd brought with me and opened the front door to the kennel.

He jumped up and covered my face with sloppy kisses. I ran my hands over his sides, doing a quick check to make sure he wasn't injured. He winced when I touched his back leg. With no visible external injuries, he must have tweaked it or hurt it when that bastard brought him over.

"I've got you, bud. Let's get you out of here and take you home. What do you say?" He limped toward the steps and turned to wait for me.

I snapped a few photos of the kennel and Gonzo in case we needed proof of where I'd found him. Then I fired off a text to let Destiny and Henry know I had her dog. I wanted to wait until I got back to the truck to call the sheriff. Old man Oliver might be passed out above, but there was no sense risking waking him by talking on the phone right under his nose.

Gonzo yelped when he tested his leg on the stairs, so I picked him up and carried him out of the storage cellar. We were halfway down the drive when a vehicle turned in. I ran as fast as I could for the scrubby coverage of some mesquite trees. It wouldn't be long before they realized the dog was gone. I needed to call the sheriff and get to the place where Henry, Destiny, and I were supposed to meet as quickly as possible.

We reached the truck, and I secured Gonzo in the front seat. "Hang on. We're going to get you back to your family soon."

I swear he smiled at me. Hoping returning her dog would earn me the right to properly apologize, I turned the truck around and headed to town, ready to put this nightmare behind all of us.

DESTINY

“*W*hy aren’t they here yet? He texted over a half hour ago. You don’t think he ran into any trouble, do you?” I paced the parking lot of the abandoned dairy on the edge of town. The sheriff had gone tearing past, lights flashing, about ten minutes ago. No doubt he was headed to my place to arrest Dartman and rip up that contract I signed.

“He’ll be here,” Henry promised. “Thorne always comes through.”

“Hmmpf.” I wasn’t too sure I agreed with that. Thorne, or Gonzo as my brother had referred to him since the day they met, might be an excellent frogman, but he had a lot to learn about interpersonal relationships.

Headlights came closer and the big black truck turned into the parking lot. I rushed over, pulling open the passenger side door before the vehicle came to a stop.

Gonzo sat in the front seat, the doggy harness I’d sent with Thorne holding him in place. I buried my face in his fur. “Oh, baby. I’m so glad to see you. You have no idea how worried I was about you.”

“He appears to be in pretty good shape, though he’s not putting weight on his left back leg. I think he might have hurt it either when they caught him or when they put him in the cage.”

“They had him caged up?” The back of my throat burned. I was trying not to cry (again) but failing miserably.

“He was in a kennel in the storm cellar under the house. The good news is, we got him.”

I was still mad at Thorne. Madder than a wet hen was what my mama used to say. I’d never seen a wet hen, so I didn’t have anything to compare it

to, but my gut told me I was even angrier than that. Even though he'd lied about who he was and why he'd shown up at the bluebonnet festival in the first place, I owed him a debt of thanks for getting involved and going after my dog.

"I suppose I should thank you." Reluctantly, I turned to face him.

"I'm so sorry for not telling you the truth. Mike made me promise. He warned me that you wouldn't appreciate him sending someone to watch out for you and I owed him one for some shit that went down over in Iraq." Thorne reached out like he wanted to touch me, but then thought better of it. His hand hung in the air between us. "He shared little things about you over the years, but he never told me you'd capture my heart the second I saw you."

"Don't." I shook my head. The damn tears started up again. I rubbed at my cheeks, refusing to let them fall.

"Destiny..." His forehead crumpled. "I never wanted to hurt you. My mission was clear. Make sure those assholes didn't take advantage of you and keep you safe through the festival. That's all I came here to do. But somewhere in the process, damn girl, I fell in love with you."

I put my hands over my ears to block him out. It was too late for confessions.

"Baby, please." He reached up and wiped the tears from my cheeks. "We've only known each other for a couple of days, but I feel like you've always been a part of me. Meeting you in person felt like a formality. Like I've known you were out there somewhere, just waiting for the right time for us to come together. Does that make sense?"

I didn't want to admit it, but I felt the exact same way. It didn't make sense. None of it did.

He must have sensed my resistance slipping away. "I'll understand if you need time to forgive me, but please say you'll give me another chance. The thought of walking away from here and never seeing you again... I can handle a lot, but I can't handle that."

"You lied to me. I can handle a lot too, Thorne, but I can't handle that."

He nodded, his eyes full of regret. "I thought I was doing the right thing, making good on a promise I'd made to your brother. I should have told you the truth as soon as I realized what was going on between us."

"What about Mike? You really think he's going to be okay with his best friend fucking his baby sister?" It sounded so crude. What happened between the two of us was so much more than physical.

“No. But if I had a little sister as strong-willed and headstrong as you, I’d know she wouldn’t stand for me trying to control her life or make decisions for her. And for the record, I don’t plan on just fucking my best friend’s little sister. What we have is real. I want to lock it down.”

My anger dissipated, bit by bit. I’d needed to know exactly how he felt about me, and he was dishing it up with no hesitation. “I need some clarification, soldier. What does ‘lock it down’ mean to you? I’d like to know the specifics.”

“It means walking away from renewing my time in the military. Building a future with the woman I love. Maybe a nice house in the country on a couple hundred acres. Plenty of bluebonnets in spring and maybe even a kid or two when she’s ready.”

I bit my bottom lip to keep myself from declaring my love right then and there. “How do you feel about llamas?”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t be a deal breaker, but I’ve heard alpacas don’t spit as much.”

“Reggie’s been growing on me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, he reminds me of you. Cranky and irritable on the outside, but once you show him a little love, his heart seems to melt.” My eyes offered a challenge.

“If my girl wanted a llama, I wouldn’t be able to deny her.” He held out his arms, hesitating like he wasn’t sure I was ready to accept his offer. “What do you say, minx? Can I gift you a llama as a wedding present?”

Henry piped up from the other side of the truck. “I’m sure Reggie would love to move to Hartsville.”

A smile tugged at the edges of my lips. “I wouldn’t mind having Reggie move in. We might have to get him a friend, though. I wouldn’t want him to be lonely like I’ve been.”

“You’ll never have to be lonely again. Be my girl, Destiny? Be my never-gonna-lie-to-you-again, love-you-for-the-rest-of-our-lives, forever girl?”

I sighed and buried my face against his chest. “You ever lie to me again and I’ll cut out your tongue and bury it in a field of bluebonnets.”

“I have no doubt you’d do just that.” Then he leaned down and whispered in my ear, low enough that his brother wouldn’t be able to overhear. “You can bet I’ll never lie to you again. I have too many other plans for my tongue, and all of them involve you.”

Heat pooled in my core. “I wouldn’t mind finding out just what those plans entail. After we make sure Gonzo is okay, you pucker up and kiss my brother’s ass enough times that he decides not to kill you, and we get word that the bad guys have been locked up by the sheriff.”

“Give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll make that happen. You make me wait any longer than that to bury my head between your thighs and Mike won’t have to kill me. I’ll die from withdrawal.”

“Oh, there’s something I probably ought to tell you.” I leaned back and looked him straight in the eye. “I love you too, soldier.”

His lips crashed down on mine so suddenly he stole my breath away. He was the man I’d been waiting for—the one who not only saw me for who I was on the outside, but also saw who I was on the inside and wanted to love me, anyway.

He was mine, and I was his, and that’s just how it was going to have to be.

For forever.

EPILOGUE

Thorne

It took a few months, but we finally got the call that Dartman and Chuck Oliver, Jr. had been found guilty of multiple charges and were going to be put away for a long time. I got the call on our six-month anniversary and couldn't wait to share the news with my new bride.

I found her in the nursery. She wasn't supposed to be painting the walls, but I'd learned it was impossible to stop my wife from doing anything.

"Do you like the butter yellow or the light maize?" She'd painted two big squares in the middle of one wall.

They looked exactly the same to me, but I didn't dare tell her that. "Which one do you like best?"

She cocked her head. "I think I'm more partial to the butter yellow."

I pretended to give it the same serious consideration. "Yeah, me too."

"You can't even tell them apart, can you?" She nudged my shoulder with the hand holding the paintbrush. A smudge of light maize or butter yellow—who could tell which was which—landed on my t-shirt. "Oh no. Look what I've done."

"You know, minx, if you wanted to get me naked, all you needed to do was ask." I whipped my shirt off over my head and tossed it on the ground.

"I don't even need to ask. All I have to do is cock my hip or look at you or hell, even breathe." She laughed as she fell into my arms. Her finger traced along the ridge of my scar. "How did your call with Bridger's parents go?"

"It was good." After things settled down with the bluebonnet festival, the

lawyer, and all, I'd moved in and opened up to her about all the demons that had been chasing me for so long. The guilt I harbored over Bridger's death was the hardest to let go. Destiny listened without judgement and through talking with her and a therapist that my buddy Jake set me up with online, I'd made peace with the events of that day. The final step in letting go of my guilt was calling his parents and telling them how sorry I was that I hadn't been able to save him.

The phone call was everything I'd been afraid of—emotionally draining and difficult—but also incredibly healing. And now it was over.

"I'm proud of you, soldier." Destiny tilted her head back and stared up at me, her eyes so full of love that I asked myself for the hundred millionth time what I'd ever done to deserve a woman like her in my life.

"Thanks. Hopefully, the visit with your brother goes that well." Mike was coming home for Thanksgiving the day after tomorrow, and it would be the first time we'd seen each other in person in over a year. The tension between us had eased, and I had no doubt everything would be fine. It would just take time.

"He's going to have to love you. Because of you, he's going to be an uncle."

"Hey, my part of that equation was pretty easy. You're the one doing all the work." I rested my palm on her growing belly. I couldn't wait to meet the child we'd created together.

"Your time will come. There are going to be diapers to change, bottles to mix up, a whole ranch to try to baby proof." Always jealous of anyone getting Destiny's affection, Gonzo got up from his dog bed in the corner and nudged his head between us. "And you're on animal duty for the foreseeable future too. Reggie probably needs more alfalfa."

"No one told me living with you would be more work than defending the United States of America," I teased.

"I guess my standards are higher than Uncle Sam's," she teased right back.

"That's for sure." I surprised her by scooping her up in my arms and carrying her out of the soon-to-be nursery and into the bedroom we now shared.

"What are you doing? It's two o'clock on a Saturday. We've got work to do." She playfully swatted at my chest, but I could tell she was more than willing to take a break.

“You’ve been working too hard and need to relax.” I unbuttoned the front of one of the long-sleeve flannel shirts she’d stolen from my side of the closet. “And I’m hankering for a taste of you, minx.”

“Six months of country living and you’re already ‘hankering’ for things, huh? I can’t wait to see what you’re like a year from now.” She helped me ease her yoga pants down her thighs, then spread her legs, unabashedly giving me access to every part of her.

“I’ll probably be fixin’ to do stuff and calling you purdy.” I gave her one last smile before I bent my head and buried my tongue inside her sweet heat. Groaning, I licked her from front to back. “Damn, darlin’. You taste better and better every single time.”

Her fingers slid into my hair. I’d let it grow out a little more on top since she liked to grab fistfuls and tug on my hair while I taunted and teased her to her release.

“Practice sure does make perfect. You get any better at that and I’ll have to give you a certificate of mastery.” She sighed and relaxed into the pillows. “And to think I almost let you go. To be fair, I didn’t have the full picture when it came to your oral talents at that point.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten rid of me so easily. If you hadn’t forgiven me, I was ready to go to Plan B.” I sucked on her clit and slid my finger inside, crooking it just so to graze that spot that would make her see stars.

“And if Plan B didn’t work?” she asked on a breathy exhale.

“I would have gone through the alphabet as many times as it would take. You’re my forever girl, minx.”

She bucked her hips off the bed, taking exactly what she wanted. Her body tensed and she sailed over the edge. There was nothing in this world more beautiful than watching my woman come. Once her breathing slowed, I kissed my way back up her beautiful curves until I could ease my way inside her.

Though I didn’t want to look beyond this perfect moment, with my cock buried deep inside her and her looking up at me like I’d hung the moon and the stars, the future was ours.

She’d made me whole so I could love her whole-heartedly. That’s exactly what I planned to spend the rest of my life doing... loving Destiny.

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ABOUT EVE LONDON

When Eve London was a girl, she wanted to be a trapeze artist. Instead, she grew up to be like most women—a juggler—trying to keep bunches of balls in the air.

Now she's a USA Today Bestselling Author who spends her days writing about the kind of men she likes – sexy, shameless, and just a little bit sarcastic.

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