



THE TRIDENT  
— SERIES II —  
BRAVO TEAM

# DUKE

BOOK 3

JAIMÉ LEWIS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Trident Series II - BRAVO Team

DUKE

Jaime Lewis

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## PROLOGUE

“Good God, it’s hotter than Satan’s asshole after Taco Tuesday,” Nails complained as he wiped the sweat from his brow as BRAVO team packed up their gear and prepared to head home.

Garrison “Duke” Reid smirked, shaking his head at his crazy-ass teammate, though he had the same thought. He was ready to return to civilization and relax in some air conditioning.

Othana, the gorgeous, small, landlocked country in northern Africa, had reached record-breaking temperatures during the two weeks the team was conducting joint military drills with the Othana military. Duke didn’t mind the heat, but one hundred twenty-four degrees was a little over the top. He could only thank the geniuses who created moisture-wicking clothing and *Gold Bond* body powder.

“Duke, are you still heading to Hawaii for a few days?” Snow asked.

“Yeah. I’m staying with Heath.”

Heath was a friend and fellow SEAL assigned to SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team One based at Pearl Harbor. He and Duke attended BUD/S together.

“I’m so jealous. They’ve got some of the best waves out there.”

“I’m also looking forward to just kicking back.” Though Duke was sure he’d spend the majority of his time, surfing and scuba diving at some of Oahu’s hidden gems.

They were all arguing over which beach in Hawaii was best for surfing when someone knocked on the door. On alert, they all looked at each other knowing they weren’t expecting anyone. Bear signaled that he would get it. When he opened the door, they were surprised to see Arkan, the General of Othana’s Army, standing there, breathing heavily like he had just run there.

“Lieutenant Commander, I apologize, as I know you and your team are preparing to leave, but we have a situation in the village nearby that we could use your assistance with,” the General stated.

“What kind of situation?” Bear asked, his expression full of concern, as everyone from the team gathered around.

“One of the villagers is suffering a medical emergency, and my men don’t have the training to treat her.”

Without blinking an eye, Duke reached for his aid bag. “What’s going

on?”

“A female went into labor, and she’s having difficulties.”

“Doctor?” Duke asked.

“No doctor here. There’s just a traveling nurse who visits once or twice a month.”

“Alright, can you take me to her?” Duke asked, following the General to his truck. The rest of the team jumped into their vehicles and followed.

They drove at a fast pace for close to ten minutes before pulling up next to a crater-like hole in the earth. When Duke saw the stairs leading down to a courtyard and the various cave-like openings off the courtyard, he realized it was a cave home. He believed the technical term was troglodyte houses.

Troglodyte houses are homes built underground by digging a twenty-five feet deep and forty feet wide circular pit. Then, tunnels are dug around the sides, creating artificial caves that act as rooms. Those types of homes were built to avoid the deserts’ intense heat, strong winds, and cold winters.

As Duke descended the sandstone stairs, he saw a large group of people gathered outside a room on the far side of the courtyard. There was shouting coming from inside the room, and the closer he got, he realized that the shouting was actually cries of desperation.

Arkan led the way, clearing a path for Duke and the team to enter the room. As soon as Duke saw the pregnant woman lying on the floor and one of Arkan’s men kneeling over her performing chest compressions, he knew the situation was dire.

Without proper medical equipment, the chances of the mother and baby’s survival were slim, but Duke was determined to do everything he could to increase their chances.

Kneeling next to the woman, he spoke to the guy doing the chest compressions, trying to better understand the woman’s condition.

“Tell me what happened?”

“She was having difficulty breathing and complaining of tightness in her chest. She vomited, then her eyes rolled back into her head, and she stopped breathing.”

They were all signs of cardiac arrest.

“How long have you been doing CPR?”

“About twenty minutes.”

*Fuck!*

“Please, you have to save her,” a man pleaded as he sat beside the

woman, caressing her hair. Duke recognized him from when they were doing joint drills. He was a member of Arkan's military team. He assumed the guy was the woman's husband, and Duke sympathized with him. Bringing a baby into the world should be a joyous occasion.

Duke reached into his bag and pulled out a stethoscope. He pressed the chest piece firmly against the woman's belly, moving it up and down, hoping to locate the baby's heartbeat.

Seconds of complete silence went by, and just when Duke feared the worst, he picked up a faint sound that reminded him of a watch ticking muffled beneath a pillow.

"I can hear the baby's heartbeat," he announced, then unzipped his bag's front pocket and pulled out the small portable defibrillator the team had with them.

"What do you need?" Snow asked, kneeling beside him and quickly helping to get the pads positioned on the woman's chest.

"A fucking miracle," Duke mumbled, knowing Snow had heard him.

The machine counted down "three, two, one," and Duke ordered everyone to stand back while the device analyzed the woman's vitals. When the machine gave a "no shock" directive, Duke dropped his head in defeat. Without a pulse and the machine delivering a "no shock" warning, it meant the woman's heart had stopped beating. And with no qualified medical facility nearby with the necessary equipment to treat her condition, there was nothing more they could do for her, but there was still hope for the baby she was carrying.

He glanced up at Bear grimly and shook his head slightly, letting him know he couldn't do anything more for her. He then turned his attention to the guy doing the CPR and instructed him to continue the chest compressions. They needed to keep her heart pumping to ensure blood kept circulating to the baby.

Duke stood up and pulled Bear and Arkan to the side.

"Her heart has stopped, and without quality care, I'm afraid there isn't anything we can do. But the baby still has a chance at survival. There was a heartbeat, but we'll have to move quickly."

"How?" Arkan asked.

"I'll have to do a c-section."

"Have you done that before?"

Duke swallowed hard, then nodded. "One."



Arkan quirked his eyebrow. "One?"

"I can assure you I know what I'm doing," Duke told him.

"What are the odds of the baby's survival?"

"Given the conditions we're in, I'd say fifty-fifty. But if we're going to do this, we need to act fast."

Arkan raked his fingers through his short gray hair.

"The guy's name is Rakin. He is the baby's father. Let's talk to him."

They approached Rakin, and Duke felt the tug on his heartstrings when he saw the tears running down the guy's face. He couldn't imagine the pain and heartbreak he was suffering.

Arkan knelt next to Rakin and started to explain the situation to him. Before Arkan could finish, Rakin was shaking his head, and his face contorted with rage as he swung his head in Duke's direction.

"I don't care about the baby. You will save my wife!" he demanded, his body language showing some aggression. The team took notice and came closer if they needed to de-escalate the situation.

Arkan placed his hand on Rakin's shoulder in an effort to try and calm the man down.

"She's gone, Rakin. There is nothing more they can do for her. But there is a chance they can save your baby."

Rakin shook the General's gesture off and jumped to his feet. "No!"

A young woman stepped forward from the small crowd that was gathered around. "Rakin, you knew there was a possibility she wouldn't survive the pregnancy."

"She had heart issues before?" Duke asked, looking at the woman.

The woman nodded. "She had two heart attacks. The nurse warned her that her heart wasn't strong and that carrying a baby could kill her. But she was determined to bring a life into the world." She turned toward Rakin and curled her lip up at him in disgust. "You know that Ghalia would want her baby to have a fighting chance. She sacrificed herself for that child. Quit being a selfish bastard."

Rakin was in denial and kept shaking his head as he stared at his wife's lifeless body. He then turned toward the General. His face was scrunched up in anger as he pointed his finger at Arkan's face. The tension in the room was palpable as the two men faced off, but Duke and his team were ready to jump in, as were a few of Arkan's men.

"I want no part of this. My life ended when hers did," Rakin told the

General before spitting in Duke's direction and storming out of the room, leaving everyone stunned.

Arkan turned toward Duke, and Duke saw the disappointment in the General's expression toward the young man's behavior.

"Let's get that baby delivered," Arkan told Duke.

"Yes, Sir," Duke replied, quickly pulling the supplies he'd need from his bag.

The young woman from earlier brought over a pot of warm water and some towels.

"I can help if you'd like. Ghalia was my best friend."

Duke could see the tears in her dark brown eyes, and he offered the woman a warm smile.

"I'd appreciate that. What is your name?"

"Naima."

"Naima. I know this is probably difficult for you, but I promise to treat Ghalia with the utmost respect."

"Thank you," she told him as she sniffled, trying to keep her emotions at bay but failing. He couldn't fault her for that.

"Hold this," he instructed, handing her one of the towels she had brought over. "It is important to keep the baby warm. So, when I hand you the baby, I need you to secure the towel around him or her."

"I can do that," she said, gaining back some of the confidence she had earlier.

He gave her an encouraging smile before glancing at his team.

"I'm going to need three of you to help me."

"Whatever you need, man," Joker responded, kneeling to get into position. Snow and Aussie followed. The rest of the team and Arkan worked to clear the room. They didn't need an audience for what was about to happen.

Duke looked around the room at those who were left—his team, Naima, Arkan, a few of Arkan's men, including the guy still doing chest compressions on Ghalia. The atmosphere in the room was grim and tense, but Duke prayed that delivering a healthy baby girl or boy would bring a little brightness to those close to Ghalia.

After quickly explaining their role to Joker, Snow, and Aussie, everyone gloved up and got into position.

Duke said a little prayer before making the incision. He worked quickly

and diligently with his teammates' help and delivered the baby within minutes.

“It’s a girl!” Naima cried out, tears streaming down her face as she stared at the tiny bundle in her arms.

Suddenly, a shrill, joyous cry tore through the somber silence in the room, bringing smiles and tears to those who just witnessed a miracle. Even Duke had to swipe his eyes.

Once Duke checked over the baby and knew she was okay, he kept his promise to Naima. He got out his suture kit and stitched up Ghalia before covering her body with a blanket. Since Ghalia had no family and her husband had disappeared, Arkan gave Duke his word that he would personally handle her burial.

All the guys were gathered around Naima, admiring the miracle they just witnessed. The tiny baby girl was fussing, which made Duke happy, knowing she had a set of lungs on her.

Naima looked up and smiled.

“Would you like to hold her?”

“Sure,” Duke responded, taking the baby from Naima.

Remembering how his nieces loved to be swaddled, he pulled the towel snug around the baby before cradling her close to his broad chest. Within seconds, the baby girl’s cries turned to sweet, adorable coos.

“You’re a natural,” Naima told him, smiling.

Duke smiled down at the little miracle in his arms.

Bear approached, a slight grin tugging the corner of his lips. He patted Duke’s shoulder. “Look at that. The big bad SEAL is also a baby whisperer.”

“I have twin nieces, and they loved to snuggle with their Uncle Duke,” Duke said, gazing at the little girl. He then looked at Naima. “She is going to be hungry. Do you have baby formula around here?”

“Yes. Ghalia hadn’t planned to breastfeed, so she had been stockpiling formula when she could find it.”

Duke was glad to hear that.

“Will she be staying with you?” He asked her.

“Considering Rakin claimed he wanted nothing to do with this precious princess, and since Ghalia doesn’t have any family, I’ll take care of her until we can find a suitable home for her.”

Duke just nodded. He loved kids and couldn’t wait to have a few of his own one day. But with his single status and the fact he was getting older, the

chance of that happening was slim to none. If not for his ex-girlfriend's infidelity a little over a year ago, maybe he would have a little one on the way.

He shook those memories from his mind. Katie was a long-forgotten memory who didn't deserve any of his attention. Not after the pain and embarrassment she caused him.

Bear caught his eye and gave him the signal that they needed to wrap things up. Duke knew that their ride was waiting for them.

He gave the baby girl one last cuddle before handing her back to Naima.

"Take good care of her."

"She's in good hands," Naima assured him, taking the baby and cooing to her. He was usually a good judge of character, and watching their interaction, he knew that the baby girl was indeed in good hands.

He offered one last small smile, then picked up his bag and exited the room with the rest of the team.

As Duke climbed the stairs, a darkness began to loom over him, as he felt the adrenalin slowly leaving his body. With that came the full reality of what had just happened.

He'd seen and dealt with innocent deaths before, but Ghalia's death, for some reason affected him like no other. As if right on cue, the self-doubts started to creep in, making him replay the situation over and over. Had he done everything he could?

Before he could give it any more thought, a commotion broke out among a group gathering nearby. People were shouting and forming a circle around something.

"Shit! Now what?" Bear grumbled, clearly annoyed by the distraction.

Suddenly, a person broke through the crowd and started charging at Duke. It only took a split second to realize it was Rakin.

"It's your fault!" Rakin shouted, pointing at Duke. His expression and tone of voice were full of rage. "You killed her! You're the reason that my Ghalia is dead! You're a murderer! You're a murderer! I'm going to kill you!"

He had only made it half the distance to Duke before he was tackled to the ground by Arkan. They rolled across the dirt. Rakin was giving Arkan a run for his money in the strength department, and that prompted Nails and Joker to run over to assist.

Duke felt awful for the guy, but violence wouldn't bring back his wife.

Seeing that Rakin wouldn't give up, Duke reached into his bag and pulled out a syringe. It was a sedative they used in the field if needed. He handed it to Bear to take over to Arkan.

A few minutes later, Rakin was out cold, and Arkan and his men carried Rakin to a vehicle.

Duke ran his fingers through his hair as Rakin's words sunk in. Hearing someone call him a murderer was like a punch in the gut. Had he killed people? Yes. Had he murdered anybody? Absolutely not. Every kill he had notched was validated.

"Don't let his words get to you, man," Jay Bird told him, squeezing his shoulder.

Duke shook his head slightly, looking toward the vehicle Rakin was being contained in.

"I can't help but wonder—"

"Don't do it, man. Don't even think about playing that *what-if* game," Jay Bird scolded him. "What's done is done. We were all there and can attest that you did everything possible. I won't lie. Yes, it was unfortunate with what happened to Ghalia, but a little baby girl is alive because of you. You did that."

"I know," Duke sighed in frustration.

"Come on, man. The quicker we get out of here, the faster you can put this all behind you."

Duke wasn't sure if he could ever put this experience behind him. He did have hopes that after some time to grieve, Rakin would eventually come to his senses and realize he had been blessed with a precious gift.

Duke sat in the front passenger seat as the team drove toward the airport. He absorbed Jay Bird's words. Yes, a person died, but at the same time, another life was born.

The situation made him recall a statement his mom would recite to his sister and him when something upset them or didn't go their way. She would say, "*Somewhere out there, someone else was dealing with a worse situation than you.*"



Six thousand miles away from Othana, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Hannah O'Quinn sat alone in the cold, sterile hospital waiting room, nervously wringing her fingers together as she awaited word of her

grandmother's condition. The only distractions were the TV playing quietly on the other side of the room and the burnt coffee smell coming from the coffee pot on the little cart that looked like it had seen its last day.

Unfortunately, those little distractions weren't enough to run interference from replaying the frightening memory of her walking through the backdoor of her home to find her ninety-nine-year-old grandmother lying on the kitchen floor, clutching her head, in extreme pain.

Anyone who knew Lillianne O'Quinn was well aware of the strong-willed woman she was. She was a staple in the community who showed no weakness, including the time when she had broken three ribs and walked around town like nothing was wrong.

So, seeing her writhing in pain, Hannah knew something serious was wrong. In the six minutes it took for the paramedics to arrive, her grandmother had started drifting in and out of consciousness.

She glanced at her watch again. It had been over an hour since her grandmother was brought into the emergency room. Not knowing what was going on was making her restless.

She kept thinking back to the fundraiser dinner she and her grandmother had attended for the Sheriff's Department about a week ago. During dinner and the following social hour, her grandmother was unusually quiet. When they were headed home, Hannah had asked her if everything was okay, and her grandmother told her she was fine and just had a little headache—but in the following days, Hannah caught Lillianne taking some over-the-counter medicine. And when she asked why she was taking them, her grandmother told her she still had a dull headache.

Hannah tried to persuade her to see her doctor, but her grandmother brushed off Hannah's concern, again telling her that she was fine and that it would eventually pass, just like anything else. If she only would've tried harder, maybe they wouldn't be in the situation they were in now.

She looked up as she heard the door to the waiting room open. Hannah took one look at Doctor Wiggins' somber expression as he walked in, and she felt an ache in her chest and knew it was from her heart shattering.

"Hannah," his usual deep voice was soft and solemn. Before he could utter another word, tears were already leaking from Hannah's eyes as she braced herself for the worst news.

Her grandmother was her world. She had become the mother and father Hannah had lost at the young age of twelve. It was always Hannah and

Lillianne—the grandmother and granddaughter duo.

“I’m so sorry, Hannah. We did everything we could.”

She sniffled, and tears steadily poured from her eyes. “I don’t understand. What happened?”

“She suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage—it’s when a brain aneurysm ruptures, and it bleeds into the space surrounding the brain.”

“She had been having headaches for the past week,” Hannah told him.

Dr. Wiggins nodded. “That was most likely a sign.”

Hannah dropped her head into her hands and let her tears fall. *Why didn’t Granny listen to me?*

She lifted her head and wiped her eyes.

“I told her to see a doctor and get it checked out.”

Dr. Wiggins gave her a sympathetic smile.

“Hannah, we both know that there was no way Lillianne was going to see a doctor.”

Hannah snorted and took a deep breath. “You’re right. That woman was as stubborn as a mule. But she was all I had,” she told him as her voice cracked and lips quivered.

Dr. Wiggins put his arm around her shoulders, pulled her close, and consoled her while she cried for the loss of her only family she had. When she finally pulled away and wiped her eyes, she felt a bit embarrassed for crying on him.

“I’m so sorry for that.”

“It’s okay. It’s going to take a while to overcome this loss. Lillianne greatly impacted this community, and everyone will miss her terribly.”

“She loved this community. It was her heart and soul.”

“That she did. Would you like to sit with her for a while?”

She couldn’t speak over the lump in her throat, so she nodded.

Dr. Wiggins took her arm and walked her through the emergency department and down a long hallway. The hospital staff she passed all gave their condolences.

When they came to a door, Dr. Wiggins gently patted her hand and told her to take as much time as she needed before he left her alone so she could have some privacy.

Hannah looked toward the bed. Her grandmother lay there, covered mostly by a colorful blanket. It wasn’t a standard hospital blanket, and she had a feeling that one of the nurses had found it and placed it on her. She

looked so peaceful—like a sleeping angel.

She walked over and sat in the chair next to the bed. She placed her hand on top of her grandmother's hands. Looking at her grandmother's manicured nails painted fire engine red, Hannah smiled. She never painted her nails, but Hannah had convinced her to when they attended the fundraiser. She had told her that the color would look great with the dress she had chosen to wear.

"I can't believe you're gone," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I already feel so empty without you."

Hannah stared at her granny. She'd give anything to hear her sweet voice once again.

"If you can hear me, please don't worry about me. I'll be fine. You raised me to be a strong, independent woman, just like you."

Hannah was trying not to choke up, but she was failing. She knew she needed to say goodbye but was afraid to because she knew it would be the last time she would see her grandmother.

*But you have your memories to remember her by,* her subconscious whispered.

"When you get to heaven, hug Mom, Dad, and Grandpa Joe for me and tell them that I love them."

Pulling her hand away, she leaned over the bed and kissed her grandmother's forehead.

"Thank you for everything. But most importantly, thank you for loving me and guiding me. Until we meet again, fly high. I love you."

She squeezed her granny's hand one last time before leaving the room. As she walked down the hall, her body felt numb, and her heart felt empty, but Hannah knew that all the wonderful memories would help it heal all over time.



## CHAPTER ONE

Hannah grabbed a pair of shorts from the dresser and placed them in her suitcase while trying to ignore the glare and snarky comments from her neighbor.

She and Thomas Cleary grew up together. His family owned one of the other ranches down the road. They were wealthy socialites who strutted around Jackson Hole with their noses high in the air.

It was unfortunate that Thomas followed in their snobbish ways. His ugly personality took away from his attractiveness on the outside. She had thought when he went away to college that he would find himself without the influence of his parents. However, that proved wrong when he returned to Jackson Hole, as he was just as bad as his father, if not worse.

When it came to the Clearys, everything came down to three things: money, power, and status.

“I can’t believe you’re actually going to follow through with this asinine bucket list thing,” Thomas arrogantly grumbled, letting go of the piece of paper in his hand as if it were a piece of trash and letting it float down to the bed.

Hannah rolled her eyes as she entered her walk-in closet and retrieved a couple of T-shirts. Walking back into the bedroom, she gave the man she once called a friend and boyfriend the stink eye before placing the shirts inside the suitcase.

“I thought we already settled this discussion, Thomas. Granny wanted this, and I intend to see it through.”

After her granny was laid to rest, Hannah met with Mr. Pederson, the attorney handling her grandmother’s estate. Nothing that Mr. Pederson went over with her was a surprise, as Granny had always been open with her regarding all her financials and assets. The surprise had come at the end of the meeting when Mr. Pederson handed her a plain white envelope with her name written in Granny’s elegant cursive handwriting on the front.

Inside the envelope, she found two pieces of paper. The first page was a letter to Hannah. In the letter, Granny expressed how she had always dreamed of traveling around the United States but never did because it was something that she and her husband had discussed doing together once he finished his career in the Navy. But when her husband was killed in action at

a very young age, those dreams died with him. Her wish after she was gone was for Hannah to fulfill the bucket list of destinations that she and Grandpa Joe had once planned to visit.

The second page consisted of a list of twenty-five cities across the United States written down. Next to each was a specific landmark to visit and take a picture of. The final words her granny left for her were to dream big and to find love during her journeys.

Hannah could definitely dream big, but she wasn't too sure about the love part. She hadn't had much luck in the relationship department. However, that was mostly her own fault as she never really allowed herself to invest herself in a relationship. Primarily because in the back of her mind, she was afraid Granny would be left alone if she found someone to settle down with.

Hannah turned toward Thomas. "I think some time away from here will do me some good. It's been years since I did any traveling."

It had been twenty-two years, to be exact, since she last left Wyoming. She was way overdue to do some exploring. She wasn't joking when she told Thomas that she intended to see Granny's bucket list fulfilled. There were many places on the list that Hannah had always dreamed of visiting. And doing it now gave it an extra special meaning. She could feel connected to it with her granny and even Grandpa Joe.

"Hannah? Are you even listening to me?" Thomas asked in frustration, and again, she rolled her eyes in boredom at his dramatic behavior. He acted like a toddler who wasn't getting enough attention. It wouldn't surprise her if he started stomping his feet.

"What did you say?"

"I asked about your grandmother's property?"

"What about it?" She knew what the conniving asshole was hinting at and where the conversation was heading.

"Who's going to watch over it while you're gone? That was a big reason your grandmother never left the area. It's a lot of land, and that comes with responsibilities, like keeping up on the landscaping, not to mention it is prime season for the berry fields."

She turned on him so fast that she not only shocked him but also surprised herself with her willingness to stand up to him.

"How dare you bring her name into this conversation to try and guilt me. My grandmother and I kept this property in pristine condition." She jammed her finger into his chest. "And I'll continue to make sure it stays that way."

And as for the berry fields, Angie can handle things there while I'm gone. God, you act like I'm never coming back."

She turned around and went back to packing. But now she was pissed off, so she started throwing things into her suitcase while silently thinking of ways shut him up.

He sighed aloud, then started walking towards her. She heard the clicking of his fancy, brown, designer dress shoes on the hardwood floors. She wished he would just leave.

"Hannah, we've discussed this numerous times. You are sitting on a lot of cash with those forty acres of land west of the house."

There it was—the topic she knew that was coming. Even before her grandmother died, Thomas had his beady eyes on the empty land west of the house. But just like her grandmother, Hannah never intended to let the property go. She would make sure that it always remained in the O'Quinn family.

"I've already told you, Thomas, *my* property is not for sale." She made sure to emphasize the word "my." Everything her grandmother owned was left to Hannah, meaning the property was now hers.

"So, you say." He walked closer and placed his hand on her hip as if he had every right to, which he didn't. Her first instinct was to break his hand. Somewhere in his weird, demented mind, he felt she belonged with him. They had dated back in high school during their senior year, but she quickly came to her senses and saw through his charm. Unfortunately, she had given him her virginity. That was thirteen years ago. Since then, she hadn't shown any romantic interest in the man. In fact, she tried to put as much distance between them as she could. She took a step back and watched his hand fall. She held back her smile, seeing his annoyed expression.

"My say is final. The land isn't for sale, and it never will be," she told him, looking him straight in the eye, wanting to make sure her words were heard loud and clear.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. A clear sign he was agitated. She couldn't understand why he wouldn't drop the issue. Okay, that was a lie. She knew why. Thomas was an entitled control freak, and whatever he wanted, he thought he deserved. And if he couldn't get it himself, he'd have his daddy step in and push his weight around until he got the desired outcome he wanted. Nobody in town said no to the Cleary family out of fear the Clearys would retaliate against them. But Hannah wasn't everyone and she

wasn't backing down from her decision.

"At least do me a favor and just listen to what the investors have to offer. It can't hurt to do that. Maybe something they say could make you change your mind."

"Pfft...that is highly doubtful," she said, dismissing the idea outright. But then she thought about it for a quick second. Just because she agreed to meet with the investors didn't mean she was obligated to accept their offer. She was serious. The land wasn't for sale. She would not deviate from that decision no matter how much money they tried to throw at her.

"Okay. I'll give. When I return from my trip, you can set up a meeting between me and your business associates." There was a glint in his eyes, and she held her finger up. She really needed to stress this point. "But just because I agree to a meeting does not guarantee anything. All I'm doing is listening to what they have to say."

"Absolutely! No guarantees. I understand." His face lit up, and she fought hard to hide her smile. She couldn't wait to see his smile fall and that light in his eyes go out when she turned down the investor's offer to their face. That was one way to get her point across.

"What about work?"

"What about it?"

"Are you taking a break from working while you go off gallivanting?"

He was such an asshole.

"I work from home, remember? That means I can work from anywhere if need be." Technically, she didn't have to work. The life insurance she inherited from her parents was enough for her to live on for the rest of her life. But that wasn't who she was. Nor was it how her grandmother raised her. She enjoyed working and helping companies grow. She had enough clients to keep her busy but not too overwhelming so she could enjoy doing things around the ranch.

She walked into her bathroom to pack her toiletry bag, or maybe she was doing it to escape him.

"You know, if you'd sell the land, you wouldn't have to work. The amount of money you'd make from the sale would be more than enough to live off of."

*For the love of God!* He was like a broken record. She walked out to tell him she had changed her mind about meeting with the investors when she bumped into him right outside the door. Their bodies collided, and Thomas

wrapped his arms around her so she wouldn't fall, though she'd rather fall on her ass than have his slimy tentacles touch her.

She looked up at him to give him a piece of her mind, but he placed his finger on her lips and grinned as if knowing what she was about to say.

*Pompous asshole!*

She tried to pull away, but he tightened his hold. She narrowed her eyes at his bold move; again, he found her actions amusing.

Chuckling, he leaned down, his mouth close to her ear. "Be safe, and don't miss me too much," he whispered, his breath fanning her ear. Then he kissed her cheek before releasing her.

She quickly took a few steps back, putting even more distance between them. He walked toward the door before turning around and smirking. "I'll text you the particulars for the meeting. See you in a few days," he threw her a wink and walked out the door.

When she heard the front door slam shut, she growled out loud.

"Grrrrr! That man drives me insane!"

Why couldn't he take the hint that she wanted no part of him or his business deals? He appeared so stupid at times that she wanted to snap him and shake the hell out of him like a glow stick until the light came on. She didn't trust him as far as she could throw him.

She heard her phone buzz, walked over to where she had left it sitting on the bed, and picked it up.

It was a message from the landscaping company she hired to handle the yard work while she was away. They were confirming the dates. After replying to them, she sent a text to Angie and the town's Sheriff and attached her itinerary for the next few weeks.

Angie, a town local, managed the berry fields on the ranch's east side, which started out as a fun pet project for Hannah when she was young. But with her granny's help, it soon grew into a profitable business, which Hannah oversaw.

The fields consisted of ten acres and grew delicious strawberries and blueberries. Visitors would come to the fields between July and September, and for a flat fee, they are given a container to pick their own berries. Angie wasn't just a great employee but an amazing friend. Hannah had no doubt the woman could run the fields without her physically being there.

Her phone buzzed again. This time, it was Sheriff Watt, thanking her for the information and letting her know that one of his deputies or himself

would periodically check on the property while she was away.

She loved being part of a small town and community that looked out for one another. Well, at least most of the townspeople did—the Clearys weren't included.

She grabbed the remaining items she pulled out to pack and tossed them into her suitcase before zipping it closed. She picked up the paper containing her granny's bucket list and smiled. She was really doing this.

“Well, Granny, here we go. First stop, Honolulu, Hawaii.”



Duke stood at the metal railing and took a deep breath as he gazed out at the long stretch of the white sand beach caressed by the warm, crystal-clear turquoise waters. The sound of the surf hitting the sand was music to his ears.

He loved Waikiki Beach. Some people may consider it too touristy, but he only had fond memories of the place. Its rich culture and breathtaking scenery were what kept him returning to Oahu whenever the opportunity arose.

Since arriving on the island four days ago, he had done nothing but lay around and mope. That was due to the unfavorable weather that had blanketed the island due to a storm system traveling through the region that stalled over the island. Yesterday, there had been a break in the rain for a few hours, which allowed him enough time to get to the beach and catch some waves.

Being out in the crystalline water on his surfboard was therapeutic. Paddling out and waiting in the line-up zone would put him in a meditative state. When he's out in the open sea waiting for the right set of waves to roll in, the adrenaline builds, releasing endorphins through his body, reducing the stress consuming him. He could feel his mood vastly improving with every wave he caught and rode in.

However, after a few hours of solitude and a few prayers to Kanaloa, the Hawaiian God of the Ocean, to ask for healing, he knew he would have to face reality again.

The events in Othana still weighed heavily on his conscience. His commanding officer, Derek Connors, received word from General Arkan that Ghalia was buried respectfully with a proper burial ceremony. He also noted that Ghalia's baby girl was doing fine and was still staying with Naima and her family for now.

Rakin, on the other hand, took a leave of absence from the military, kept his word, and disappeared. It was unfortunate for both him and his baby girl. It wasn't fair that there were people all over the world who dreamed of having a family and couldn't for various reasons, and then you have individuals like Rakin who are blessed with a healthy, beautiful life but want nothing to do with it.

Duke couldn't hold back a small smile as he remembered the cute baby girl. She had a full head of raven black hair, just like her mother. She had looked so tiny in his arms when he held her. He wondered what they named her.

Again, the situation made him reflect on his life and how much he desired to have his own kids. But, thanks to Katie and her cheating and selfish ways, he'd most likely have to settle for spoiling his nieces and teammates' kids, which he didn't mind because they were awesome.

"Duke!"

Hearing his name being called, Duke turned and saw his buddy Heath walking towards him.

They hugged, slapping each other on the back.

"Good to see you, man," Duke said as he pulled away.

"Same," Heath replied, running his hand over his shaved head. "Sorry that work has been busy, and we haven't had time to catch up."

Duke waved him off. "Don't worry about it. You've got a job to do. I'm just grateful for a place to crash at for a few days."

"I know, but it's weird that you're staying at my house, and this is the first time we've spoken since you got here."

Duke laughed, and Heath looked out toward the water.

"That storm really screwed with the weather the past few days."

"Yeah, but I was able to get in a few hours of surfing yesterday."

Heath nodded. "That's good."

"How about breakfast? My treat," Duke asked.

Heath rubbed his stomach and grinned. "Breakfast sounds great. I'm tired of base food."

Duke chuckled. "Come on, let's go to the café next door."

The hostess sat them outside on the patio at a table in the corner. When the waiter approached, they both ordered coffee and the breakfast buffet. Once they had their food and sat back down, Heath started his interrogation, which didn't surprise Duke.

“So, you’ve been here for four days and only got a few hours of surfing in. What else have you been up to?”

“Not much, really. I’ve been able to catch up on some reading.”

“How about catching up on your sleep?”

Duke shrugged his shoulder. “I’ve gotten a little shut-eye.”

Heath raised one of his eyebrows at Duke’s response. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look tired as fuck.”

Duke chuckled, knowing he looked just as he felt. When he was brushing his teeth earlier and looked in the mirror, he had seen the the dark circles under his eyes.

“Haven’t been able to sleep much,” he admitted, and Heath nodded as if understanding.

“Anything you want to talk about? Or can you talk about it?”

Duke respected Heath. During BUD/s, they became close friends, helping and encouraging each other through the grueling training, especially when either of them was tempted to ring out.

“So?” Heath pressed as he shoveled a fork full of sausage and eggs into his mouth.

Duke put his fork down and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“Just one of those situations I can’t seem to put behind me.”

Heath nodded. “I’m all ears.”

“We were finishing up our joint military drills and training with the Othana Army. There was a medical emergency in the village nearby. A pregnant woman was in labor and went into cardiac arrest. I was able to save the baby, but unfortunately, the mother didn’t survive.”

“Oh, damn. That’s tough.”

Duke went into detail, telling Heath what went down during the delivery and about Rakin and how he walked out and still hadn’t made contact with his daughter. He also told him about Rakin’s behavior and how he accused him of murder.

Heath shook his head. “You don’t believe what he said, do you?”

Duke sighed. “No. I mean, the man just lost his wife. He wasn’t in the right state of mind. I just don’t understand why this one affected me so much.”

“You’re human, man. We see a lot of shit—a lot of bad shit. There’s only so much our mind and sanity can take before we need a cleanse as we could maybe call it. In many of our operations we find ourselves protecting



innocent women and children. So, in your case, not being able to save the woman messed with your head. It sounds like it was very traumatic for anyone who was there. I couldn't imagine being in your shoes and making those decisions. From what you explained, you made the right call. Don't let someone's nasty words tell you any differently. I know firsthand that sitting here talking about it won't make the memories from that day disappear. But on days when that dark cloud starts to hover over you, just remember that baby girl that you gave life to. She is the brightness that will continue to shine. And hopefully, her rays of light will outshine the darkness from that day over time."

Duke sat there for a minute, letting Heath's words sink in. He was right. He needed to focus more on the good of the situation, especially if he wanted to move past it.

"You're right. Thanks, man."

Heath waved him off. "You'd do the same for me." Heath then changed the topic. "Are you making a trip over to Pearl?"

Duke smirked. "Of course. My trip wouldn't be complete without a trip to the Memorial."

"I think Mike is piloting the shuttle boats this week. When are you going?"

Mike was another friend they met in BUD/s. However, Mike wasn't so lucky. He developed a lung infection right after Hell Week and was medically removed from the program.

"I got two tickets for tomorrow at noon."

"Two tickets?" Heath asked.

"I wasn't sure what your schedule would be like. So, I got a second one just in case."

"Damn. I'd love to go, but I'm tied up with training exercises all day."

"That's alright. There are always people looking for a ticket. So, it's not like the ticket will go to waste."

"That is very true. People wait in the standby line for hours, hoping a ticket becomes available. So, what are your plans for today?" Heath asked as he scraped up the remaining eggs on his plate.

"Well, I planned on returning to the condo and hermitizing in the dark. But after our talk, I'm feeling more energized—maybe considering a hike to Koko Head Crater. You up for the challenge?"

The out-and-back trail consisted of a mile and a half of steep stairs and

loose dirt. It tested the strength and endurance of those up for a challenge. It was precisely what Duke needed—a strenuous hike to get his heart pumping and adrenalin going.

“I’m in. Afterward, we can hit that roadside Japanese food truck you like.”

Duke smiled, already knowing what he would be ordering. That specific food truck had the best sukiyaki beef.

“That sounds perfect,” Duke said as he paid the bill, and the two started to walk down the beach toward Heath’s condo.

With his head a little clearer, Duke looked forward to enjoying the last few days on the beautiful island.

## CHAPTER TWO

After showing his passenger ticket as he entered the Port of Casablanca in Morocco, Rakin walked through rows upon rows of metal containers, searching for the route to get him to the MSC Meg XVII cargo ship.

Being the largest port in northern Africa, the Port of Casablanca on Morocco's coast was massive and never slept. Even now, at a little after midnight local time, it was bustling with workers and truckers, loading and unloading containers for shipment.

Once he located the one-thousand-two-hundred-foot ship, an armed security guard stopped him before boarding.

“Name?” The guard asked.

“Hassan Lazaar,” Rakin answered, remembering to use the name on his passport and other travel documents his cousin secured for him.

“You’re a passenger?” the guard asked, looking over the paper attached to his clipboard.

“Yes,” Rakin replied, following his cousin’s advice and keeping his answers short.

“Passport and Visa?”

Rakin handed over all the documents and waited while the guard reviewed them. The guard then got on the radio with someone. Rakin heard the guy tell whoever he was talking to his name.

“I’ll send him that way,” the guard stated, clipping the radio back on his belt before handing Rakin back his paperwork.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Lazaar,” he said, then pointed toward a door. “Go through that white door, take the stairs up to the third level. Once you exit the stairs, turn right and follow the hallway around until you reach room twenty. That will be your sleeping quarters. All the information you’ll need to know about meals and what areas are off limits for passengers are in your room.”

Rakin thanked the guy, then swung his duffle bag onto his shoulder. Following the guard's directions, he managed to find his room quickly and easily. The room wasn't anything fancy, which he wasn't expecting it to be. But on the flipside, it wasn't as bad as he thought it would be either. It resembled a college dorm room with stark white walls, a twin bed, a nightstand next to the bed, a small desk and chair, and an armoire with a

small space to hang things and store stuff. His view out of the lone window overlooked the thousands of stacked containers that would be off loaded once the ship arrived in Baltimore, Maryland.

“Not too bad,” he uttered out loud. The route from Morocco to Baltimore would take ten to twelve days, depending on the weather. But Rakin was okay with the timeline as it would give him time to study his plan so he’d be ready once he arrived in the United States.

He picked up his duffle bag and backpack and placed them on the bed. The first thing he unpacked was the two six packs of Morocco’s finest beer, Casablanca. He had one in each bag. He removed one bottle before putting the remaining in the small mini fridge under the desk.

Once he had put his clothes away, he grabbed the bottle of beer he had set aside and sat on the bed with his back against the headboard. He tugged his backpack closer, reached inside, and pulled out two nine-by-twelve manila envelopes. He opened both envelopes and emptied the contents onto the bed. There were papers, bundles of American cash, and a key. But the one item that immediately caught his eye was the photograph of his sweet Ghalia.

It was taken on the day of their wedding. She was so beautiful. The entire day, her smile never faltered. It was the happiest he’d ever seen her in the three years he’d known her. That happiness continued for the next year as they made plans for the future. Everything was lining up the way they had planned. He had been accepted into the Othana Army’s special forces pilot program, and Ghalia was studying to become a teacher. They were saving money, hoping to buy property closer to the capital where he’d be stationed.

But then those plans were put on hold when he came home from work one day, and she told him she was pregnant. She was so happy, and he tried to be happy, but her health was a concern for him. Ghalia had a history of heart issues, already having survived two heart attacks.

She was two months into her pregnancy when the nurse who traveled the region came and did a workup on her. Ghalia’s blood pressure was very high during the visit, which concerned the nurse. Then, when the nurse learned of Ghalia’s history of heart trouble, she tried to tell Ghalia that aborting the pregnancy would be in the best interest of her health because the added pregnancy stress to her body could potentially kill her. Rakin had sided with the nurse and even told Ghalia they could adopt. However, Ghalia waived off everyone’s concerns and decided that she would see the pregnancy through even if it killed her.

He gritted his teeth, remembering that exact moment when her eyes rolled into her head, and her heart stopped beating. Just moments before, she had been so excited when she went into labor and was ready to welcome their baby into the world. But instead, she left him heartbroken with a grudge against the baby everyone called his daughter.

He brought the beer bottle to his lips and guzzled about half of it.

He curled his lip up in disgust, thinking about that child who meant nothing to him. If it weren't for her, his Ghalia would still be alive. But he couldn't place all the blame on the vile child. The person he held responsible for Ghalia's death was the American SEAL, whom everyone in the village fawned over because he saved the baby. However, Rakin believed that the SEAL was nothing but a pussy and took the easy way out. The bastard should have put Ghalia's well-being first. He should have done everything he could to save Ghalia over that fucking baby. In Rakin's mind, he truly believed that they could have saved her. They should have given her more time to try and bring her back, even if it killed the baby.

He was pissed at everyone, including his General, who he thought would have had his back. But instead, they all took the SEAL's advice on what he thought was best. He wasn't a fucking doctor.

Now, because of their backstabbing actions, they would all suffer the same fate as Ghalia. And the first target in his crosshairs was the SEAL who sent Ghalia to her grave.

He guzzled the rest of the beer and set the empty bottle on the table next to the bed.

He began looking over all the papers and cash that his cousin secured for him through his underground contacts. He didn't ask how he got it or who was involved. That was his cousin's business, and Rakin knew not to ask questions. All that mattered was that Rakin had the means to exact his revenge against those who betrayed him.

The ten stacks of bundled cash totaled up to ten thousand dollars. That was more than enough to get him through until his business in the United States was complete.

He had changed his physical appearance to match his new Moroccan passport and driver's license by shaving off his long hair and growing a thick beard that covered his jaw and upper lip. He also got a pair of non-prescription glasses and colored contacts to alter his eye appearance. His cousin's contact advised him to travel by ship versus air because it's been

proved that the port immigration system was a bit more lenient and faster when processing visitors, as long as he didn't bring any extra attention to himself.

Whoever his cousin's contact was in the United States must have a high-security clearance to get their hands on the information given to Rakin. The documents contained the background and home address of the SEAL he was targeting. The information provided would definitely make the process of locating him easy.

He reached for the key that was in the envelope. There was a laminated key tag attached to it. On the tag was an address to a storage unit in Virginia Beach. An evil, wicked smile pulled at his lips, knowing what awaited him inside that storage unit.

Still smiling, he lifted his arms, pretending to be holding a rifle. He aimed it toward a spot on the wall, imagining that dark spot was the SEAL's head.

"You can run, but you can't hide. I'm coming for you, Garrison Reid."

## CHAPTER THREE

Hannah pulled into the Pearl Harbor Visitor Center's parking lot and parked the rental car in the first available spot she saw. Before she got out of the car, she sat there for a few minutes with the air conditioning on full blast, hoping the frosty air would bring her body temperature down. Anytime she felt stressed or worked up, she would get overheated.

At the moment, she was very worked up. She felt stressed, anxious, and very upset with herself, as she forgot to set her alarm and overslept. Now, she was running way behind schedule, and her chances of securing a ticket to visit the USS *Arizona* Memorial were most likely slim to none.

Because she only planned the trip a week ago, tickets for the day were already sold out. However, the website mentioned a standby line and that those seeking a ticket should get to the center early. But it also warned that standby tickets may not always be available.

She looked at the clock and frowned. It was already eleven o'clock, and the Visitor Center opened four hours ago. She should've been there then. Now, she was pretty sure that the line was long.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then exhaled. There was no use getting herself worked up than she already was. What's done is done, and she couldn't change anything. The only thing she could do was take the chance and hope for the best. If she failed to get a ticket, she could say she was there and saw the Memorial, even though it wouldn't be the same.

She took her driver's license and credit card out of her wallet and slipped them into the pocket of her shorts. Since the Center had a no-bag policy, she slid her small purse under the front passenger seat so it was out of view.

She turned the engine off and exited the vehicle. She felt the sun's warm tropical rays penetrate her skin, which was welcomed since it had been raining for the past four days, not really allowing her to get out and explore the island. However, she was glad that the weather had chosen to brighten up on the most important day.

She grabbed her wide-brimmed floppy sun straw hat from the back seat and settled it on her head before slipping on her black sunglasses. She locked up the car and started toward the entrance across the parking lot.

The moment she walked through the security checkpoint, she looked

toward the left, and in the distance, sitting in the water, was the white concave silhouette concrete and steel structure that spanned the wreckage of the USS *Arizona*. Tears instantly stung her eyes, and goosebumps emerged on her skin as she took in the solemn sight. She couldn't believe she was really there.

Taking a deep breath and trying to rein in her emotions, she looked in the opposite direction and spotted the ticket and information desk. But when she saw the line of people in the standby line, the tears she was holding back felt like they were about to break through. Without even counting, she knew more than fifty people were already waiting.

She spotted one of the Park Rangers walking towards her and stopped him.

"Excuse me, can I ask you a question?"

The Ranger stopped and smiled, "Yes, ma'am,"

"How many standby tickets are there normally?"

"It all depends on the day; unfortunately, today is pretty busy."

"So, what you're saying is that I shouldn't waste my time in the line and just take in what I can see here at the Visitors Center?"

"Unless you have another day to visit and can get here when the center opens and be one of the first in line, that would be my suggestion. You can also take a shuttle to Ford Island and tour the USS *Missouri* and the Aviation Museum. It's an extra cost, but there are always tickets for those available."

She stole another glance at the USS *Arizona* Memorial as she weighed her options. It would be a shame to waste the opportunity to see the other attractions, especially since she didn't know when she'd ever make it back there.

"Unfortunately, I'm flying out tonight. And this trip was a spur-of-the-moment thing. So I couldn't get an advanced ticket online." She told him about her grandmother's passing and how she was fulfilling her granny's bucket list.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. But what a great thing you're doing in honoring your grandmother."

"Thank you. Anyway, it's my own fault for getting here late. But I think I'll take your suggestion and have a look around here first and then hop on a shuttle and visit the other two places."

He stared at her momentarily, and then a small smile played on the corners of his lips.



“Actually, I might have a solution for you. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Umm. Sure. I’ll be right over there,” she told him, pointing toward the railing by the water. She was a bit skeptical, but she’d wait for him.

“I shouldn’t be more than five minutes.”

“Take your time.” It wasn’t like she was going anywhere.

Hannah watched the Ranger disappear behind the ticket building. It was a bit strange, and she wondered what his solution consisted of.

She walked toward the water, passing by one of the three anchors from the USS *Arizona* that was on display.

She reached the water’s edge and leaned against the railing. A light, warm breeze blew in off the harbor water, caressing her skin. Seeing how calm and peaceful the harbor looked, it was hard to imagine the chaos and destruction that ensued when it was under attack.

“Well, Granny. I made it here. I’m sorry that I failed, as I’m not sure if I’ll get to see it up close, but it’s beautiful even from a distance.”

Suddenly, a deep voice spoke from behind her and made her jump.

“Excuse me, ma’am,”

She looked over her shoulder, and one look at the man standing behind her nearly caused her to embarrass herself as her breath caught in her throat, rendering her speechless.

He was very tall, and she had to crane her neck to get a better look at him. Judging how the material of his dark green golf shirt stretched over his well-defined chest and biceps, she’d describe him as having a brawny build. But the feature that captivated her was his dark brown eyes that matched his hair color. They were striking and filled with warmth as he looked her over. She had a hard time trying not to stare at him.

The guy chuckled, and Hannah blushed, knowing she had been caught ogling him. *How freaking embarrassing.*

“I’m sorry, darlin', I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, and Hannah about fainted hearing his sexy, thick southern drawl of that added to his appeal.

She had to give her head a shake to prevent her from embarrassing herself any further. She waved him off.

“It’s okay. I tend to startle easily,” she told him, then wanted to give herself a swift kick in the ass.

*What the heck? I tend to startle easily. Can I make myself look any more*

*like a dork?*

“I’m sorry. Did you need something?” She asked, trying to deflect the attention off of her.

The guy grinned, and a small dimple appeared on his right cheek. His thin beard camouflaged it, but it was there. Could he get any more handsome?



Duke was standing near the ticket and information center talking with his friend Mike when Peter, one of the Park Rangers that Duke had met through Mike walked up.

“Hey, Duke, do you still have that extra ticket for the noon tour?”

“Yeah, I was actually getting ready to turn it in so someone could use it. Why, what’s up?”

Peter grinned. “I think I have someone that would like it.” He motioned Duke to follow him. As they rounded the corner of the ticket building, Peter pointed in the direction of the water, and that was when Duke’s eyes landed on a woman leaning against the railing looking out at the water.

“She needs the ticket?” Duke asked, studying the woman, and Peter smiled.

“Yeah. I was just talking to her. She had stopped me to ask a question, but then she and I started talking, and she told me how she was fulfilling a bucket list belonging to her grandmother. I’ll admit, it was a touching story. Not to mention, she was pretty cute.”

Duke looked back toward the woman. It didn’t matter if she was attractive or unattractive. If Peter said she needed a ticket and that her story touched him, then Duke would give her the ticket.

“Alright. I’ll go over and talk to her.”

Peter slapped him on the back. “I’m telling you, you’ll be thanking me later,” he said, giving his eyebrows a little wiggle, making both Mike and Duke laugh.

Duke told Mike he would catch up with him later before turning his attention to the woman who had piqued his interest.

As he headed towards her, he eyed her over. He could only see her from behind since her back was turned toward him. She was petite, but the muscle definition in her arms and legs told him she worked out. She leaned more over the railing, making her butt stick out, and he couldn’t stop his eyes from

traveling to her backside. She had a curvy round ass that filled out the black shorts she wore.

He gave his head a slight shake. *What in the hell am I doing? Just give her the ticket and move on.*

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

She jumped, looking over her shoulder, her long, wavy, strawberry-blond hair whipped around her face. When she removed her sunglasses and her soft brown eyes peered up at him from under the floppy hat she wore, he felt his chest tighten with a sensation he hadn’t felt in a very long time. She was stunning, and he forgot why he was standing there for a moment.

“I’m sorry, darlin’, I didn’t mean to startle you,” he finally said, and he watched as her cheeks pinkened, and a small smile appeared on her supple lips as she waved him off.

“It’s okay. I startle easily,” she told him, and he chuckled as her cheeks turned an even darker shade of pink. She laughed nervously. “Anyway, I’m sorry. Did you need something?” She asked him, and he grinned at her cuteness. Peter hadn’t lied about her looks.

“My friend Peter mentioned that you were looking for a ticket to the Memorial.”

She scrunched her eyebrows together as if she was thinking, and then her eyes widened, giving him a great view of her big brown eyes.

“Are you talking about the Park Ranger?”

“Yes, I’m sorry. Peter the Park Ranger.”

The woman snorted a laugh and slapped her hand over her mouth. Her cheeks turned pink again.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in between fits of more giggles. She fanned her face with her hand, and when she finally could breathe, she said, “It’s just the way you said his name.” She bit down on her lip to stop herself from laughing again. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, and Peter seems like a great guy, but it’s just that Peter the Park Ranger sounds like a porn star name.”

Duke couldn’t contain himself as he barked a laugh, drawing curious looks from others nearby.

Even after he stopped laughing, he couldn’t wipe the smile from his face as he stared at the woman who looked like she wanted to crawl under a rock and hide.

“I’m so embarrassed right now. I cannot believe I just said that,” she

mumbled, trying to avoid his eyes. Her poor cheeks were so red now that they matched the red highlights in her hair. Not only was she beautiful, but she had a sense of humor.

Duke chuckled. “No need to apologize or feel embarrassed. That was actually pretty funny.” *I don’t know if I can look at Peter again and not laugh.* He thought to himself.

She removed her hat and shook out her hair, and Duke’s fingers itched to see what those locks felt as soft as they looked. Everything about her had his cock stirring in his pants. *What the fuck is happening? Is this what happens when I don’t get laid in almost a year and I meet a gorgeous woman?*

She tilted her face up towards his.

“Can we start over?” She asked, her cheeks still pink like she had been in the sun too long.

He smiled and held out his hand.

“I’m Garrison, but my friends call me Duke.”

A gorgeous smile replaced her pout, and she placed her small, delicate hand into his. “Hannah.”

An electrifying feeling coursed through his veins when their hands touched, and he felt alive. Her skin felt so soft against his calloused fingers that he couldn’t help but hold on to it a little longer than a normal handshake.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hannah.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well, Duke. Is it okay to call you Duke? And please excuse my behavior. I tend to babble when I get nervous, and sometimes my mouth speaks before my brain tells it to.”

He really couldn’t get over her cuteness, nor how comfortable he felt talking with her.

“Yeah, Duke is fine. So, before we got sidetracked, I was trying to ask if you still needed a ticket.”

“Oh, right. Yes. But your friend said that my chances were pretty slim to get one today.

“Well, I just happened to have an extra one if you’d like it.”

Her eyes widened, and he could see the surprise and hope in them.

“You really don’t need it?”

He shook his head. “No, my buddy who was supposed to meet me couldn’t get off work.”

“Only if your positive.”

“I’m positive.”

“Why me?”

She had an innocence about her that called to him, and he found himself chuckling again.

“Do you always ask this many questions when someone is trying to be nice?” He teased.

“I’m so sorry and believe me, I’m not trying to sound ungrateful. I’m just surprised. I mean, here I thought I was out of luck, then I meet your Ranger friend, and now here you are, standing in of me and offering me a priceless gift that I could never repay you for.”

“I understand. And to answer your question, I chose you because Peter said you told him a very touching story. Something about fulfilling a bucket list that belonged to your grandmother.”

He watched as her eyes filled with unshed tears, and he wondered what brought that on. She bit her lip as she shifted nervously on her feet.

“Are you really sure you don’t need the ticket? I don’t want you to be on the hook if your friend ends up showing.”

“Absolutely,” he told her, giving her an encouraging smile, hoping she would say yes.

When he saw a smile form on her lips, he knew she would accept it.

“If you’re sure, then I’d love the ticket. It would mean the world to me.”

“It’s yours. However, there is a catch.”

Her eyes widened, and her pretty, bright smile fell. He quickly finished what he was going to say before she changed her mind.

“I promise, I’m not asking for a kidney or anything like that,” he teased, and she folded her arms across her chest.

“Alright. What’s the catch then?”

“After we visit the Memorial, you have lunch with me.”

The shocked look on her face was priceless. However, he had surprised himself for even asking her. But something, like a strong energy force was pushing him to get to know her a little more.

Her expression went from surprised to a smile that played on her pretty lips. “I’ll agree to have lunch with you, but only if I get to buy.”

He did not expect that, but with a smile, he held out his hand.

“Deal.”

“Deal,” she repeated and smiled, shaking his hand.

“Well, I guess we should go get in line because our tour starts in twenty

minutes.”

He gestured toward the theatre, where the tour started with a movie before the shuttle boat took them to the Memorial.

She nodded, then fell in step with him.

“So, is this your first time in Hawaii?” He asked her as they walked.

“It is.”

“Was there something special that brought you out to Hawaii besides coming here?”

“No. This was the main reason for visiting. I’ve always wanted to visit but just hadn’t gotten around to it yet. My grandmother’s bucket list gave me the opportunity, so I took it. Though, the weather hasn’t been all that great the past few days, so I haven’t really gotten to do anything I wanted to.”

Duke snorted. “No, it hasn’t. It’s messed up my plans as well. I haven’t been able to do what I had planned while visiting either.”

She looked up at him. “Are you not from here?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m just visiting a friend.”

“Oh. I thought you lived here since you said Peter was your friend.”

“I know Peter through Mike, another friend who’s in the Navy and works here. Actually, he’s piloting the boat we’ll take to the Memorial.”

“Are you in the Navy too?” She asked, and Duke hoped she wasn’t one of those women who liked to chase men in uniform.

“I am,” he admitted, though he left out the part of him being a SEAL. That was a piece of information that he kept close to him and definitely didn’t share with strangers.

“Well, thank you for your service. Where are you stationed?”

“Virginia Beach,” he told her.

“I’ve never been there. Is it nice?”

“It’s home for me. And I can see myself settling down there after I retire. So, yeah. I guess it’s nice. How about you? Where’s home for you?”

“Jackson Hole, Wyoming.”

“Oh wow! Jackson Hole is beautiful.”

“You’ve been there?” She asked, looking surprised.

“I have. It was only for a day or two. I’d love to go back and spend a good week or two exploring the area.”

“Well, I’ll have to give you my number so that if you ever make it out there, I can show you around.”

He smiled. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They made it into the theatre and took their seats inside. Duke struggled to pay attention to the movie with Hannah sitting beside him. He watched her as she indulged in the movie. Her facial expressions gave away the emotions she was experiencing as the movie played out. When the movie ended, he caught her wiping her eyes before the lights came back on.

They walked silently outside where the boat awaited to take them to the Memorial.

“Where do you want to sit?” She asked as they boarded.

He didn’t like having his back exposed, so he pointed toward the empty row in the back.

“Let’s go all the way back. That way, you can get an end seat to get some good pictures of the Memorial on the way out.”

She smiled, and he pressed his hand against the small of her back as he guided her toward their seats.

Once everyone had taken their seats, the boat pulled away from the pier. It was a quiet and calm ride out to the Memorial.

Duke found it extremely hard to keep his eyes from wandering to the woman beside him. Hannah was stunning and appeared so carefree. Though, at times, when they spoke, he caught some insecurity that hid in her eyes.

He looked down and noticed she was fidgeting with her fingers. She seemed tense and nervous, and he chalked it up to maybe she was afraid of the water. Many people didn’t like being out on a boat. But the only way to access the Memorial was via boat. Or maybe she was just nervous in general about visiting the Memorial. It had that effect on people, as many weren’t sure what to expect when they got out there. It was a very somber but humbling experience.

He wasn’t sure why, but he reached over and covered her hands with one of his. She stilled instantly, her head snapping upward to look at him, her expression full of surprise.

“You seem nervous,” he told her, gently caressing the top of her hand with his thumb. Her cheeks pinkened, and she lowered her eyes.

“Sorry. I fidget when I’m nervous,” she admitted.

“Why are you nervous?”

Meeting his gaze again, she said, “Being here.”

“The Memorial?”

“Yeah. My—” she started to say, but she was interrupted by Mike’s

announcement as they pulled up to the pier attached to the memorial.

Duke wanted to hear what she was going to say, but he'd have to wait until they were back on the boat.



Hannah's nerves were at an all-time high as she sat quietly, her hands clasped together on her lap. She was trying her hardest to enjoy the boat ride, but it was challenging due to the anxious feeling she was experiencing. Not only was she nervous about entering the Memorial, but she was also feeling a little off-kilter due to the man sitting next to her.

Having only met him about an hour ago, she felt something brewing internally leaving her very confused. So far, she had enjoyed spending time with him. She was intrigued by him. She was drawn to the good qualities he exhibited. He was down to earth and easy to talk to. He was also funny and just appeared to be genuine. His good looks and cute dimple were a bonus. The more she thought about it, maybe intrigued wasn't the only word to describe how she felt towards him. *Was it an attraction? Oh, Jesus. Is that what is happening? Am I attracted to him? Oh, hell! What am I thinking?* For all she knew, he could have twice as many bad qualities compared to the good ones he had shown her.

She hadn't realized she had been fidgeting so badly until she felt the warmth from Duke's hand as he covered her hands.

She only saw concern in his brown eyes when she met his gaze.

"You seem nervous," his voice was low, so only she could hear.

She nodded and was about to tell him why, though leaving out the part about the possible attraction to him, but then she was interrupted when they arrived at the Memorial.

She and Duke were the last ones off the boat, and as she walked across the gangway and stepped through the entryway of the Memorial, she was overwhelmed by a rush of emotions.

The history of Pearl Harbor has always fascinated her, but actually seeing firsthand the destruction of just one ship and knowing the hull of the ship just below the surface where she was standing was a tomb for more than nine hundred sailors was surreal.

The atmosphere was quiet and somber, yet watching the visitors move about the memorial, paying their respects in their own ways, was moving.

She gazed out at the water, looking at the small oil slick on the water's



surface. It was unbelievable that oil still seeped from a ship that sunk eighty-one years ago.

Duke stood close next to her. He, too, seemed a little emotional.

“Seeing it in person really brings the history of that day alive,” she whispered.

“It sure does,” he told her. He then pointed toward the small oil-slick patch floating on the surface. “Some say the ship is still mourning from the attack, and the droplets of oil that bubble to the surface are black tears from the souls entombed below.”

“It’s just so sad. So many innocent lives were lost that day,” she said as her voice cracked from being overcome with emotion.

“The history that sits in these waters is astounding. I mean, we are standing where World War II began for the United States. But then you look right over there,” he pointed to the USS *Missouri* sitting in the water, “and on the deck of that battleship was where the war ended.”

The thought of that gave Hannah goosebumps. But it was fitting and appeared like the USS *Missouri* was watching the harbor.

Hannah took in the unique but gorgeous architecture as they moved through the structure. She read on the internet how the architect *Alfred Preis*, who designed the memorial, described the floating museum. He said, “*Wherein the structure sags in the center but stands strong and vigorous at the ends, expresses initial defeat and ultimate victory. The overall effect is one of serenity. Overtones of sadness have been omitted to permit the individual to contemplate his own personal responses...his innermost feelings.*”

As they moved through the Assembly Hall, Duke excused himself when he spotted another Park Ranger he knew. Hannah took her time as she made her way toward the Shrine.

When she noticed that most of the other visitors had started returning toward the Assembly Hall and the Entry room, she decided it was time to venture into the room she was nervous about entering.

As she stepped into the Shrine room, her mouth gaped open as she admired the beauty of the all-white room. She stared at all the names engraved on the marble wall before her. Her body trembled in anticipation as her eyes jumped from name to name until they landed upon the one she sought.

Tears began to flow from her eyes, leaving streaks of wetness trailing

down her cheeks. The heartwarming stories that her grandmother used to tell her were pushed forward into her mind.

“Hannah?”

She was so far into her head that she hadn’t even noticed that Duke had rejoined her.

Lifting her head to look up at him, she knew she had to look like a mess.

“Hannah, what’s wrong?” his deep voice was soft, but she could hear the concern mixed in.

“I’m sorry. I feel so many emotions right now,” she told him, sniffing and wiping her eyes.

His expression softened, “It’s okay. This place does that. It gets to me every time I come out here. It’s a feeling you can’t really explain until you experience it yourself.”

“It’s just seeing his name.”

“Wait, you know someone on the wall?” He asked, looking down at her, an expression of shock covering his face.

She gave him a teary-eyed smile as she nodded. “My grandfather.”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. His consoling touch was like being wrapped in a cozy blanket as waves of warmth traveled through her body. His tight but comforting hold felt like he was expelling the grief she was holding onto.

The sound of someone clearing their throat had both Hannah and Duke looking over their shoulders. The Park Ranger that Duke had been talking to just a few minutes earlier gave them both a sympathetic smile, and Hannah wondered if he had heard what she told Duke.

“They’re starting to board the boat,” he told them.

“Thanks, Parker. Please let Mike know we’ll be there in just a minute?” Duke asked.

The Ranger nodded. “Sure, man.”

When the Ranger left, and they were left alone, Duke turned his attention back to Hannah. He pulled her close, rubbing his big, strong hands up and down her arms. The feeling of his touch caused her belly to do flip-flops. He looked deep into her eyes.

“I don’t like seeing you sad,” he admitted, using his thumb to wipe a tear from her cheek.

She sniffled again. “I’m sorry.”

He smiled softly. “You have no reason to apologize. There are no words that can make grief disappear. And I can’t even begin to think I understand your feelings because I don’t. So, I’m not going to stand here and tell you that it’ll be okay because not everyone is the same, and grief is unique to the person who has lost a loved one. But I can offer you a big shoulder to cry on and my ears to listen if you feel like talking.”

Hannah almost started to cry again at Duke’s kind words. Standing before her was a man who knew pretty much nothing about her but was willing to comfort her.

She smiled up at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Your kindness is all I need,” she told him.

She knew her time at the Memorial was ending, but that didn’t mean it was an end to the wonderful memories and stories her grandmother had passed on to her as a way for Hannah to learn and know who her grandfather was. Her Grandpa Joe was a true hero who put his country before himself.

“You ready to go?” He asked, his deep voice coming out soft and tender.

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

With one last look over her shoulder, she made a promise to return to this spot in the near future.



The entire ride back to the Visitors Center, Duke held Hannah’s hand as she used his shoulder to rest her head against. He could tell she was still pretty upset.

He hadn’t lied to her when he told her he didn’t like seeing her upset. Call him crazy, but seeing tears in her eyes nearly brought him to his knees. A feeling of protectiveness overcame him, and he wanted to shield her from harm or sadness.

He felt her lift her head off his shoulder and he glanced down at her. She was looking up into his eyes. Her brown eyes were still glassy.

“Feeling a little better?” He asked, and she nodded.

“Yeah,” she answered with a small smile on her lips. “Thank you for what you said back there. About not knowing how I felt or what I was going through.” She paused for a second, her nose scrunching up, appearing to think about what she would say. “I lost my grandmother a little over a week ago, and coming here on her behalf and seeing her husband, my grandfather’s name on that wall...well...let’s just say that reality kicked in, and I felt so

engulfed with sadness and guilt.”

*Damn.* Duke thought to himself. He hadn't realized that she had *just* lost her grandmother and then traveled here on a whim because it was her grandmother's wish. It was no wonder she was overcome with grief.

“I'm glad you're feeling better. You are too beautiful to be shedding any tears.”

Her cheeks turned rosy, and she shyly looked down at her lap, where they were still holding hands. He gave her hand a light squeeze, and she looked back up at him.

“I'm sorry to hear about your grandma. But just know that it's okay to feel sad at times. And like I said, I'm a great listener if you ever need someone to talk to you.”

“Thank you, Duke. I appreciate that.”

They continued staring into each other's eyes, and Duke felt a mutual attraction between them. The need to kiss her increased, especially when her little pink tongue darted out to wet her lips. God, she was enticing. Just as he was about to say *fuck it* and lean in for a kiss, the boat started to rock, breaking the hold they seemed to have had over one another.

When he looked up, he saw they were back at the dock, and everyone was exiting the boat.

Looking back at her, he grinned. “I guess we better get off before we get in trouble.”

She chuckled, then nodded her head. “That's a good idea. We don't want Peter the Park Ranger to discipline us.”

Duke threw his head back and roared in laughter as the two made their way toward the exit. As they were disembarking, Mike grabbed him.

“Hey, Duke. Do you have a second? There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Duke glanced at Hannah. “Do you mind?” He asked her, as he didn't want to appear rude.

Hannah grinned as she released his hand, and Duke instantly felt the loss of her touch.

“No. Not at all. But don't even think about blowing me off because I still owe you lunch.”

He grinned. “Never. Give me a few minutes, and I'll meet you by the ticket counter.”

She nodded before turning and walking away.

Duke watched her until she disappeared around the theatre building.

Mike punched him in the shoulder.

“Damn, man! You move quick,” Mike teased.

Duke shook his head and laughed. “It’s not like that. She needed a friend, and I was there.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve seen friends who have just met hold hands and make goo-goo eyes at each other.”

“Mike…”

Mike chuckled. “Come on, man. You know I’m just messing with you. But in all honesty, she’s cute and seems very *friendly*. A huge upgrade from you know who,” he uttered, referring to his ex, Katie.

Duke was enjoying his day and didn’t want to ruin it by bringing up the past, so he changed the topic.”

“What did you want to ask me?”

Mike smirked, knowing Duke did that on purpose.

“Right. You know that I proposed to Bethany, and she said yes.” Duke nodded. “Well, we set a date, and I wanted to know if you’d do me the honor of being one of my groomsmen at the wedding.”

A huge smile spread across Duke’s face. “I’d be honored. Of course. Well, as long as I’m not deployed.”

“I understand that, and so does Bethany.”

“When’s the big day?”

“October 21<sup>st</sup>. A little over two months from now. I know it’s short notice, but Bethany and I didn’t want to wait.”

“No worries, man. I’ll do my best to be there.”

“I know you will. And just so you know, your invitation does include a plus one,” Mike informed him with a slight wiggle of his eyebrows.

Duke smirked. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Mike laughed. “Well, I better get going, as the next tour should be rolling in soon.”

Duke shook his hand. “It was great seeing you. Keep me informed on the details of the wedding.”

“Will do. Safe travels back home.”

“Thanks.”

Duke walked the palm tree-lined path back to the ticket counter. His thoughts were all directed toward one strawberry blonde who had his insides all twisted up.

When he arrived at the ticket counter and couldn't find her, he wondered if she used the time away from him to make her escape. The thought of her leaving and not saying goodbye hit him hard in the gut. However, she didn't seem to be the kind of person who would go to that extreme.

He stood there for a few minutes watching everyone who entered his sight line, waiting to spot her. Finally, he spotted her turquoise tank top, and he felt relieved. He tracked her with his eyes. She was gorgeous. She probably had no idea how much attention she attracted from her looks alone. He spotted men looking in her direction as she walked toward him.

"Sorry, there was a line for the restroom," she told him as if aware that he was paranoid that she had scooted out on him. He actually felt a little silly for even thinking that.

"It's all good. I haven't been waiting too long."

"Cool. So, are you hungry?"

"Starving."

She laughed. "Me too. I skipped breakfast because I woke up late and rushed to get here. Since you're somewhat familiar with the area, where can we grab a bite to eat?"

"There's a cool little place just outside the entrance of the Visitors Center. They have all types of sandwiches, tacos, even seafood if you like that."

"As long as they have burgers, I'm sold."

"They have some of the best burgers," Duke said, grinning.

"Well, lead the way."



Hannah had eaten every bite of her greasy bacon cheeseburger with extra pickles and all her French fries.

The conversation between them during lunch was kept casual. They spoke about general stuff, like sports, and she learned that she and Duke shared a common interest in hockey. She was a *Penguins* fan but promised not to hold a grudge against him for being a *Capitals* fan. She had been surprised how easily the conversation flowed, and she was comfortable with him. Even more surprising was how much she had enjoyed his company.

He had even kept his promise and let her pay for lunch. Though, he did try to sneak the waiter his credit card. But to his surprise, she had already spoken to the waiter and told him that under no circumstances should he

accept any money from Duke. She'd give him points for being a gentleman.

As they walked back toward the Visitors Center, she reflected on her wild, emotional roller coaster of a day. But if she had to do it all over again, she wouldn't change one thing, especially the part where she met an amazing guy who took pity on her without even knowing her story and gifted her with a priceless gift that she would never forget.

She stole a quick look at Duke. He was very attractive in a rugged way. With his short, well-trimmed beard and broad, muscular body, she imagined he'd be even more drool-worthy in a pair of well-fitted jeans molded to his tree trunk thighs and tight ass.

Okay, maybe imagining that wasn't such a good idea as she felt her body temperature begin to climb, and it wasn't from the hot temperature outside.

"I'd love to know what you are thinking about right now," he asked, looking her over.

She felt her cheeks warm and knew her face had to be redder than a ripened tomato. Her blushing seemed to be the trend for the day.

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Just thinking about today," she admitted. She wasn't lying. She had been thinking about her day.

He stared at her with his intense dark brown eyes, and she felt a pull deep within her.

*Don't be getting any crazy ideas*, she reminded herself, knowing that she'd be saying goodbye to him in about an hour, and all she'd be left with were memories of an amazing day.

"What time is your flight?" he asked.

She looked at her watch. "In about four hours."

"I guess we should finish up. I don't want you to be late for your flight."

They walked around for about another thirty minutes until it was time for her to leave. On the way out, she stopped in the gift shop, found a book she wanted, and purchased it.

She waited outside while Duke paid for his purchase. When he exited, he gave her that million-dollar smile that made her weak in the knees.

"Ready?"

"Sure," she answered, even though she wasn't ready to say goodbye.

They walked to her car in silence. When they arrived at her vehicle, she took a deep breath and turned to face him.

“Duke, I don’t think I can ever repay you for your generosity and compassion today. I had an amazing time.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for hanging out with me. I had a great time, too.”

“This will be awkward, but can I hug you?” She prayed she wasn’t making a fool of herself. But his warm smile and glint in his eyes told her she wasn’t.

“Of course,” he said, stepping closer and wrapping his strong arms around her waist while she looped her arms the best she could around his neck. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment. She could lose herself just being in his arms.

Pulling away, she looked up at him. He was still grinning, and then he pulled a small box from the front pocket of his shorts.

“I got you something. For you to remember today.”

Appearing surprised, she smiled. “You didn’t have to do that. You’ve given me enough.”

“Go ahead and open it.”

She couldn’t believe how shaky her hands were. She lifted the top of the box and found a small silver hibiscus charm with BB-39 engraved on it.

Tears prickled her eyes, and she tried to blink them back, but it was useless, and she found herself in tears.

“I didn’t get it for you to cry,” he teased, using his thumb to wipe away the wetness.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“The hibiscus is the state flower of Hawaii, and BB-39 represents the USS *Arizona*.”

“Do you mind helping me put it on?”

“Of course not. Turn around,” he instructed as he took the necklace from her hand.

She closed her eyes as Duke clasped the necklace around her neck. When she turned around, he smiled.

“It looks gorgeous on you.”

She didn’t even ask this time as she closed the space between them and hugged him tight.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

His eyes moved slowly over her body when they parted, making her belly tighten.



“I wish you weren’t leaving tonight because I’d really like to talk more with you.”

She grinned, glad to hear she wasn’t the only one feeling that way.

“I wish I didn’t have to leave either. Strangely, I’m not normally comfortable around people I don’t know or just met. I’m the person you would find standing in a corner when you walk into a crowded room.”

“I don’t know about others, but if I walked into a room, I’d spot you in a heartbeat.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek. Their close proximity stirred something inside her, and her heart began racing. She was definitely attracted to him.

“This day has been full of surprises. Plus, I did something I’ve never done before,” she told him, and he cocked his head.

“Yeah? What is that?”

“I took a chance and spent the day with a stranger. A very kind stranger.”

Duke laughed. “Well, hopefully, you don’t consider me a stranger anymore.”

“Of course not. After spending the day with you, I think we can say we’re friends.” Although deep down, she wished there could be more between them.

“Would you like to exchange numbers? To keep in touch?”

She grinned. “I’d like that.”

She rattled off her cell number to him, and he called her so she would have his number.

“Oh, no!”

“What is it?” He asked, looking worried.

“I got so caught up in everything I forgot to take a picture. My grandmother specifically stated in her letter that I was to take a picture at each destination.”

Duke looked around. “How about over by the entrance sign? I can take one of you in front of it.”

That would work. But then an idea hit her.

“Let’s take one of us together in front of the sign.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have gotten to fully experience my grandmother’s wish of seeing Pearl Harbor.”

They walked over to the sign, and Duke put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to his side. He held up his phone and snapped a selfie of them.

“I’ll send it to you.”

“Thanks.”

Knowing she really needed to get going, she looked up at Duke.

“I better get going.”

He stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and hugged her. Before he pulled away, she felt his warm lips against her cheek as he kissed her, creating butterflies in her stomach.

“Drive safe. And if you remember, text me when you get home so I know you made it safely.”

“I promise I will.”

She hit the key fob, unlocking the car. Before she got in and closed the door, she looked at Duke one last time.

“Bye.”

“Bye, darlin’.”

As she backed out of the parking space and began to pull away, Duke waved, and she waved back. It wasn’t until she reached the highway that she remembered her grandmother’s last sentence in her letter. “*My wish for you, Hannah, is to dream big and find love on your journeys.*”

A funny feeling settled in her stomach. Had her chance meeting with Duke marked the beginning of her journey to finding love?

## CHAPTER FOUR

Hannah thanked the driver and tipped him after he unloaded her suitcase and duffle bag from the trunk.

It was a little after five in the evening, and Hannah was starving. She couldn't wait to see what the bed and breakfast where she was staying at was serving for dinner. Thankfully, her flight from Dallas to Savannah didn't encounter any delays.

After leaving Hawaii, she flew to Dallas, Texas, and checked off another destination on her granny's list. Her three-day visit to the Lone Star State was nice and enjoyable, though it didn't compare to her adventure in Hawaii, which included a certain Navy serviceman that she couldn't stop thinking about.

She was sad when she drove away from him four days ago. She thought about him constantly, even though she kept reminding herself that she would never see him again. It was strange, but she couldn't control her thoughts. At least she had a picture of them together to remember the day.

As promised, she had texted him when she landed in Dallas, letting him know she had made it. He was happy to hear from her, but he had admitted that he thought she would blow him off and he'd never hear from her again.

Who knows, maybe he would become her new pen pal. She shook her head, laughing at that thought. Maybe when she returned home in a few days, she would try connecting with him again to say hi. God, just the thought of texting him made her giddy.

She was so screwed. The man had seriously ruined her for all other men. He was perfect in every way.

She settled her duffle bag on her shoulder, grabbed her suitcase, and started up the sidewalk toward the Bed and Breakfast.

As she approached the building, she was already impressed by the B&B's stylish, sizeable front porch. It was the epitome of elegance and grace with its beautiful décor and furniture. The giant ferns mixed with bright-colored in-season flowers added the perfect touch. It was a place where she could see herself curled up on one of the comfy-looking chairs with a book in her hand.

If she was this impressed with just the porch, she couldn't wait to see the inside. She pushed down on the handle to the front door and was in awe when

it opened into a grand lobby. The pictures on the website didn't do the place justice.

Looking straight ahead, she made eye contact with a cute brunette behind the counter.

"Hi, welcome to Reids Inn." The woman greeted her with a warm, friendly smile.

"Hi," Hannah replied.

"Checking in?"

"Yes, the reservation is under Hannah O'Quinn," she said, walking over to the counter and setting her bags down.

Hannah glanced around. The architecture and decor were stunning, with dark hardwood floors, matching colored woodwork, and Victorian furniture.

"This place is gorgeous. The architecture and color scheme is remarkable."

"Thanks. When my family purchased this place, it was abandoned and stripped down to its bones. We did a lot of research on the property and found out it used to belong to a doctor and his family. We tried our best to bring the history back into the place as well as incorporate a few modern touches."

"Well, you guys did a fabulous job. It all looks original."

"I'm Courtney, by the way," she said, holding her hand out, and Hannah shook it.

"It's nice to meet you."

"Same. So, is this your first time here in Savannah?"

Hannah nodded. "It is. I'm excited to get out and explore the city."

"It is a great city with so many things to do and see. In the Parlor Room, there are a ton of brochures and discount coupons for a bunch of the attractions in the area. Feel free to help yourself to any of them. And if you have any questions or need recommendations, just ask. I'm usually around. My family and I converted the entire fourth floor into a family living space, so we are always on-site. But if I'm not around for any reason, one of the other employees can help you."

"Thank you. Once I get settled and have a good night's sleep, I'll probably hit you up for some recommendations."

"Perfect! You originally booked the Lavender room, which is a great room. But, since we don't have many reservations this weekend and you seem really nice, I'd like to upgrade you to our Magnolia Suite on the third

floor. On the house, of course.”

“Wow! Are you sure? I really don’t mind taking the room I reserved.”

Courtney smiled. “Positive. The suite is gorgeous, and the views from the balcony are stunning. Oh! Do you like baths?” Hannah nodded. “Then you are going to love the extra large claw foot tub. Under the sink in the bathroom, you’ll find all sorts of bath oils, bath salts, and bubbles. Help yourself.”

“Thank you so much! Now I’m even more excited.”

“You bet. Now, all I need you to do is sign here for me,” she pointed to the signature line on the paper.

After completing all the paperwork, Courtney went over breakfast and dinner and what time they were served.

“Dinner will be ready in the main dining in about twenty minutes. For dinner tonight, we are featuring a classic southern fried chicken dish served with creamy mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and homemade bread. The dessert is peach cobbler.

Hannah’s stomach growled, and Courtney laughed.

“It all sounds delicious.”

“Here is the key to your room. When you reach the third floor, your room is the one to the left. My brother is in town this weekend and is staying in the other room.”

“Perfect. Thank you again.”

“You bet. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Hannah bent down to pick up her bag, and when she stood up, she saw Courtney smile and wave to someone behind her. When Hannah turned around, her mouth gaped open in shock when she saw who was standing just inside the front door, looking just as sexy as the last time she saw him.

His shocked expression probably mirrored hers.

“Hannah...” he said, and she swooned, hearing her name roll off his tongue in that sexy southern drawl of his.

“D-D-Duke!” She stuttered and hadn’t even realized that her feet were moving, and she had been walking toward him until she stood before him with her head tilted back, looking up at him.

His warm smile almost made her cry. How was it possible that her Hawaiian crush was in Savannah and at the same Bed and Breakfast?

Before she could say anything, he reached out and pulled into a bone-crushing hug. As soon as those muscular arms wrapped around her, she

closed her eyes and relaxed in the security of his embrace. She was shocked at the instant attraction she felt as he held her close, loving how she fit against his tall, muscular frame, and damn he smelled so good.

“I don’t believe this. I can’t believe you are here,” he whispered, his breath tickling her hair.

“I’m pretty shocked myself,” she admitted, squeezing him around his waist.

Duke started to release her, but she didn’t want the hug to end. She was afraid if she let go, she would lose him again. She knew that sounded stalkerish but she couldn’t help it. But as the saying went, “all good things must come to an end,” she found herself pulling away, but not too far.

Courtney joined them, looking very confused. Her scrunched-up face almost made Hannah laugh.

“Do you two know each other?” She asked, looking between Hannah and Duke.

“Sort of.” They both said at the same time and then started laughing.

Duke looked at Courtney. “Hannah and I met a few days ago in Hawaii.”

Courtney’s eyes widened in shock, and she looked at Hannah. “You’re joking.”

Hannah shook her head. “Nope. It’s true.” She and Duke proceeded to tell Courtney the story of how they met. When they were finished, Courtney was grinning but also appeared dumbfounded.

“That’s just bizarre. I mean, what are the chances that you all meet in Hawaii, of all places, then end up in Savannah at the same Bed and Breakfast.”

Hannah snorted. “That’s the same question I was just asking myself.”

Courtney clapped her hands together and bounced on her feet. She reminded Hannah of a cheerleader.

“Oh, my gosh! Wait until mom hears this story.”

Hannah’s eyes shot to Duke, then flew over to Courtney.

“Mom?”

Duke chuckled. “Courtney is my sister.”

“Yeah, Duke’s my brother I told you about who was staying for the weekend.”

“Oh!” Hannah exclaimed, now understanding the connection.

“Well, I need to head to the dining room to ensure everything is ready

for dinner. I'll see you both in a few minutes," Courtney told them before hurrying off through a doorway that Hannah assumed was the dining room.

She turned her attention back to Duke, who was shaking his head.

"I still can't believe we are both standing here right now."

"Same."

His eyes zeroed in on the necklace he had given her, and his smile widened.

"You're still wearing it."

"Of course. It's special." She only removed it when showering.

"Indeed it is. A special necklace for a special lady."

She blushed, and Duke laughed.

"Come on, I'll show you to your room," he picked up both of her bags and started up the stairs. Hannah followed him.

"So, you just arrived today?" he asked her.

"Yep."

"So, you flew back to Wyoming for three days and then traveled here?"

"No. I was in Dallas before I got here."

"Dallas?"

"Yeah. It was another stop on my grandmother's list." Duke nodded in understanding.

"What about you? I thought you were heading back to Virginia Beach. When did you get here?"

"Yesterday."

"And you stay at your family's Inn?"

"Sometimes. Then there are times I'll crash at my parent's house. I didn't get a chance to see Courtney and her family the last time I was here, so I told her I would stay at the Inn this time."

"That's awesome."

"Yeah, it is," Duke said as they arrived at the third floor. There were two rooms—one to the left and the other to the right. Duke pointed to the left. "This would be your room. The Magnolia Suite."

"You're sister upgraded me to this suite."

"She did?"

"Yep."

"You must've given her a really good first impression."

"Why's that?"

"Because my sister never gives anyone an upgrade."

“Oh...”

Duke laughed as he set her bags down in front of the door.

“Are you heading downstairs for dinner?”

“I was planning on it. The food your sister mentioned sounds delicious.”

“It is. Courtney’s husband is a chef and cooks all the food here.”

“Oh, wow! How cool.”

“Well, I will let you get settled and see you downstairs in a few minutes.”

She smiled. “Sounds good.”

She unlocked the door and moved her bags inside. As soon as she shut the door, she pinched herself to ensure she wasn’t dreaming.

Had fate played its hand again?



Duke tried his hardest not to laugh out loud as he watched Hannah scraping every piece of peach cobbler onto her fork that she could.

“You know, I’m sure my sister has more pie in the kitchen,” he teased and watched as her cheeks turned pink and she set the fork down.

“I’m sorry. I can’t even imagine what I looked like,” she said, wiping her mouth with the napkin. “That was the best peach cobbler I’ve ever had.”

She wasn’t lying. His brother-in-law’s peach cobbler was one of the best in the state. He had even won awards for it.

“I have to agree with you on that. Tony makes a killer peach cobbler. And I’ll tell you a secret,” Hannah leaned forward, “There is always cobbler in the kitchen.”

Hannah laughed, and hearing her sweet laugh made him smile.

When he returned from the store, and walked through the front door, and saw those strawberry blonde locks, he about fainted. He thought he had seen his sister wave to him, but he was too focused on the woman standing at the check-in desk with her back to him. He even blinked a few times to clear his eyes, ensuring he wasn’t hallucinating and that the woman really resembled Hannah. The sweet, beautiful woman with the gorgeous brown eyes that he couldn’t get out of his mind.

When she turned around, and he saw that spark in her eyes come alive, he knew their connection in Hawaii wasn’t just a fluke. There was definitely something brewing beneath the surface.

Courtney had invited him and Hannah to sit with her and her family



during dinner. Courtney was still flabbergasted by how he and Hannah met and found each other. She never said it, but he knew his sister had already called their mom and told her everything.

Even though he enjoyed sharing Hannah with his sister over dinner, he was ready for some quiet alone time with her. He wanted to learn everything he could about her.

“Would you like to get a drink and sit on the porch with me?”

She smiled at him, her brown eyes twinkling like stars in the sky.

“That sounds lovely.”

His sister handed him a Domaine Serene Pinot Noir Evenstad Reserve bottle and two wine glasses.

As they stepped out onto the porch, he heard the light gasp escape Hannah’s lips.

“Oh, my! This is gorgeous out here. I mean, it was beautiful when I arrived, but seeing all the lights strung throughout the porch and the candles placed perfectly to give it a cozy feel is picture perfect.”

“I must admit this porch is my favorite place at the Inn. I could sit out here twenty-four hours a day.”

“You wouldn’t be alone.”

He looked down at her and smiled. “And I wouldn’t mind the company one bit.”



Hannah couldn’t get over the beauty and charm of the lighted front porch. It looked even more amazing at night. She could totally see herself sharing this space with a special someone.

Right when she was having that thought, she looked up and found a gorgeous set of dark brown eyes staring down at her. The intensity of his gaze gave her heart palpitations.

He took her hand in his larger one and led her to the cozy loveseat. Hannah sat down and tucked her legs under her butt, facing Duke, and Duke sat down next to her, slightly turned in her direction, with his thigh touching her knee.

He took her hand and played with her fingers.

“I can’t begin to tell you how much I’ve missed you. I swear I’ve thought about you constantly.”

Hannah was touched and relieved that she wasn’t the only one who

couldn't get her mind off of a certain person the last few days.

"It's been the same for me, too."

Sitting so close to him, she saw his dimple as he started grinning. It made her smile.

"So, now that we aren't rushed and are alone, I want to know more about you," he told her.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Hannah swallowed hard and took a deep breath before she opened up and spilled her life story. She delved into her happy times and told him about her struggles when she lost her parents in a plane accident when she was twelve. He was an amazing listener, allowing her to speak with no interruptions. He would nod his head, smile, or even gently rub the top of her hand when her emotions seemed to take over, especially when talking about her parents.

When she was finished unloading her life story, she found Duke staring at her with a look of admiration.

"You've had a tough go around. I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your parents. I couldn't imagine losing one parent, not to mention two, and especially at such a young age as you were."

"It was pretty tough, but my grandmother guided me through the turbulent waters, especially when I withdrew into my own shell. She became my best friend."

"She sounds like an amazing woman."

"She was. So, now that you know pretty much everything that makes me tick, tell me a little bit about you."

Duke started telling her about his family—his mom, dad, sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and the many cousins he had. He had a pretty large family, but from how he spoke about them, it sounded like an amazing and close-knit family.

She had shown him her granny's buck list, and when he saw that Williamsburg, Virginia was listed, he got excited because Williamsburg was only an hour from Virginia Beach, where he lived.

She had promised him that she would move Williamsburg further up on the list and maybe visit in the very near future. He told her about a little bar and restaurant in Virginia Beach where he and his friends like to hang out. He had raved about the prime rib and told her that if she ever went there, she had

to order the prime rib special. He did warn her that it wasn't a touristy place, and from the outside, it didn't look all that inviting, but that the scenery changed once you got inside.

"What is your favorite holiday?" she asked him.

"Thanksgiving. Yours?"

"Halloween."

He wrinkled his forehead. "Is Halloween really a holiday?"

"In my book, it is."

"Fair enough. Favorite color?" he asked her.

"Orange. You?"

"Gray. But brown is starting to grow on me."

"Why is that?"

"Because you have gorgeous brown eyes that I love staring into."

Hannah felt her cheeks warm.

Duke chuckled, and they continued talking and asking each other questions until Hannah glanced at her watch and saw it was almost midnight. She couldn't believe how they had lost track of the time. They had been out on the porch for close to five hours. But it was five hours of pure enjoyment.

The front door opened, and Courtney walked out, looking tired. When she saw them sitting there, she looked shocked.

"Are you guys still out here?"

Duke chuckled and looked at Hannah. "I guess we should probably call it a night." He held out his hand for her to take. "I'll walk you up to your room."

They walked hand in hand up to the third floor and stopped when they were right outside her room.

"Thanks for tonight. I enjoyed talking with you."

"Me too." He paused for a few seconds. "Do you have plans tomorrow?"

"Not really. I had just planned to wing it. Why?"

"Would you like to come with me to my parents' house? Since I don't get home too often, they are throwing a little family get-together. I'd love for you to come."

Oh, wow! Meet his family? But it could be fun, and the way he spoke about them, she'd love to meet them.

"Are you sure? I don't want to intrude on your family time."

"I'm positive. And if I'm right, which I'm ninety-nine point nine percent

I am, Courtney already spilled the beans about you and me, and if I show up without you, I'm sure I'll get an earful from my mother. Plus, I'll be here another five days, so I'll have plenty of family time. On the other hand, you are only here for three days, and I want to make sure I get my fill of you before you disappear on me again."

He could fill up with her anytime he wanted to. *Oh, my word. Did I really just think that?*

"If you're sure, I'd love to go with you."

He smiled, then leaned down and softly kissed her cheek.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning at o-eight-hundred for breakfast. If you love Tony's peach cobbler, wait until you try his southern omelet.

"Breakfast sounds great, but you lost me at o-eight-hundred."

He chuckled. "Sorry, military time. That would be eight in the morning for you civilians."

"Got it," she said and made a mental note to study up on her military time.

"Sleep well," he told her.

"Goodnight."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Hannah found herself fidgeting with her fingers again, and she wasn't sure if it was because of Duke's gaze or because of the number of cars parked in front of his parent's house. Last night, he told her it would be a small family get-together. But from all the vehicles, it resembled more of a block party.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked.

She looked up at him and saw the concern in his eyes.

"I'm just nervous. It looks like there are a ton of people here."

Duke gripped the back of his neck and started rubbing it.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. When I told my mom I was bringing someone, I think she called the whole family. We don't have to go in there if you don't want to. We can leave right now, drive into town, and have a quiet dinner. Just the two of us."

"That's very sweet of you to offer, but I think I'll be fine. At least I know your sister already."

He gave her a look like he wasn't sure if he believed her. She reached out and took his hand in hers.

"Duke, I promise. I'll be okay. Plus, I'm excited to meet them after what you've told me about your family."

As they made their way toward the monstrous house, a woman came rushing out the front door.

"Duke!"

"Hi, Mom," he greeted her and wrapped her up in a big hug.

It was obvious how much Duke cared about his mom, just by seeing how his lips stretched in a big smile as he hugged her. Hannah felt a little envious of their affection if she were being honest. But only because she no longer had that type of connection to anyone.

When Duke released his mom from his suffocating grasp, he stepped back and looked at Hannah.

"Mom, I'd like for you to meet—"

"Hannah!" his mom exclaimed and surprised Hannah when she pulled her into a hug.

Hannah thought she heard Duke mumble something sarcastic under his breath.

“It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Catherine,” she said, then pointed to her “MOM” T-shirt. “I’m Duke’s mom.”

Hannah grinned, already loving the energy that Duke’s mom put out. She had a feeling that she would be just fine.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Reid.”

Catherine waved her hand in the air. “Call me Catherine. We aren’t formal around here.” She looked Hannah over and smiled again. “I’m so glad you’re here. We were ecstatic and couldn’t wait to meet you when we found out that Duke was bringing someone.”

Hannah glanced at Duke, and Duke just shrugged his shoulders, looking a little lost and a bit embarrassed. It was actually pretty funny.

“Come on, let’s go inside and introduce you to everyone.”

Hannah walked into the large brick colonial home and immediately felt the warmth of the home wrap around her. It dripped with southern hospitality and charm, with an open floor plan offering a fantastic view of the large backyard and river.

“Mrs. Reid, your home is stunning and so welcoming.”

“Thank you, Hannah. And I told you to please call me Catherine. Come, everyone is out back.”

Duke placed his hand against her lower back. The warmth of his large hand gave her instant butterflies. He stayed close, guiding her through the house and onto the back patio that opened into a beautiful landscape you’d see in an edition of Homes and Gardens.

The large custom kidney-shaped pool was full of kids and a couple of adults watching over them while the rest of the adults, who she assumed were Duke’s family, sat talking and laughing at a couple of tables near the pool.

Eyeing the thirty or so people, she started to doubt herself and wondered what she had gotten herself into by accepting Duke’s invitation.

She quickly glanced up, and she found him looking at her. He offered her a small smile and winked.

“I promise they won’t bite,” he whispered to her.

“Hannah!” Courtney called out, and Hannah waved.

“Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to Hannah,” Catherine announced to the tables full of people. She then turned toward Hannah and smiled. “Hannah, meet the family.”

Hannah smiled and waved. “Hello!”

Everyone went around and introduced themselves. Once everyone had a

turn, Duke looked at his mom, pointed to her T-shirt, and then motioned to everyone else wearing a similar T-shirt, just with a different title.

“What’s with the shirts?” he asked, and his dad, Jerry, snorted.

“These were your mother’s idea. She was up all night making them because she thought it would help Hannah know who was who,” he looked at Hannah and winked, letting her know that he was just teasing his wife.

Hannah looked at Catherine. “It’s very helpful, Catherine.”

Catherine chuckled, then gave her husband a sassy look.

“Hannah, come sit over here,” Courtney told her.

She looked at Duke, and he smiled. “Go ahead, and I’ll grab us drinks. What would you like?”

“Oh, get her one of mom’s famous Chatham Artillery punch drinks!” Courtney called out, and Hannah looked back at Duke. She had never heard of it.

“What is Chatham Artillery punch?”

Duke smirked. “It’s a mixture of rum, whisky, brandy, and Champagne. It also contains lemons and sugar. Mom also adds a secret ingredient that she has yet to tell us,” he added, giving his mom a playful stink eye.

Hannah nodded. “Sounds interesting. I’ll try one.”

“She’s not driving, is she?” Duke’s dad asked but then let out a belly laugh.

“No. I drove,” Duke retorted, then looked at Hannah. “Mom’s punch is known to be a little potent,” he told her.

Hannah walked over and took the open seat next to Courtney. Minutes later, Duke reappeared and handed her a mason jar glass filled with a pinkish-orange liquid, topped with an orange slice and cherry.

She took a sip and closed her eyes, absorbing the taste. It was sweet, yet it was well balanced with a citrus touch.

“This is delicious,” she told Catherine. I may need your recipe.”

Catherine winked.

“So, Hannah, Duke tells us you’re visiting our city. Where is home for you?” Jerry asked.

“Wyoming.”

“Where about in Wyoming?”

“Jackson Hole. My house is about ten to fifteen minutes from town. I can walk right out my backdoor and dip my toes in the snake river.”

“Now that is what I call paradise. Hand me a chair, a fishing pole, and a

beer, and I'd be set."

Hannah looked around the professionally landscaped backyard, including the custom pool and the gorgeous river view.

"I think you have your own slice of paradise right here."

Jerry laughed. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I assume your family is in Jackson Hole as well?" Duke's Aunt Mae asked.

Hannah felt a slight ache in her heart. Spending time with Duke's family brought back many memories of her family having summer barbecues and picnics. She missed all the traditions they had. After her parents' accident, she and Granny had attempted to continue most of them, but some were too difficult to sit through, knowing that her mom and dad wouldn't be joining them. Instead, she and her granny started a few new traditions. But now that her granny was gone, she doubted that those would continue.

She reached for her punch and took a drink. "Uhm...right now, it's just me. I lived with grandmother, but she passed away a few weeks ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear."

"It's okay. But thank you," she smiled and stole a quick look at Duke. He cleared his throat.

"Actually, it was because of Hannah's grandmother that Hannah and I crossed paths."

Hannah smiled at Duke, and he winked.

"Really?"

For the next half hour or so, Duke and Hannah explained how they met at Pearl Harbor and everything that had led up to the present. When they finished, everyone was smiling and commenting. However, there was one smile that stood out amongst the others. Catherine was beaming, her smile meeting her eyes. She seemed extremely happy.

"Wow! That's a plot for a romance novel," Catherine said aloud with her hands over her heart.

"Romance novel?" Duke questioned, looking over at his mom like she was crazy. "I've never seen you with a book in your hand."

Jerry snorted. "Your Aunt Carla showed your mom how to download books on her tablet. Now I have to pry the damn thing out of her hands."

Catherine playfully smacked her husband's arm as she laughed. "I'm not that bad. Plus, I don't hear you complaining when we're in bed and use some of those techniques I've read about in those *romance novels*."



“Okay, I really didn’t need to hear that last part,” Duke muttered, picking up his beer and taking a drink.

Hannah laughed, and so did Catherine.

Catherine then stood up and looked at Duke.

“Duke, do you mind helping me bring out the desserts?”

“Sure.” He turned to Hannah. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She smiled. “Take your time. I’m sure your family has plenty of embarrassing stories about you that they can entertain me with.”

Jerry snorted. “Damn right we do,” he joked, and everyone laughed.

Duke leaned over and kissed the side of her head before following his mom inside the house. His show of affection in front of his family had shocked her. But it also warmed her heart, giving her hope that they could build on the relationship they were forming.



Duke walked into the spacious kitchen, and his eyes immediately found the tray of strawberry shortcakes sitting on the counter. They were his favorite, and seeing the ripe red berries coated with gel and whipped cream had his taste buds watering.

His mom turned and smiled when she saw him standing there. She walked over and hugged him.

“It is so good to have you home.”

“It’s good to be home.” He wasn’t lying. He understood the sacrifices that came with his career, including limited time with his family.

He walked closer to the counter, where the tray of shortcakes was. “Did you make those for me?”

“You know damn well I did.”

He dipped his finger into one and brought it to his mouth. As soon as the sweet taste hit his tongue, he moaned in delight. Damn, that was some good stuff.

His mom laughed and continued adding whipped cream to another tray of shortcakes she pulled out of the refrigerator.

“Hannah seems nice.”

“So, you like her?”

“Well, considering your father is ready to welcome her into the family, and he has known her for what,” she looked at her watch, “two hours? I think it’s safe to say that the whole family loves her.”

“How you two met sounds like fate. But I can see that something is bothering you.”

“I can’t find a flaw in her. Granted, we haven’t known each other long, but I don’t know, Mom. It feels different—like we’ve known each other for a lifetime. She is easy to talk to, and I’m comfortable around her. We just click.”

“It’s like....” He was searching for the right words.

“True love?”

“Does that really exist? I mean, could she really be the one?”

His mom took his hand. “Honey, anything is possible.”

“I feel different around her. Like I don’t want to leave her side.”

“Well, I can’t tell you if it is true love, but I will say that she fits in well with the family.”

Duke looked out the window and couldn’t hide the smile on his lips as he watched Hannah smiling and laughing at something Uncle Raymond was saying to her.

“Yeah, she does.”

“Does she know what you do?”

He shook his head, turning back to face his mom. “No. I haven’t told her yet. She knows I’m in the Navy and live in Virginia Beach. But that’s the extent of it.”

“Are you afraid of how she may react when you do tell her?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Well, you won’t know until you tell her. And remember, it’s best to be honest.”

“I know.”

“Now, if you really want to move your relationship along, you might want to hurry,” she nodded toward the window, facing the patio. “Because I think your cousins may be interested in her too.”

Duke’s gaze flew to the window, and damn if she wasn’t right. Three of his cousins had Hannah cornered.

“I think I’m going to take Hannah down to the dock so she and I can talk.”

His mom gave him a knowing smile. “I think that’s a great idea.”



When Hannah first arrived at Duke’s parents’ house, she thought she

was being thrown to the wolves. However, that assumption turned out to be false, as she was having the time of her life talking with his family.

They all had a way of making a complete stranger feel comfortable around them. Though, Duke's three cousins seemed to be trying a little too hard. But she had a feeling they were trying to rile Duke up.

Before he even touched her, she sensed Duke behind her. When she turned around, she found him smiling at her. He held out his hand.

"How about a walk down to the dock? We can see if we can spot some gators."

"Alligators?" Hannah asked, her eyes wide as saucers and her voice full of skepticism.

But then Duke winked and gave her that playful grin of his.

"I'm just kidding. We don't see them too often around here."

Smiling, she took his hand as he guided them away from the other partygoers and toward a gravel path lined with beautiful magnolia trees and a mix of in-season flowers that gave off a sweet-smelling scent. As they neared the end of the path, a gorgeous, gated arbor trellis with white flowered vines weaving throughout it came into view.

Duke opened the gate and placed his hand on the small of her back as they strolled down the long wooden dock that offered stunning river views.

"Sorry if my cousins were bothering you."

She waved him off.

"They weren't bothering me. They were messing with you, trying to get a rise out of you. You have a wonderful family. You should be very thankful."

"Believe me, I am. I never take them for granted."



When they reached the end of the dock, he turned her to face him, holding her chin with his thumb and pointer finger. Her gorgeous brown eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun.

"I want to kiss you," he told her, wanting to see if her feelings for him went deeper than just a friendship.

Her cheeks turned pink, just like the color of her lips that he was eager to taste. She stepped closer to him so their fronts practically touched each other. She ran her hands up his arms, stopping when she reached his shoulders. With their height difference, she stood on her tiptoes, and then,

with a twinkle in her eye and a mischievous grin, she closed her eyes and pressed her warm, wet lips against his lips.

To say he was surprised was an understatement. He took her actions even further, pulling her flush against him, sliding his hand under her hair, and cupping the back of her neck. He gently swiped his tongue along the seam of her lips, and she opened immediately, which delighted him. He didn't hold back and kissed her fully, exploring every inch he could reach.

When they finally parted to breathe, Duke moved his hand to her cheek, cupping it as he stared down into her eyes. She looked so beautiful, her lips a little swollen from their kiss, and her cheeks flushed. But what he loved most was the smile on her lips. The woman definitely packed a punch.

"That was amazing," she whispered, and he chuckled, hugging her close.

"It sure was, darlin'. Better than I imagined it would be."

"You imagined kissing me?"

"When we said goodbye in the parking lot at Pearl, and I watched you get in your car and drive away, I regretted then not kissing you." Her eyes widened, and he laughed again. "It's been a long time since I had those butterflies in my stomach when I kissed a woman."

"Same," she replied, grinning.

He could kiss her all day. As he lowered his head to kiss her again, a board creaked, alerting them that they weren't alone, and he pulled back.

He looked over Hannah's head and saw his sister standing there with an expression he knew all too well. She was angry about something, but at the same time, he saw a hint of worry.

"I'm sorry, Duke, but there is...uhm...company up at the house for you."

He gave his sister a questionable look, and she sighed, "Katie."

Hearing that one name made all the air leave his body and darkened his mood. What in the hell was she doing here? An even better question was, how in the hell did she know he was in Savannah?

"How did she know I was here?" He asked his sister.

"My only guess is Beth told her."

Duke rolled his eyes. Of course, his cousin, who was best friends with Katie, had told her.

"Who's Katie?" Hannah asked, taking Duke's hand in hers, and the gesture made Duke smile. It appeared Hannah was staking a claim to him.

“My ex-girlfriend.”

“Oh...” Hannah drawled out, her smile just a second ago turning into a frown.

Dammit, if this wasn't a clusterfuck, he didn't know what. He owed Hannah an explanation, but first, he needed to find out why Katie was here and then figure out how to get rid of her. Although he was pretty sure if he left the last part up to his sister, Katie would be floating in the river as gator food.

He looked down and saw the uncertainty on Hannah's face. He wanted that smile of hers to return. He felt terrible.

He turned her towards him. “I just need a few minutes.”

She placed her hand on his chest. “It's okay. Do what you need to do.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger a little longer.

She gave him a soft smile when he pulled away, but he could tell she was a little leery about the situation. He'd probably feel that way, too, if he was in her shoes. If anyone could ruin a special moment, it was Katie. But that is what he would expect from someone who destroyed her own relationship.

He gave her hand one last squeeze before walking around to the front of the house to deal with Satan's sister.



Hannah watched Duke walk away from her. She had mixed feelings about the situation and wasn't sure how to react. She definitely didn't want to come across as a jealous, raving lunatic, especially since they had only shared one kiss. But how was she supposed to feel knowing he would be facing his ex-girlfriend—an ex-girlfriend who Hannah knew nothing about, including the details surrounding their relationship and how it ended.

“Hey,” Courtney said, looping her arm through Hannah's and walking back towards the party. “You have nothing to worry about. What occurred between my brother and Katie is history, and Katie can only blame herself. She hurt my brother. She cut him deeply.”

Hannah looked at Courtney, wondering what this Katie woman had done. From just a few off comments made by Duke's family members, it was apparent that Katie wasn't liked nor welcomed. This made her ask, if she knew that she was unwanted, then why in the hell would she be that ballsy to

show up at his parents' house no less?

"Honestly, Courtney, I can't really be upset. I just met your brother."

"The two of you may have just met, but I can already tell he really cares about you."

"How?"

They stopped walking, and Courtney turned to look at Hannah.

"My brother doesn't just bring someone home on a whim to meet the family. Especially someone he just met days ago. Surprisingly, he's somewhat traditional when it comes to dating."

Actually, what Courtney said didn't surprise Hannah. Duke came across as a traditionalist who liked spending time with family and valued stability, safety, security, consistency, and commitment. Hannah imagined participating in those traditions with him and maybe even starting their own traditions.

"I guess we'll see what happens."

"And I'm guessing we'll be helping plan a wedding in the future."

"Courtney!" Hannah scolded, but Courtney just laughed and pulled Hannah toward the tables where the family was gathered.

"Come on, I see Aunt Mae brought her Scattergories game. And just a heads up, Aunt Mae also brings her own rules for the game."

"Her own rules?"

Courtney grinned. "Aunt Mae likes to spice up the game if you catch my drift."

"Like dirty or naughty answers?"

Courtney laughed. "Exactly."

"Oh, lord. I think I will need another cup of your mom's punch."

"Oh! Can you please grab me one?"

Hannah smiled. "Sure. I'll be right back."

When Hannah entered the kitchen, she found Catherine putting some dishes in the dishwasher.

"Hi, sweetie," Catherine said.

"Hi."

"What do you need?"

"I was coming to get two glasses of your punch for Courtney and me."

Catherine smiled. "They're in the fridge. Help yourself."

Hannah went to the refrigerator and pulled out two glasses.

"Thank you for your hospitality. I've had a lot of fun today," Hannah

told Catherine.

“I’m glad you came. It’s been nice getting to know the woman who has managed to snag my son’s heart.”

Hannah blushed. “I don’t know about snagging his heart. I mean, we just met days ago.” However, Duke had already wormed his way into hers.

“Oh, Hannah, believe me. I know my son. And I have never seen him look at a woman like he does you.”

Hannah pulled her lip between her teeth.

“I didn’t say that to embarrass you. It’s just…” Catherine paused as if not knowing how to finish her sentence. “You know what, I shouldn’t say anything because it’s none of my business.”

Hannah placed her hand on Catherine’s arm. “Does it have to do with the woman who broke his heart?”

Catherine’s eyes widened. “He told you about Katie?”

“Not really. But I’m pretty good at reading between the lines. And from some of our conversations, I could tell that someone who was once close to him had hurt him. Plus, Katie just showed up a little bit ago.”

“What!? Katie is here—at my house?”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah. They’re out front.”

Catherine sighed. “I hope he tells her that she’s not welcome here. I never cared for that girl from the beginning. But my son loved her, so I respected his decision and tolerated her. It broke my heart and made me so angry when she hurt him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so torn up about something after he found out what she did.”

Hearing how upset and vocal Catherine was about the situation made Hannah wonder what actually happened. From the sound of it, it appeared it was pretty bad.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. Today was supposed to be fun, and here I am venting to you about my displeasure with that girl. Not to mention that she dares to show up here causing a disruption.”

Hannah wanted to laugh at how Catherine kept referring to Katie as “that girl.”

“It’s okay.”

“Promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?” Hannah asked.

“Don’t break my son’s heart.”

“As long as he doesn’t break mine, I don’t see that being a problem.”

Catherine smiled. “I like you, Hannah. I think you are just what my son needs in his life. You are like a breath of fresh air. As far as him breaking your heart—I don’t see that happening. I can already tell how much he cares for you.”

“How?” Hannah asked, tilting her head to the side. She was now the second person to say that.

“If Duke didn’t care about you, he never would have brought you here to meet his family. I’m telling you, my son is smitten with you.”

“He possesses many qualities you don’t find in many men these days.”

“Like what?” Catherine asked, walking over to the large island and pulling out a stool to sit on.

“Duke is very genuine. He’s real and doesn’t try to act like someone he isn’t. And I fully admire and respect that. Being around him makes me feel like I’m in a dream. Like I’m living in some sort of a fairy tale. Sometimes it doesn’t seem real. He’s one of the most caring and attentive men I think I’ve ever met.” Hannah shrugged her shoulders. “Or maybe he was just raised by good parents.”

Catherine laughed, then smiled at Hannah. “That’s very sweet of you to say, Hannah. But parents can only guide their children so far. After a while, it’s up to them to make their own choices. But I think you bring out those qualities in Duke. Duke is the type of man who, when he makes a commitment, is in it for the long haul. You’ll never have to guess what he’s thinking because he’s honest.”

“That’s good to know. Honesty goes a long way with me.”

Catherine glanced out the window. “You better get back out there because I can tell Aunt Mae is itching to start her game.”

Hannah set the drinks down on the counter. “I’m going to run to the restroom first.”

“Sure. There’s a bathroom right off the laundry room. Go through the kitchen, and you’ll see a little hallway. Go right, and the bathroom is down there.”

“Thanks.”

Hannah followed the directions and found the bathroom with ease. She felt good after talking with Duke’s mom.

She quickly did her business and was washing her hands when she heard Duke’s voice, followed by a female’s voice outside the window. She assumed the other voice was his ex-girlfriend.



She didn't want to be nosey, but she was curious about this Katie person.

Hannah quietly made her way over to the window between the shower and the toilet. She peeked through the blinds, and what she saw instantly made her stomach sick.

Seeing Duke embracing Katie while kissing her left Hannah paralyzed. She felt as if every nerve in her body was frozen. So many emotions hit her like a freight train, many she didn't even know she was capable of feeling—she felt disbelief and confusion, but then came the anger and disgust. But the worst was feeling like her heart was shattering into a million pieces.

She let the blinds go as if it was on fire and burning her skin. She placed her hand over her stomach, feeling the bile rise from within. She raced to the toilet and flipped the lid up just as she threw up.

“This can't be happening,” she choked out between sobs and heaves.

She thought about everything Duke's mom and sister had just told her. Had they all been lies? Or was Duke secretly seeing his ex-girlfriend behind his family's back? Either way, she wasn't going to stand for it. She didn't deserve that pain and sadness. She'd dealt with enough pain and heartbreak with losing her parents and granny. She didn't need to put herself through any more grief, especially over a guy who proved to be the exact opposite of what she thought he was.

She had to get out of there. But she couldn't go back out there and face his family or him. But she needed an excuse to leave.

She flushed the toilet and moved over to the sink. She found a bottle of mouthwash in the cabinet and rinsed her mouth out. She looked into the mirror. Gone was that glow she had just minutes ago. The light in her eyes had dimmed, and her red nose and cheeks to match were all a telltale sign that she had been crying.

Returning to the kitchen, she saw that Catherine was still there. As if sensing Hannah, Catherine turned around, and her eyes widened.

“Hannah! Honey, what's wrong?” Catherine asked, rushing over to Hannah's side. But Hannah was too distraught even to speak. Then she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

“I'm sorry, but I have to go.”

“What? Why? Where's Duke?”

Hannah shook her head, trying to keep her tears at bay. She knew where Duke was, but she kept that to herself. Eventually, Catherine would find out

the truth.

“I got a call from someone back home, and there’s an emergency at the house, and I need to get back. Thank you again for having me.”

Hannah didn’t even wait to get a response back from Catherine as she rushed through the house and out the front door, making sure to avoid being seen by Duke. She stopped to remove her flip-flops and then ran as fast as she could down the street until she came to a small corner store where she called for a ride to take her back to the Inn.



Duke was furious as he stood towering over Katie. On the other hand, Katie tried her best to guilt him with her big fake crocodile tears.

“Duke, I just wanted to talk with you.”

“I said all I had to say last year when I found you in bed with one of your clients.”

“You didn’t even let me talk to explain,” she cried out.

“There was nothing to explain. You cheated on me. You decided to end our relationship. It was all on you!”

“That’s not fair!”

Duke shook his head in disbelief. He couldn’t believe she was trying to portray herself as a victim when she slept with another man.

“I’m done with this, Katie. As I told you the last time we talked about this, there is nothing you can say or do to make me even consider taking you back. Now, get the hell off my parents’ property.”

He turned his back to walk away when she reached out and grabbed his arm. He tried to yank it away from her grasp, but in doing so, she lost her balance and started to fall. He didn’t realize that it was all an act, and he found himself in a compromising position with Katie’s lips pressed against his.

When his brain got over the shock of what was happening, he pushed away from her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?” He shouted at her.

“Come on, Duke. We both know that we belong together.”

“No, Katie. You may think that in your demented mind. But I know for a fact that I don’t want to be with you. I don’t even want to breathe the same air as you.”

She started with the fake tears again, and Duke had enough. He rolled

his eyes, not even caring that she saw him do it.

“Leave Katie. Leave now before this situation gets out of hand.”

He turned his back and walked away from her. She started screaming for him to return and that he couldn't walk away from her. But he did just that—he kept walking, knowing his future was sitting in the backyard waiting for him.

When he didn't find Hannah outside with the rest of his family, his sister told him that Hannah had gone inside to grab some drinks and that his mom was inside, too.

As he entered the kitchen through the back door, his mom rushed over to him, looking distraught.

“Mom, what's wrong?”

“Did you see Hannah?”

“No. I came in here looking for her.”

“She's not here.”

“Courtney said Hannah came inside to get some drinks.” Duke's eyes landed on the two mason jars full of punch on the counter.

“She was here, but she left. And she was very upset when she rushed out.”

“What do you mean she left?”

“She's gone! When I saw her upset and asked what was wrong, she said she got a call from someone she knew back home and that something had happened. Then she just ran out the door.”

Duke didn't understand. Why would she leave and not say anything? But she didn't have a car.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed Hannah's number. It went straight to voicemail.

“What was she doing before she left?”

“She and I were talking, and then she said she had to use the bathroom, and when she came back, her eyes, nose, and cheeks were red. I knew she had been crying.”

The hair on the back of Duke's neck stood up.

“Mom, what bathroom did she use?”

“The one next to the laundry room.”

Duke closed his eyes and punched the wall in frustration, nearly putting a hole in it.

“Garrison Reid! What on earth has gotten into you?”

“She had to have seen Katie and me. That’s the only explanation.”

“Who saw you? And what were you doing with Katie.”

“Hannah. I think she saw Katie and me kissing,” he clenched his teeth, wanting to kick himself in the ass for falling for Katie’s little trick.

“What!” Catherine screeched, her voice hitting an octave that was new to Duke. She narrowed her eyes at Duke. “Start talking now! And so help me, God, if you hurt Hannah, your SEAL team won’t even be able to find your body after I’m through with you.”

“Calm down, Mom. It’s not what you think,” and he began to explain what happened. By the time he finished, his mom’s face was so red that he thought her head might explode.

“I hope to hell you threw that wench out on her ass.”

He wanted to do a lot more than that.

“She’s gone. That’s all that matters.”

“Duke, you need to fix this.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I know.” He pulled his keys out of his pocket. “I’m going to go look for her. She can’t be far without a vehicle.”

“Unless she called an Uber or something.”

He looked at his mom. His heart felt like it was being ripped in two. His past had come back, and it had hurt Hannah.

“I can’t lose her, Mom.”

Catherine smiled and hugged him.

“Then go find her.”

Just then, his phone chimed with an incoming message. He pulled it from his pocket, hoping to see Hannah’s name. But those hopes were dashed, and his search for Hannah would have to be delayed. He and the team had been called up.

“Shit!”

“Work?” she asked, and he nodded.

“I have to head straight to the airport.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“But what about Hannah?”

“I promise I’ll fix it, Mom.”

“You better,” she scolded, then gave him another hug. “I’ll go let everyone know and have Courtney head to the Inn to talk to Hannah.”

“Thanks.”

“You know I’d do anything for you and your sister. Now, be safe.”

He kissed her cheek and gave her one last hug before he stormed out the front door.

He felt literally sick to his stomach, knowing he had hurt Hannah. However, he wasn’t lying to his mom when he told her he would fix everything. He'd find her and explain what happened as soon as he returned from wherever the hell he was being sent to.

## CHAPTER SIX

Duke and Aussie lay prone, his rifle aimed toward the enemy's last known position. The open field was overrun with heavy foliage that helped conceal the team's presence.

The sun had disappeared several hours ago, and the temperature was dropping. The island had a very sparse population.

"Where is this fucker at?" Jay Bird growled impatiently. Like Duke, the rest of the team was waiting on pins and needles for the shit show to commence.

The team had deployed two weeks ago to the small island in the South Atlantic Ocean between Argentina and the Falkland Islands. Their mission was to capture a man whom the U.S. government wanted for the bombing of an airplane that took the lives of seven government workers.

Intel said the guy was present on the island, but locating him had been challenging until they got a tip from a local that the guy Parker they were hunting was seen at a residence on the southern tip of the island.

They've had eyes on the large white farmhouse for the past three days. The house was in an isolated area on the ruggedly beautiful shores of the South Atlantic. A tall iron fence surrounded the guest house on the property. But the interesting feature that caught their eye was a private runway on the property. Perfect for someone to come and go without being seen.

"I don't like this," Bear stated over his mic. "Something isn't right. We've been here for three days, and the only movement we've seen is a woman out walking a dog."

Duke could hear the frustration in Bear's tone. Everyone felt the same. It made Duke wonder if the tip was bogus and if someone was trying to throw the team off.

Whatever it was, Duke just wanted to get the job done to get home and continue his search for Hannah.

He still hadn't been able to reach her, as she had blocked his number. He was able to speak with his mom a few times after the shit storm had occurred, but according to his mom, by the time Courtney got to the Inn, Hannah had already packed up her belongings and left town.

He was even finding it hard to concentrate on the current mission because he constantly thought about her, which was dangerous as hell.

She had managed to worm her way into his heart in the short time he had spent with her. Yes, he was fucking obsessed with her.

“Joker, do you see anything from your vantage point?” Bear asked his best friend and teammate, who was on the other side of the compound with Playboy keeping an eye on the situation from higher ground in case things went south and they needed someone to cover their asses. Or in case the asshole tried to flee.

“Negative. Quiet as a mouse.”

It was an uncomfortable silence, and Duke felt his heart rate start to increase as if his body sensed something was about to go down.

Suddenly, the eerie silence was disrupted when an explosion detonated about seventy-five yards away, causing Duke and Aussie to retreat further back and take cover in a crop of trees.

“Shit!” Aussie shouted as the trio then came under heavy gunfire.

“Damn it! Joker and Playboy, what’s the status?” Bear shouted to the others as Duke and Aussie retook their positions at the edge of the tree line and began firing in the direction from where the gun fire was coming from.

More explosions detonated around the property as Joker and Playboy informed Bear they had a visual on their target.

“Take the fucking shot!” Bear ordered.

“Fuck! I’m hit!” Snow called out over the mic, his voice laced with anger and pain.

“How bad?” Bear questioned, the concern for his teammate clearly noted in his tone.

“Upper arm. I think it’s just a flesh wound, but it hurts like a bitch.”

“What’s your position?” Duke asked, preparing his medical supplies while Aussie continued firing his weapon.

“Stay put, Duke. I’m bringing Snow to your position,” Nails was heard saying.

“Copy,” Aussie responded just as another round of explosions shook the ground. It was chaos all around them.

Duke saw movement to his three o’clock, and Nails appeared with a pissed off Snow, who was favoring his left arm. Duke got to work assessing Snow’s wound, and thankfully, the wound was just a graze, though it was deep. He would recover, but he would be hurting for a while.

Joker’s voice came over the comms. “Target is heading on foot toward the property’s northwest side. I do not have a shot.”

“Duke, Aussie, Nails, he’s heading in your direction. Currently about one-hundred-fifty yards out.”

Duke worked quickly to bandage up Snow’s arm. Once he was done, he, Aussie, and Nails got into position to intercept the target.

Duke suddenly saw the figure of someone burst through the bushes. But then, seconds later, a loud crack from a rifle pierced the air, and the assailant dropped to the ground.

Seconds of complete silence passed before Bear’s voice echoed in the comms.

“Target neutralized. Great shot, Jay Bird.”

As the team met up where the target was laying face down on the ground, Bear stepped up and rolled the person over. What they found had each of them speechless.

“Holy shit! It’s the woman with the dog,” Joker stated, looking shocked like the rest of the team was.

“All this time, we were under the impression that Parker was a man when it was a woman,” Playboy commented.

“A very resourceful woman,” Aussie said.

“How in the hell didn’t Intel pick that up?” Nails asked.

“I don’t know, but that’s not for us to figure out. Let’s pack it up and head home.”

Playboy looked at his watch. “Hey, as long as there are no delays, we should make it home and have time to grab a beer. Who’s in?”

Their commanding officer started the tradition that after every successful mission, the team would meet at Bayside Bar and Grille upon returning home to celebrate with a beer.

Everyone looked at each other and nodded.

“Bayside it is,” Bear said as they loaded up and headed to their extraction point.

As Duke slid into the truck, he pulled his cell phone out and tried calling Hannah again. But he got the same result—voicemail.

“Still no luck?” Playboy asked, and Duke shook his head.

“How in the hell am I supposed to explain to her that what she saw had been a big-ass misunderstanding if she won’t accept my calls?”

Playboy patted his shoulder. “You’re a SEAL. Think outside the box.”

Duke leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The only thing left for him to do was to head to Jackson Hole and sit at her doorstep until she agreed



to talk to him. Maybe that was what it was going to take.



After sixteen hours, including repelling down a one-hundred-fifty-foot cliff, a twenty-eight-mile boat ride, a brief helicopter ride, and then ending with a ten-and-a-half-hour flight, Duke and the team filed into their gear room on base.

Duke looked up at the clock on the wall and sighed—seven in the evening local time. He wasn't in the mood for going to Bayside, but traditions were sacred amongst the teams, and he'd never break a tradition.

He walked over to his locker and started cleaning and stowing his gear. Playboy walked over and leaned against the cage.

“You thought any more about what you're gonna do about Hannah?”

“I don't have anything concrete, but I'm leaning towards going to Jackson Hole.”

“If I can help in any way, let me know.”

“I appreciate that, man.”

“You still up for that beer?”

Duke nodded. “Wouldn't miss it.”

“Cool. Bear also mentioned grabbing a bite to eat there as well.”

“Works for me.”

Duke walked over and grabbed his phone from his bag. He hadn't checked it since they boarded the plane about eleven hours ago. He scrolled through his texts, which were all from his family. But then, at the very bottom, he saw a name that took his breath away.

*Hannah...*

His heart began to race, seeing she had texted him three times. He looked at the date and saw that all three messages were sent yesterday about ten minutes apart from each other. The grip he had on the phone tightened, and he closed his eyes. He was suddenly a nervous fucking wreck. His usual restrained demeanor was replaced with worry and fear. With the likelihood of his knees buckling, he quickly sat down on a nearby chair. Taking a deep breath, he readied himself. His hands shook as he flipped the phone over and clicked on the messages.

**Hannah:** *Hi*

**Hannah:** *Duke?*

**Hannah:** *I'm sorry...*

*Oh, sweetheart, you have nothing to be sorry for. If anybody is sorry, it's me,* he thought to himself.

Not wasting another minute, he clicked on the phone icon next to her name and waited as he heard it ring. After five rings, it went to her voicemail, and he left a message.

"Hannah, it's Duke. I just saw your texts. Please call me."

The anxiousness faded away, leaving him with a more optimistic outlook on the situation with Hannah. Hopefully, she'd soon get his message and try reaching out again. Until then, he'd try to keep the stress in his life to a minimum. That was if he wanted to keep his sanity.

"Hey, guys, check this out," Snow called out, pointing to the large TV mounted on the wall. It was tuned to one of the major news channels with the headline at the bottom reading: **"BREAKING NEWS: Pentagon confirms that suspect responsible for the downing of U.S. government plane killed during Navy SEAL raid."**

"Well, that didn't take long," Bear muttered, eyeing the TV in disgust.

"Our own government can sometimes be our worst enemy," Jay Bird added, shaking his head.

"Isn't that the truth," Joker stated. "I don't understand why they must tell the world who was involved. All that does is put another target on our backs."

As they discussed the situation, Derek, their Commanding Officer, walked in. He took a look at the television report and shook his head.

"I haven't figured out which one is worse—the people in our government with the loose lips who could give a fuck that what they say could endanger our service men and women, or the leeches in the media industry who encourage it because they're chasing a story." He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Anyway, that's not why I'm here."

"What's up?" Bear asked.

"I just got a call from the SECNAV. It appears there was a breach at the Department of Defense."

"What kind of breach?" Bear questioned.

"Someone managed to access a database that stores personnel files for many Special Forces groups. The SECNAV notified me because your records were stored in the database that the hackers targeted."

"Holy shit! So that means someone now has all our private information, like our home addresses and phone numbers?" Joker asked, looking

concerned.

“They don’t know yet whose files were compromised as each individual file is encrypted with its own unique password. The DOD is trying to quickly narrow down whose files were compromised. The FBI is also involved.”

“Do they know when they might know?” Duke asked. It was a serious situation that could potentially lead to serious and dangerous consequences. There were very bad and scary people out in the world who would pay top dollar to get their hands on that kind of information.

Derek shook his head. “No. But the SECNAV said he would keep me updated on the situation.”

“So, what should we do?”

“For now, we can only wait and see what the investigation turns up. We all just need to be more vigilant. Watch your surroundings. If you see anything out of the norm, report it. I don’t care what it is. Everyone’s safety is a priority, including our families.”

Duke could see the concern in everyone’s expression. This was a big deal where people’s livelihoods were at risk.

After Derek left, Bear addressed the team.

“I say for now, we keep this information within the team. Our families are already somewhat alert and know to tell us if they see or hear something unusual. I don’t want to spook anyone until we have confirmation if any of our information was included in the breach.”

Everyone agreed.

“I don’t know about y’all, but I think I’m ready for that drink now,” Nails stated, and Duke couldn’t agree any more with him. This news definitely called for a drink—maybe even two.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Hannah stood in front of the rental car, staring at the weathered wooden building in front of her. She looked up at the lighted sign for the third time, triple-checking that she was indeed in the right place. But each time, the sign read Bayside Bar and Grille.

She was glad that Duke had given her a heads up about the look of the place, or she would have gotten back in the car and driven off. It was no wonder tourists didn't stop there.

She could see where the owner at one point was trying to go with a nautical theme with fishing nets and other boating paraphernalia tacked to the sides of the building, as well as large barrels and wooden crates set around the property. It was interesting, to say the least. But since Duke had nothing but good things to say about the inside and the food, her anticipation was building to see it for herself.

She walked across the crowded parking lot and entered through the front door. The moment she stepped inside, her mouth gaped open. It was like a total transformation. It was bright, airy, and decorated very tastefully with a mix of nautical and military themes that showed a lot of red, white, and blue. There was music playing, and the place was packed full of people.

"Hi, welcome to Bayside!" A beautiful woman with gorgeous black raven-like hair greeted her.

Hannah smiled. "Hi."

"Let me guess. It's your first time here?" The woman asked with a knowing smile.

Hannah chuckled. "Was my expression that noticeable when I walked in?"

The woman laughed. "It happens to all newcomers when they first walk in."

"If my friend who recommended this place hadn't warned me beforehand, I would have kept driving after seeing the outside."

"Yeah. My dad had the outside designed just for that purpose. He wanted a place for locals. That's not to say that tourists eventually find out about us."

"Oh! So, your dad owns this?"

"He and I both do. I became co-owner last year." She held out her hand.

“I’m Arianna, by the way.”

“Hannah,” she said, shaking her hand.

“Well, Hannah, it’s nice to meet you. Are you coming in to eat, drink, or both?”

“My friend told me that if I ever came here, I needed to try the prime rib special.”

Arianna grinned. “Ah...yes, our prime rib is a local favorite.” She then looked around the room. “The only open tables we have right now are by the pool tables in the back, and I don’t recommend you sit there if you want to eat because it can tend to get rowdy. The guys can be very competitive when it comes to pool. But there is seating at the bar if you don’t mind sitting there.”

“No, the bar is fine with me.”

“Perfect. Follow me.”

Hannah followed Arianna, weaving in and out of tables full of people. She also spotted a small dance floor where men and women danced to a popular 90s country song.

Arianna pointed her to an empty bar stool at the far end near a hallway. She then went behind the bar and walked over.

“What would you like to drink?” She asked, and the first drink that popped into her mind was Duke’s mom’s Chatham Artillery punch. Everything she had done for the past two weeks, in some way or another, had reminded her of Duke.

She had been devastated when she saw Duke kissing his ex-girlfriend outside his parents’ house. She couldn’t understand why he would do something like that. Why would he lead her on and act annoyed by the ex-girlfriend showing up when he looked happy with his arms wrapped around her tiny little body?

She had acted on impulse and just bolted. But what else was she supposed to do? Was she supposed to play it off like she hadn’t seen them and go on with the day feeling completely torn apart inside?

Thankfully, there was an *Uber* in the area, and she was able to catch a ride back to the Inn, where she quickly packed her bags and left. She didn’t even stick around Savannah. She went straight to the airport and took a flight home that evening.

It hadn’t been until a week ago when she was getting ready to leave for Washington D.C., that she had received a call from a number she didn’t

recognize. Normally, she would let calls like that go to voicemail. But a gut feeling made her take the call. And she was glad she did.

Hearing Courtney, Duke's sister's voice on the other line had completely caught her off guard. But when Courtney explained to Hannah what *really* happened between Duke and his ex, it made Hannah feel like a complete idiot. Though Courtney told her that she understood why she had left and refused to take Duke's calls and that if she were in Hannah's place, she probably would've done the same.

Before Hannah left for D.C., she made a few adjustments to her itinerary, extending her trip another week. She decided that after visiting D.C. she'd drive to Williamsburg and head to Virginia Beach since Duke told her it was only an hour's drive.

She texted Duke yesterday when she arrived in town but didn't tell him she was there. It had been over twenty-four hours, and she still hadn't heard back from him. It made her wonder if her habit of jumping to conclusions had really damaged the bridge between her and him.

"Hannah?" Hearing Arianna say her name made her realize she had zoned out for a second—or maybe minutes. *Shit!*

She gave herself a mental shake and then smiled at Arianna.

"Sorry about that. I'll take a Modelo."

"You got it."

While she waited for Arianna to return with her drink, Hannah reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone.

"Crap," she muttered, seeing her phone had turned off because the battery was dead. She had accidentally left her phone charger at the hotel in Williamsburg and forgot to pick a new one up this morning. She'd stop at a store on her way back to the hotel tonight to buy one.

A few minutes later, Arianna returned and set the bottle of Modelo down in front of her. Hannah pulled a ten-dollar bill out and went to hand it to her when Arianna smiled and held her hand up.

"It's already taken care of."

"What?" Hannah asked, furrowing her eyebrows.

With a shrug of her shoulders, the woman grinned with a twinkle in her eyes before heading to the other end of the bar to take another order.

*Who would've...*

Before Hannah could finish her thought, a pair of large arms came around her from behind, caging her against the bar.

“Fancy meeting you here,” The guy whispered against her ear, sending warm tingles all over her body.

She didn’t need to turn around to know who it was. The small design of three interconnected triangles representing the mind, body, and spirit tattooed on his wrist and the sexy southern drawl told her the answer.

“*Duke...*” she said to herself, leaning back against his broad chest.



Duke couldn’t believe his eyes. It couldn’t be her, he thought to himself. However, deep down, he knew without a doubt it was her. There was no way he’d forget that radiant smile of hers. The woman who had stolen his heart in a matter of days before disappearing had just walked into Bayside.

He and the team arrived at Bayside about twenty minutes ago and were seated at a high-top table near the patio doors. They were all still a little on edge with the news that Derek had informed them of. He had already drunk one beer and was finishing up the second one before he would call it a night until she walked in.

He nudged Playboy’s arm and motioned to the woman standing near the front door.

“Do you see that woman over there?”

Playboy looked. “The one talking to Arianna?” Duke nodded. “Yeah, I see her. She’s cute.” Playboy commented before taking a gulp of his beer.

“She’s off limits,” Duke told him, a frown forming on his lips.

Playboy gave him an odd look, and then his eyes widened in recognition.

“Oh, shit! Is that her? Is that Hannah?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Duke said, a smile tugging the corners of his lips, though he was still a bit in denial.

“Did you know she was coming?”

“No.”

“Why is she here then? Wait...How did she even know about this place?”

“I mentioned it to her when we were talking. She must have remembered it,” Duke answered, not taking his eyes off her. He tracked her as she followed Arianna to the bar and took a seat. She looked amazing. She wore her strawberry blonde hair down, with it pulled to one side over her shoulder. The black keyhole tank top showed off her toned arms, and her

shapely legs peeked out beneath a pair of khaki shorts.

“Are you going to go over there?”

“You bet your ass I am.”

He pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket.

“Do me a favor and go to the bar and tell Arianna I want to buy Hannah’s drink.”

Playboy took the money and smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

Duke chugged down the rest of his beer, then stood up and started walking toward the bar. Playboy was already talking to Arianna, and when she looked up and saw him walking towards Hannah, she smiled and nodded in understanding.

Arianna was a sweetheart. Not only did she own Bayside with her dad, but she was also married to his good friend Dino, a SEAL assigned to Alpha team.

He was standing right behind Hannah when Arianna brought over the beer and sat it down in front of Hannah. He wanted to laugh when Hannah tried to pay, and Arianna waved her off, telling her it was already taken care of.

Surprisingly, Duke wasn’t nervous at all. He was excited.

He stepped closer, pressing his front against the back of the bar stool and moving his arms around her so she was caged in against the bar. He moved his mouth near her ear.

“It’s fancy meeting you here,” he whispered, then grinned when he saw her tense shoulders sink when it registered who was behind her.

He heard her release a breath as she relaxed into his hold. He breathed in the scent of her coconut shampoo, wanting to bury his nose in her silky locks.

He pulled his arms back, and before she could turn around, he slowly spun the stool around so she was facing him. He was still taller than her, and she tilted her head back to look up at him.

She gave him a shy smile. “Hi.”

He grinned. “Hi.”

She lifted her drink. “I’m assuming I should thank you for this?”

He nodded but kept silent as he looked her over. God, he missed her. She looked so good, even fidgeting with her beer bottle.

Someone walking by accidentally bumped into him, pushing him closer to her. It was crowded. And he didn’t want to talk to her with a bunch of loud people nearby. He knew where to take her so they could talk in private.



He held out his hand. “Walk with me.”

It made him happy when she didn’t hesitate to take his hand. With her other hand, she reached for her purse and drink.

As they were walking out, he spotted his team all watching him, and he shook his head, knowing he’d be the topic of conversation.

He led her down the hallway past the restrooms toward the side exit. Opening the door, he was hit by the thick humidity in the air. They walked over to the stairs that led down to the beach. Her grip on his hand tightened a bit, and she looked up at him.

“Are we going to the beach?”

“Yeah. I figured it would be better to talk where it wasn’t so crowded.”

She was initially quiet, and he thought she might object, but then she nodded. As he went to step down, she stopped him.

“Hang on,” she said, then brought her beer to her lips and chugged almost the entire contents before tossing the bottle into a nearby garbage can. He was impressed.

Looking back up at him, she smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t want it to go to waste, and I thought I could use a little liquid courage.”

He laughed, watching her cheeks turn pink. She was so damn cute when she was embarrassed.

“Come on,” he said, giving her a gentle tug.

Once they made it down to the beach, he walked them over to a sitting area that Paul, Arianna’s dad, had installed for patrons who wanted to sit out on the beach. Luckily for them, they were all alone.

They sat on the two-seater loveseat as the sound of the waves crashing along the shore was heard in the distance. He didn’t let go of her hand.

He could tell she was nervous just from her body language, and that’s not how he wanted her to feel. He gently squeezed her hand.

“Hannah, relax,” he told her, and she looked at him.

“I’m trying to. But...” Her words trailed off, and she lowered her head.

Using his fingers, he gently tilted her face up towards him and smiled softly, looking into her brown eyes.

“But what?” he asked.

She swallowed hard. “I’m scared,” she admitted. And Duke could now see the fear in her eyes.

“What are you scared of?”

He watched as a single tear leaked from her eye and rolled down her

cheek.

“I’m scared that I ruined everything between us.”

He released her hand and wiped the tear from her face. He then pressed his palm against her cheek.

“Darlin’, why would you think you ruined anything?”

“Because I jumped to conclusions. If I would’ve stayed and waited for you, I would’ve known that Katie had tricked you.”

Duke dropped his hand from her face and pulled back a bit. He cocked his head to the side.

“How do you know that Katie tricked me?”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “Your sister called me about a week ago and told me everything. I wanted to call you immediately, but I needed a few days to process everything. After a lot of thinking, I decided I wanted to surprise you. So, after reworking my itinerary, here I am. Though when you didn’t respond to my texts last night, I thought I had made a mistake by coming here.”

Duke made a mental note to buy his sister that weekend spa retreat she had been wanting to do.

Smiling, he placed both hands on her cheeks and looked deep into her worried eyes. He wanted to wipe that scared look on her face.

“I owe my sister a huge thanks. I did get your texts, and I tried calling you about an hour or so ago. But when the call went straight to voicemail, I assumed you still had me blocked.”

“I’m so sorry, Duke. My phone died, and I haven’t had time to recharge it.”

He could feel her getting worked up.

He ran his hands up and down her arms, hoping his touch would help soothe her worries.

“Hannah. Don’t stress about it. Things happen sometimes that we can’t control. I don’t want to dwell on the past.”

“I don’t want to either,” she told him.

“I can’t begin to tell you how happy I was to see you walk through that door tonight.”

Her eyes widened a smidge as her eyebrows shot up.

“You were?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I was.”

“So, you aren’t mad at me?”

“Hell no! If I’m mad at anyone, I’m mad at myself for falling for Katie’s tricks. I knew better than to let her lure me in. The woman is like a snake in disguise. No matter how many times it sheds its skin, it is still a snake. And I swear to you that I made it clear to her that I wanted nothing to do with her before I threw her off my parents’ property.”

Hannah grinned. “I know. Courtney told me. She also told me how mad your mom was.”

Duke dropped his hands and raked one through his brown hair as he rolled his eyes. “Don’t remind me. The ‘wrath of Catherine’ can be traumatizing.”

Hannah’s eyes widened as if she just realized something. “Your mom! I forgot to call her. I told Courtney that I would. I need to apologize to her for my behavior. She must think I’m some sort of a nut job. I can only imagine what I looked like.”

Duke chuckled and grabbed Hannah’s hand. “My mother already loves you.”

“She does? I mean, right before everything went down, she and I were talking, and she told me she liked me. But I just thought her opinion of me might have changed with everything that happened.”

Duke shook his head. “No. She still likes you.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

“Do you still like me? And I’m not talking about in a friend-like sort of way.”

Was she crazy? Duke licked his lips and stared at her. Then, very slowly, he leaned in so only millimeters separated their lips and could feel her warm breath against his lips.

“You tell me,” he told her before closing the distance and kissing her. He tried to go slow but couldn’t as he delved his tongue into her mouth and explored every mouthwatering inch of it.

When he felt her small arms wrap around his neck and attempt to pull him closer, he wanted to celebrate. He ate up her moans, which only intensified the desire flowing through him.

Not caring they were on a public beach, he pulled her onto his lap so she could straddle his lap. Finally, she pulled back, breaking the kiss. They were both breathing heavily as they stared into each other’s eyes. The look on her face was unforgettable. Her lips were wet and swollen, and her eyes

shimmered.

She was amazing, and she was his. He wasn't trying to act barbaric, but being around her made him lose all self-control. He felt possessive and turned on. She could probably feel what she did to him, considering she was sitting on his now hard cock.

He smiled and pressed his forehead against hers. They sat like that for a few moments—eye-to-eye and nose-to-nose, while the steady beat of her heart was felt against his chest.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you," he admitted, and she smiled.

"Really?"

"Really. You can even ask my team. I think I drove them nuts talking nonstop about you."

Her brows pulled inward. "What do you mean your team?"

*Shit!* He forgot she didn't know he was a SEAL. And he really didn't want to get into that right now. That was a whole other story for another time. But he would tell her soon. He didn't want any secrets between them.

"I'll tell you about them later. Right now, I want to talk about me and you."

"Is there a you and me?" She challenged, showing a little bit of sass with one of her eyebrows raised.

"After that kiss we just shared, I'd say hell yes."

They both started laughing, but then Duke became serious. He pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Would it scare you if I told you that I've developed very strong feelings in just the few weeks we've known each other?"

She smiled softly. "No, because I feel the same way. And call me crazy, but being away from you and not speaking to you drove me nuts."

"Well, we don't want you going crazy," he teased, then leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

"How long are you in town for?"

"I was scheduled to fly out the day after tomorrow."

"Was?"

"Well, that was before I ran into you," she said.

"And now? When do you plan on leaving?"

He wished she would say "never." But that was asking a little too much, too soon.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have a few weeks to spare. That's when

the berry fields get really busy.”

He nodded, remembering that first night in Savannah when they stayed up late talking, and she told him about the berry fields at the ranch.

“Do you have plans tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

“Good. I don’t have to work. How about I pick you up, and we can hang out? I’ll show you around town. We can do breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Make a whole day of it.”

“I’d love that.”

“Is eight or nine okay to pick you up?”

“Either works for me.”

Eight would give him another hour with her.

He smiled. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“I can’t wait.”

Neither could he.

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Trying not to alarm Hannah, he scanned the area. It was dark, with only a few lights leading the pathway from the seating area to the stairs.

He strained his ears, listening for a sound indicating someone or something was nearby. But all he heard was the sound of the waves crashing onto the shore and chatter from those sitting on the deck above them.

Even though he didn’t see or hear anything, something told him they weren’t alone.

“Is everything okay?”

He refocused on Hannah and smiled in an attempt to hide his concern.

“Yeah. Everything’s good, especially now that you’re here,” he told her, gently caressing her cheek.

She laid her head on his shoulder, and Duke wrapped his arms around her.

Duke smiled and felt content with Hannah in his arms, but there was a feeling in his gut that he couldn’t shake. Thoughts about the breach at the DOD resurfaced. He was accustomed to having a target on his back. But with Hannah in the picture now, he needed to be more on guard because if someone was after him, it was possible they could use her as leverage, and there was no way in hell he’d ever let that happen.

Tomorrow, he would sit her down and explain the truth of what he did for a living.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Rakin smiled sinisterly as he slowly backed away from the cozy couple, using the sand to muffle his retreating footsteps.

As he made it up to the parking lot without being seen and when he was in the safe confines of his vehicle, he released a joyous scream.

He couldn't believe it! Since he had arrived in town last week, he'd been scouring all the places his contact had provided, hoping to catch a glimpse of Reid. But he hadn't had any luck. That was until now.

The contact had listed the little restaurant and bar as being one of a few locations that SEALs were known to frequent. It was one of the places he had yet to visit.

He had been sitting at the bar nursing his beer while deciding whether to call it a night when a group of men walked in. The place was packed, making it hard to see them, but when the crowd parted to let them through, Rakin felt his chest tighten when he saw *him*. There was no mistaking that the man standing across the room was the same man who had murdered his wife. It was a face he would never forget.

Rakin reached for the picture he carried with him and ran his finger down her beautiful face. He promised her that he would avenge her death.

"Soon, my love," he told her, kissing the photograph.

He started the car and pulled out of the parking lot to return to his hotel.

He needed to rethink his plan as it appeared that the dynamics of the game had changed. Seeing that Reid had a companion, maybe instead of killing him, he would kill her. As the saying goes— "an eye for an eye."

## CHAPTER NINE

“What do you expect me to do, Thomas? I’m like two thousand miles away.”

“For starters, you need to throw away that asinine list your grandmother left for you and get your ass back here where you belong.”

She pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it. She could hear him still spewing shit from his mouth.

It wasn’t her fault that he scheduled the meeting with the investors without consulting her. If he had asked her, she would’ve told him the date didn’t work for her. Now he’s in a bind and blaming her for it.

She took a deep breath before returning the phone to her ear.

“Thomas, I won’t stand here and listen to you berate me for something out of my control. I’m hanging up.”

Her finger was hovering over the disconnect button when she heard him shout.

“Hannah, wait!”

She thought about it for a few seconds before bringing the phone back up again.

“What?” She snapped and had no regrets about doing so.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to go off on you like that. It’s just my reputation is on the line as well.”

Was he being serious?

“You know, Thomas. I’m glad I’ve gotten to see the person who you really are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Everything is about you.”

“That’s not true!”

Oh, my God! The man was in denial.

As she was pacing, she looked up and spotted Duke pulling up.

Thomas started to go on another rant when she cut him off.

“My ride is here. I have to go.”

“Hannah—” she heard him say before she disconnected the call.

Now she understood what her granny always used to say, *“a good mood is like a balloon, one prick is all it takes to ruin it.”*

She saw Duke coming around the front of the SUV, and she smiled. She wasn't going to let some self-centered asshole ruin her day.



Duke pulled into the beachfront hotel's parking lot and immediately spotted Hannah under the portico off the main entrance. She had her cell phone to her ear while she paced the short sidewalk.

He became a bit alarmed when she turned, and he saw the frown on her face. She appeared annoyed with whoever she was talking to. He wondered who it was.

He waited for the two cars in front of him to finish loading their suitcases into the back of the vehicles. Once they left, he was able to pull forward.

As he slowly rolled his Chevy blazer forward, she finally noticed him and told whoever she was on the phone with that she had to go.

He parked the vehicle, got out, and walked around to the passenger side.

She smiled as she stepped off the curb, and he couldn't help but admire her tanned legs. She surprised him by wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him.

"Good morning, darlin'," he greeted and kissed her cheek.

"Morning," she responded with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. He could tell from the tense body position that something was off.

"Everything okay?"

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and looked up at him. "Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You didn't look thrilled with that phone call you were on."

"Oh..." She worried her bottom lip. "You saw that?"

He nodded.

"Sorry. It's just this guy back home." Duke's eyebrows rose, and Hannah tried to backtrack her words. "Not like a boyfriend. Well, if he had his way, I'd be his girlfriend or wife by now, but he's just a family friend. Though lately, he's been more like a pain in my ass."

She stopped and took a big breath.

"Want to talk about it?" He asked.

He listened as she quickly told him the land, the investors and the guy Thomas. After she explained it all, the guy sounded like a real dick.

"I'm so sorry. I feel like such an idiot."



“Come here.” He pulled her into a hug and squeezed her tight. “You’re definitely no idiot. I’m sorry that you’re having a rough morning. Don’t let him ruin your day. At the end of the day, it’s your land and your say in what happens with it.”

She smiled and grinned. “Thanks. I needed that.”

“Well, there’s more where that came from.” He winked, and she blushed. Damn, he was a lucky bastard.

He opened the passenger door for her, and she hopped in. Once he made it around to the driver’s side and put the vehicle into drive, she turned to look at him.

“So, where are we headed?”

“How would you like to meet my friends?”

“I’d love to!”

“Good. One of the guys invited us to a barbeque at his house, so I thought we could go there for a bit and you could meet everyone. Unless there’s something else you’d rather do.”

She had a big smile on her face. “That sounds wonderful!”

He had already texted all the guys from Alpha and Bravo teams and informed them that he hadn’t told Hannah about the team yet. They all replied and told them they had his back and would let the ladies know so they wouldn’t spill the beans until Duke spoke with Hannah.



Thomas gripped his cell phone so hard that he thought he’d break it. Damn, that woman got under his skin. The audacity of her to hang up on him like that.

He flung the front door to his business open and stormed inside, not even bothering to greet Gretchen, the receptionist.

He was so pissed off he didn’t want to speak with anyone. He could see members of his staff ducking behind the walls of their cubicles in their attempt to avoid him. He was known around the office for having a temper.

But seeing the cowards hiding only made him angrier. He should fire them for appearing weak. He couldn’t have members of his staff looking incapable. It wasn’t a good look for him, and if his competitors saw that, they would use it to their advantage.

Thank God his office sat on the top floor so he wouldn’t have to look at them.

The elevators opened to the private lobby outside his office. Callie, his executive assistant, stood from behind the long custom desk.

“Good morning, Mr. Cleary.”

He quickly nodded in her direction as he passed by her on his way to his office.

Callie was his lifeline inside the office, so he couldn't afford to be a total dick towards her. Nothing would get done without her, nor would he know what goes on inside the office. She made sure the office was run correctly and efficiently. She was well compensated for her loyalty and dedication. But he knew there was more she was after. She had been out one evening after work having drinks with a few friends and admitted out loud that she was working her way into his bed. She would probably be a good fuck, but it was hard to find a good employee like her, and if he did fuck her, she would just be a sidepiece.

His ultimate prize was Hannah. She was sweet, well-liked in the community, and apparently had developed a backbone. She was an asset he needed to succeed.

He rounded his desk, and before he could sit, his door flew open, and his best friend and business associate walked in.

“What is it, Justin?”

Justin chuckled, walked over, and plopped down in one of the chairs across from Thomas' desk.

“What's crawled up your ass so early?”

Thomas shook his head.

“Hannah.”

“What happened?” Justin asked, sitting up straighter.

“We're supposed to meet the investors tomorrow, and she's out checking off things on a stupid piece of paper.”

“Wait, so she's not coming?”

Thomas shook his head.

“No.”

Justin gave him a look. “I hate to say this, man, but I think you need to cut your losses and move on. If this deal falls through, we can't risk our names being dragged through the mud. It's obvious that Hannah isn't serious about selling her property. Nor is she interested in you.”

Thomas was pissed. He wasn't going to lose Hannah or this deal.

Justin sat forward in the chair. “What I don't understand is what is she

planning to do with all that land. It would be different if she had animals, but she doesn't."

Thomas leaned back and threw his hands in the air. "I have no fucking idea."

"It sounds like you need to drive over there and talk some sense into her."

"It's not that easy."

"Why the hell not? You've never had any issue with stalking her in the past?"

"Because she's not there, remember?"

"Where exactly is she?"

"Off galivanting the country, checking off more places on that stupid bucket list her grandmother left her."

"Didn't she just return from Hawaii or Savannah a few weeks ago?"

"Both, and yes. However, she left again a few days ago to head to the East Coast. According to her, she is in Virginia Beach right now."

"When is she due back? Maybe we can reschedule the meeting."

"She said she wasn't sure."

"Hmmm..." Justin mumbled and sat back in the chair as his expression grew serious.

"What?" Thomas asked him.

"You don't think she met someone, do you?"

"Met someone?"

"Like a man. Why else wouldn't she know when she is returning home? It sounds like something is keeping her there."

Thomas snorted and shook his head vehemently.

"No. Not Hannah. She's shy and an introvert. Believe me, there's no man in the picture." At least, there better not be. He thought to himself. "I'll give her another week or two, and if she still hasn't returned, I'll go looking for her and convince her to come home. In the meantime, contact the investors and see if they'll reschedule. Tell them that Hannah is sick or something."

Thomas looked down at the documents on his desk. Without Hannah's signature he was screwed.

He smiled to himself. He knew she wasn't still completely over the death of her grandmother. She could easily be manipulated, and he knew how to strike.

“What can I do to help?” Justin asked, but Thomas just shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it. I know exactly what needs to be done.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Hannah was having the time of her life, hanging out with Duke's friends and their families.

When she and Duke first pulled up to Ace and Alex's house and saw all the cars parked in the driveway and up and down the street, she started to have flashbacks of Duke's parents' barbeque.

But once she got inside and had a chance to meet everyone, she felt right at home. She felt like she belonged.

The ladies, Alex, Tenley, Bailey, Jocelyn, and Clover, were all nice and made her feel welcome. And the guys were friendly as well, but there was something about them that Hannah couldn't quite put her finger on. They were more reserved than the guys she was used to.

Hannah hadn't laughed so much in her life. The stories the ladies were sharing were hilarious.

"So, your daughter gave all the guys wet cat food instead of the tuna fish?" She asked Bailey, a cute blonde who was married to Irish, one of Duke's friends.

Bailey laughed, nodding her head.

"Well, not all the guys," Tenley piped in. Tenley was married to Potter, another friend of Duke's. "Potter had the real tuna fish."

Hannah laughed. "Oh, my gosh. I wish I could have witnessed that."

"It was really funny, even though it was gross," Alex said, grinning.

"So Hannah, Duke says you are a corporate strategist. What exactly is that?" Jocelyn, Bear's wife, asked.

"My main goal is to develop and implement new strategies to businesses so they can improve their bottom lines or meet goals."

"And you can do that from your home?"

"Yes. At least for the businesses that I contract with. That's one of the perks of owning my own business. I get to pick and choose who I want to work with."

"That's pretty cool."

"I enjoy it, so that says something."

"Okay, I'm going to ask the question that all of us are dying to know. How serious are things between you and Duke?" Clover, Joker's girlfriend, asked, and Hannah felt her cheeks warm.

“Uhm... Things between Duke and I are still new.”

“Is it true that you guys met in Hawaii and then bumped into each other in Savannah a few days later?”

Hannah grinned. “Yeah. All that is true, and it was pure coincidence.”

“That’s not a coincidence, that’s fate. And so romantic,” Jocelyn said with a big smile on her face as she held her clasped hands over her heart.

Hannah then proceeded to tell them the full story about how she and Duke met at Pearl Harbor and ended up at his family’s bed and breakfast in Savannah. She even told them about Duke’s ex showing up and causing havoc and how she never thought she would ever see him again.

“How cool! And then you show up here. Wait. How did you know about Bayside?” Clover asked.

“Duke and I were talking that night in Savannah, and I showed him my grandmother’s bucket list. He told me that if ever came to Virginia Beach, I had to go to Bayside.”

“What did you think of Bayside?”

“Honestly, when I first pulled into the parking lot, I almost left.” She chuckled. “The place looks like it is barely standing.”

“Yeah, but once you get inside...” Alex said.

“It was worth it. The people seemed nice, especially Arianna.”

“Oh! You got to meet Arianna. She’s a good friend of ours. Her husband Dino, uhm... works with the rest of the guys.” Clover added.

“Oh! Wow! Small world. Well, she was very nice. I didn’t get to try the food as Duke sort of kidnapped me, and by the time we were done talking, the kitchen had closed. But I hear it is amazing.”

“I still can’t believe you both ended up at the same place at the same time again,” Bailey said.

Hannah grinned. “I can’t believe it either.”

“Well, Thank God for that,” Jocelyn mumbled, and Hannah cocked her head to the side.

“Why do you say that?”

“Girl, Bear said that for the last two weeks, he has never seen Duke mope the way he had been.”

Hannah felt a little better knowing Duke was just as miserable as she had been.

“Well, just know we’re all in your corner,” Tenley told her.

Hannah smiled. “That’s good to know.”

“So, how long are you in town for?” Clover asked, changing the topic.

“I honestly have no idea. Again, seeing Duke again wasn’t on my itinerary. And it’s something he and I haven’t talked too much about.”

“Oh! I hope you are still here to go to the gala that Alex is hosting in two weeks.”

Alex nodded her head. “You should definitely come. We’re all going, and so are all the guys.”

Hannah tilted her head, looking at Alex. “What is the gala for?”

“A few years ago, I founded an organization called the Jacob Hardesty Foundation. I named it after my biological dad, who was killed in action when I was very young. The foundation assists current and former military personnel and their families with medical visits and other things they may need.”

“Wow! That sounds amazing!” Hannah gushed.

“It is. Alex is expanding to the San Diego area.”

“How do you manage to run it all?”

“I am blessed with an amazing volunteer staff.”

“So, the organization is all volunteers?”

Alex nodded. “Yep. Even the doctors and nurses who help out volunteer their time. We have no paid staff. We rely on grants and donations for funding. Even in-kind donations.”

Hannah was in awe of Alex. What she was doing for people was truly amazing. Suddenly, an idea was forming in her head. She needed to do a little research, but she may have found a purpose for her land in Wyoming.

Suddenly, Sienna, Irish and Bailey’s little girl, appeared beside Hannah, and Hannah smiled.

“Hi, sweetie!”

“Hi! Are you Uncle Duke’s special friend?” Sienna asked.

“I am.”

The little girl beamed. “You’re pretty.”

“Thank you. You’re pretty, too. And I love your bathing suit.”

Sienna frowned, and Hannah thought she might have said something wrong.

“My daddy picked it out. I wanted the pink and purple bathing suit. My friends have one but in a different color.”

Bailey cleared her throat. “Irish thought the pink and purple suit was too revealing for a little girl her age.”

Hannah could understand. Some of the clothing options for kids nowadays were a little risky. But she was being sincere in complimenting Sienna's bathing suit. It was really cute.

Hannah looked at Sienna. "You know, Sienna. Being different isn't a bad thing. In fact, it could benefit you. You seem like a very outgoing girl. You remind me of a leader. So, my advice to you is don't worry about what others are wearing or doing. Just be yourself. As long as you are happy, don't let others bring you down."

"Did your daddy pick out your clothes?"

"No. But sometimes, my granny did when she disagreed with my choice. And let me tell you—she wouldn't have let me wear the suit you're wearing now."

"Why not?"

"Because that was who granny was. You should actually thank your daddy because I bet many of your friends will be jealous of your bathing suit when they see you."

Sienna stood there momentarily as if pondering what Hannah had just told her. She then spun around like a mini tornado. "I'll be back," she shouted, skipping toward the guys' table.

All the ladies watched as Sienna crawled up on Irish's lap and hugged him. She leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Even though they couldn't hear the words that were exchanged, the huge loving smile on Irish's face spoke words as he hugged his daughter back.

"Wow, Hannah! Thank you!" Bailey said, smiling as she watched Irish kiss Sienna on her cheek before the little girl hopped off his lap and cannonballed herself back into the pool with the other kids and dog that were swimming around.

Grinning, Hannah waived her off. "It was nothing. Plus, I really do like her bathing suit. And I wasn't kidding when my granny used to pick out my clothes."

"Potter is the same way with Alejandra," Tenley said laughingly.

"Speaking of kids, I hear that Stitch and Mia are expecting!" Clover exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Tenley nodded her head. "Yep. They're due in November. One month before my bestie over there pops," she laughed, gesturing toward Alex, who was sucking on a popsicle.

Alex grinned as she rubbed her tiny baby bump. "Yep, our Christmas



present.”

All the talk about kids and babies had Hannah’s mind racing. Her and Duke’s relationship was new, and the talk of kids and babies was way off. But it did make her wonder what his thoughts were on the subject. He seemed good with kids. He doted on his nieces, and she saw him playing with the other kids, including Jocelyn’s two kids in the pool earlier.

A small smile played on Hannah’s lips, and she looked over at Duke. As if sensing her eyes on him, Duke turned in her direction and flashed her his gorgeous smile.

“Yep, I think Duke has fallen victim to the love bug.”

Hannah swung her head toward Jocelyn, who was grinning.

“I don’t know about that.”

“Oh, please. That man is smitten with you.”

“What?”

“Trust us,” Clover pipped in. We all know that look.”

Hannah felt a little flush. This was all happening so fast.

“Hey, don’t look so panicked,” Alex told her.

“I’m good. Okay, maybe a little overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed is okay. We’ve all been in your shoes. Even though each of our stories is a little different, we all have felt overwhelmed at some point, especially when dealing with that group,” Alex told her and pointed to the guys’ table.

“She’s right. Just try to relax and enjoy the moment. What happens, happens,” Bailey said, giving her an encouraging smile.

*That was a little easier said than done,* she thought to herself.

She glanced at the Duke, and when his brown eyes met hers and he smiled, her heart began to beat faster. Maybe the girls were right, and love could exist between them.



“So, Hannah seems nice,” Aussie told Duke, and the other guys all agreed.

Duke grinned. “I still can’t believe she came here.”

“Thank God, because your mood was killing my vibe and you were being a real dick,” Nails pouted.

Duke rolled his eyes. “Quit being a drama queen.”

Nails’ eyes widened. “Dude, I was laying there bleeding, and you told

me to stop being a pussy and suck it up.”

Duke chuckled. The man wasn't lying. He did tell Nails that. But again, he was being a drama queen.

“I've seen papercuts worse than the little scratch you had.”

“Scratch my ass! If I recall correctly, you had to close up the *gash* with eight stitches.”

Duke laughed, drawing laughs from the others.

“Any word from the ex?” Joker asked.

“No. And thank God for that.”

“Wyoming is a long way from here,” Bear stated, and Duke knew what he was implying.

“It is.”

“How will that work if things remain serious for the two of you?”

“I don't know. We haven't really gotten to that part yet.”

It made Duke wonder how it could work. He understood that she had a life back in Wyoming. But his life was here where his job was. It was definitely something they would need to talk about, especially if they decided to take their relationship to the next level, which he hoped was the case.

Interrupting his thoughts, Potter's oldest daughter, Alejandra, skipped over and jumped on her dad's lap. Alejandra was nine years old, going on eighteen. The young girl was very smart for her age but was a total sweetheart with a heart of gold, just like her mother, Tenley.

“Whatcha got there?” Potter asked, pointing to the paper plate she sat on the table.

“A meatball sandwich.”

“Aww...Did you make that for me?” He teased, making her grin.

“No. But, I'll share with you,” she told him, making Potter smile, which was a freaking miracle in itself. The broody SEAL rarely showed any emotion unless it came to his girls or his wife, Tenley. He was also extremely protective of them, and if someone messed with any of them, they were liable to find themselves six feet under.

“That's okay, sweetie. You can have it. But thank you.”

She shrugged her shoulders, picked up the small sandwich, and took a big bite. After she finished chewing, she wiped her mouth with a napkin and looked at her dad.

“Daddy, how much meat would you say are in meatballs?”

Potter squinted his eyes. “I don't know. Why?”

“When I was at camp a few weeks ago, I was in the kitchen with the cooking lady, and she was teaching us about ingredients. She said all foods have something else in them besides the main part. So, I was just wondering how much meat is actually in a meatball.”

Potter looked at everyone hoping someone had an answer, but neither Duke nor any of the others offered anything, only giving Potter a shoulder shrug indicating they didn't know.

Turning his attention back to his daughter, who was staring at him, waiting for an answer, he shrugged.

“I don't know. I would say maybe ninety percent,” he told her, not sounding like he was very confident in his answer.

“Hmmm...” she muttered and paused, looking at the meatball before looking back at him.

“So, that would mean that ten percent of the ingredients are balls?”

Half of the guys who had meatballs on their plates scrunched up their faces in disgust as they pushed them to the side, while the other half, including Duke, tried to hide their laughter.

Potter was apparently left speechless because he was just staring at Alejandra. “Did your mother tell you to say that?” he asked, and the little girl shook her head.

“Did I tell her to say what?” Tenley called out, looking at her husband with a raised eyebrow.

“I swear that woman's ears are like sonar,” Potter mumbled under his breath, but Duke was close enough to hear him, and he wanted to laugh.

Potter then smiled at Tenley. “Nothing, babe. I was just having a conversation with Alejandra.”

Potter looked at Alejandra, who was looking between her mom and dad. “Don't tell your mother I said that,” he whispered, kissing her cheek.

Alejandra grinned. “It'll be our little secret, daddy.”

“That's my girl. Now go play with your friends before your mother accuses me of something else.”

As Alejandra ran away, Alex showed up at the table.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Ace said, taking Alex's hand and gently pulling her down onto his lap. “You feeling okay?” he asked her, placing his hand on her little belly.

She smiled at him. “I'm fine. I actually came over to talk to Duke.”

“Me?” Duke asked, and she nodded.

“Are you still planning on going to the gala?”

“Yeah. I mean, as long as we’re around.” He then remembered Hannah. Shit! He only had one ticket. “You don’t by chance have a spare ticket I could buy, do you?”

A mischievous smile took over Alex’s lips. “That depends. Are you planning on asking Hannah to go?”

“Alex...” Ace sighed, but she ignored him.

Duke grinned. “Of course, I’m going to ask her.”

“Then yes. I’ll get you a ticket,” She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I do have to tell you that she sort of already knows about it. The topic came up during our conversation, and she asked what it was. I’m sorry,” she said, looking guilty.

“It’s fine, Alex. Don’t worry about it. And thank you. I’ll give Ace a check this week to give to you for the ticket.”

“I really like her, Duke. She’s genuine and nice.”

Compliments like that coming from Alex went a long way, as Alex had a knack for judging a person's character.

“I really like her too. And thanks for making her feel welcome.”

“Pft...no thanks needed,” Alex said before turning her attention to Playboy.

“Speaking of the gala. Hey, Playboy. Guess who bought a ticket?”

“Who?”

“Gabby.”

“She did?”

Alex nodded and smiled. “And there just happens to be one seat left at your table.”

“You better not be messing with me, Alex. I’ve seen some of the jokes you’ve played on some of the guys before, and if this is one of them—”

Alex started laughing as she cut him off.

“I’m telling you the God’s honest truth. Gabby bought a ticket, and I assigned that ticket to your table.”

Duke didn’t think Playboy’s smile could get any bigger. Gabby was a Coastie whom Playboy had a crush on. Though, if Gabby’s body language said anything when she was around Playboy, Duke would assume that she had a crush on Playboy, too. He didn’t know why Playboy didn’t just ask her out. It was like the two of them were playing a game of cat and mouse.

Snow then snorted. “You better hope that it’s Gabby that shows up and

not her friend Luna.”

“Luna?” Playboy questioned, pulling his eyebrows in.

Jay Bird chuckled. “Are you talking about the chick who thinks she’s a wolf shifter? The one who Gabby brought with her to Bayside a few months ago.”

“Yeah,” Snow confirmed and laughed along with Jay Bird.

“She sounds like someone that would be right up your alley, Nails,” Joker joked.

A wicked smile covered Nails’ lips. “Ain’t nothing wrong with a little role play. There are some pretty sexy costumes. A little pair of wolf ears with a matching tail.” He gave his eyebrows a little wiggle, and everyone laughed except for Playboy, who looked horrified.

“Please tell me that it is Gabby who is coming?” Playboy pleaded to Alex.

Alex laughed but then put the poor guy out of his misery.

“I promise. The ticket is for Gabby.”

As they continued to talk for a bit, Duke looked at his watch and saw it was getting late. As much as he enjoyed hanging out with the team and their families, he wanted to spend a little time with Hannah alone before taking her back to her hotel. Plus, he still needed to discuss with her about him being a SEAL.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Duke pulled out of Ace and Alex's subdivision. He stole a quick glance at Hannah before returning his eyes to the road.

She was very quiet, and her silence had him a little worried that something might have happened at Ace and Alex's house.

He saw her phone light up as a call or text came through. She looked at the phone and sighed before placing it inside her purse. It was obvious she didn't want to talk to whoever was calling. He couldn't help but wonder if it was that guy she knew from back home.

He reached over and took her hand, placing both of theirs on the console between them.

"You seemed to have had fun today."

A small smile graced her beautiful lips. "I did. They are all an amazing group of people, especially the ladies. They were very informative, and shared some funny stories."

Oh shit! He forgot how chatty that group can be. Not that they gossip. They tell the truth, but they do love to talk.

"Did someone say something to upset you?"

She whipped her head in his direction.

"No. Why did you ask that?"

"You just seem really quiet. Like you have something on your mind."

She took a deep breath and exhaled.

"I guess I'm just worried."

"About what?"

"Us. That one day this fairy tale is going to come to an end."

"What brought this on?"

"Seeing all the couples today just got me thinking about the future. Our future and how it would look like."

Duke nodded. "I know there is still a lot we need to talk about, which is why I wanted to see if you wanted to come back to my place so we could talk."

Her lips parted in surprise. "You're inviting me to your place?"

Duke chuckled. "I am. Just to talk," he promised, squeezing her hand. He didn't want to insinuate that he was inviting her over for sex. Though the thought of her naked and his bed made his cock stir.

*Down boy. We don't want to scare her off.*



Duke turned into a subdivision, and Hannah looked at the houses they passed. Overall, the community was fairly small, but the home lots were large. If she had to guess, she'd say they were probably at least an acre, if not more.

At the end of the road, Duke pulled up to a tall, black iron gate, and pushed the button for the gate clicker clipped to his visor. When nothing happened, he pushed it again. Still nothing happened.

"That's strange," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"The clicker for the gate isn't working."

"Maybe the battery died," she suggested.

"Maybe," he said. But Hannah could tell he seemed annoyed or irritated by it not working.

He rolled his window down and punched in a code on the box. Once the gate opened, Duke pulled forward but stopped and waited until it closed behind them.

As they drove up the long driveway, Hannah admired the beautiful landscaping. The lighted driveway was lined on both sides with gorgeous dogwood trees spaced perfectly apart. She would love to see them when they bloom in the spring.

"Oh, wow!" Hannah said aloud when the mini antebellum mansion came into view. The large wrap-around style porch, wide center entrance to the beautiful columns reaching upward to the second-story balconies screamed southern charm. Knowing Duke was grounded to his southern roots, his choice of home-style was no surprise, and she couldn't wait to see the inside.

He pulled in front of the three-car garage and hit the other button on his visor. As the door lifted, he pulled the vehicle into the bay.

She got out and met Duke by the door leading into the house. She waited for him to unlock the door, and then he motioned for her to go in. Her jaw dropped when she stepped through the doorway and into the monstrous kitchen. She twirled around, looking at the massive space. This kitchen was every cook and baker's dream.



As they entered the kitchen, Duke chuckled when he heard Hannah gasp as she explored his state-of-the-art gourmet kitchen.

“Wowzers! This kitchen is amazing.” She walked around, running her hand along the smooth white and gray granite countertops as she looked at everything.

“Is that a Café Professional Double Wall Oven?” She asked, and Duke rubbed his hand over his short beard. He was impressed with her kitchen appliance knowledge.

“It is. When I bought this place, I completely renovated it. Most of the budget went toward the kitchen.”

She looked across the large island that separated them.

“This is gorgeous. You did a fantastic job on the renovations.” She shook her head, still looking around at everything. “So, with a kitchen like this, I assume you like to cook.”

“I do. My mother taught me.”

She smiled, and Duke could feel the happiness radiate from her.

“That’s sweet.”

He chuckled as he walked around the island to the refrigerator.

“My mom also told me that knowing how to cook would impress the girls.”

“Your mom would be correct. In fact, I can’t wait for you to cook me something.”

“You can’t, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Well, how about dessert now?”

“Dessert?”

“Yep. I made it this morning, hoping you would say yes to coming over here for a bit after the party.”

He winked, then turned and opened the refrigerator and pulled out a tray. He laughed as Hannah tried looking over his shoulder to see what was on the tray, but his large frame blocked her view.

When he set the tray of strawberry shortcakes down on the counter, a smile slowly spread on her lips.

“Is that your mom’s strawberry shortcake recipe?”

He winked. “Of course it is.”



He laughed when she didn't waste any time and reached for one of the shortcakes and put it on a plate. She pulled the top off the Cool Whip container, scooped up a huge dollop, and placed it on the shortcake. Just when he thought she would take a bite, she surprised him by handing the plate to him. Taking the plate, he tilted his head to the side.

"You made them, so it's only fair that you get the first one," she told him.

"Thank you."

"Thank you for making them."

She made her own before sitting on the stool beside him at the island.

He watched her take the first bite to see her reaction.

As she shoveled a forkful into her mouth, she let out a soft moan.

"Mmmm...This is delicious!" She exclaimed, taking another bite.

"I learned from the best."

"Your mom is pretty cool. Actually, your whole family is amazing."

"They think you're pretty great too."

"I know," she told him and winked. "They told me so."

Duke laughed.

They both got seconds and when they finished, Hannah picked their plates up and walked them over to the sink. After she washed the dishes, she wrapped up the tray of shortcakes and put them back in the refrigerator.

The whole time she busied herself, Duke just watched her ease around the kitchen as if it were her own domain. It made him smile to see how comfortable she was in his home. After she dried and put the plates away, she walked back to the island and stood beside him.

"All clean," she said, giving him a big smile.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her between his legs. Her head tilted back as she looked up at him, and the second their eyes locked, he leaned in and kissed her. It was just a peck, but he let his lips linger on her lips.

"Thank you."

She smiled and looped her arms around his neck. "You're welcome," she replied and kissed him.

With their bellies content and full from dessert, Duke thought now was as good a time as any to have that *talk* with her.

He slid off the stool and took her hand in his. As they walked through the kitchen and into the open living room, Hannah's eyes lit up when she saw

the grand curved staircase leading to the second floor.

“Duke, this place is insane and so beautiful.”

“Thanks. I think so, too,” he teased.

She looked up at him, and he saw the admiration in her eyes.

“Did you renovate in here too?”

“Yep.”

“Wow! I’m speechless. This is just stunning. I mean, the detail in the woodwork on the banister and the matching solid wood floors are exquisite. You really should feel proud of yourself.”

“I admire it every night I walk through the door. Come on, let’s go sit on the couch and talk,” He was antsy as the anticipation of seeing and hearing her reaction to him being a SEAL was eating at him.

He motioned for her to take a seat on the large sectional sofa. Once she chose where to sit, he sat down beside her. He loved having her in his home. And he was thrilled by her reaction to the house since one day he hoped she’d be living here with him.

He held her hand and placed it on his thigh.

“Hannah, there’s something that I need to tell you.”

“Okay…” she stated, looking worried. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I promise it isn’t anything bad.”

“Okay.”

“So, you know that I’m in the Navy. And I know you’ve heard me mention that the guys you’ve met are my teammates.”

“Right,” she said, following along.

“I’m a SEAL.”

Hannah’s eyes widened. “A SEAL? As in, like the Special Forces?”

Duke nodded and swallowed hard. Damn, please don’t let this be a deal breaker, he thought.

She let go of his hand and started fidgeting with her fingers. He couldn’t gauge her reaction, and that worried him.

“I had planned on telling you when we were at my parent’s house, but you know what happened, and I never got the opportunity to.”

When she remained silent for over a minute, he really started to worry. He placed his hand over her hand to stop her from fidgeting.

“Hannah, look at me, please,” he asked, keeping his voice soft and low.

When she raised her head and looked him in the eyes, he could see several emotions swirling in her caramel eyes.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“Not right now. But I probably will later. I’m just a little shell-shocked right now.”

“I can understand. And I didn’t keep it from you intentionally. It’s just we don’t go around broadcasting who we are.”

“Duke, you don’t have to explain. I get it.”

“So, does that mean you don’t mind?” He had every part of his body crossed that could.

“Why would I mind?”

“Because many relationships don’t hold up against the stressful conditions of the job.”

“Well, those relationships aren’t ours,” she stated with conviction, making Duke smile. “I’m sure it’s tough, but I would think that communication plays a huge role in making or breaking the relationship. And as long as the communication flows two ways, I don’t see what the problem would be. I mean, I get that you won’t be able to share everything with me. That just comes with the territory, and I’m okay with that.”

“You also have to remember that my job takes me away from home. It could be anywhere from a few days to months, and it could be at a moment’s notice. It just depends on the situation. It could get lonely for you, and…”

She placed her hand over his. “Duke, if you’re worried that will be an issue for me, you have nothing to be worried about. Actually, I think it’ll be me who will do the worrying.”

He gave her a warm smile and caressed her cheek with his knuckles. “I don’t want you to worry, but I understand.”

“So, if you get called up, do you have to go?”

“Unless I want to get arrested and charged with desertion, then yes. I have to go.”

“What happens if you’re on leave—say you’re on vacation with your family. How does that work?”

“Normally, we work in a rotation with several other teams. Some of the guys you met today, Ace, Potter, Irish, and the ones who weren’t there, Dino, Frost, Skittles, and Diego, are considered part of Team 2, but Alpha Team. Then you have my team, which is Bravo team. My teammates are Bear, Joker, Playboy, Aussie, Nails, Snow, and Jay Bird, whom you met all of them earlier.

But if there is a world crisis and the team or teams on rotation at the

time are tied up with other missions, and our team is called, then they find a way to get me back as quickly as possible.”

“I see.”

“Does that bother you?”

She pursed her lips. “It does, and it doesn’t.”

“Explain that.”

“It doesn’t bother me because I know you’d be making a positive difference in the world with whatever you’re doing, even though your mission may be shitty. It’s the hopeful, positive outcome people must focus on.”

“That’s a good way to look at it. And just so you know, the majority of our work is shitty. But like you said, the outcome is mostly positive in some way or another.”

They stared at one another, neither saying a word for a few minutes. Duke assumed everything was sinking for her, and she was trying to process it all.

“What are you thinking about right now?” Duke asked her.

“How I wish I could sit here all night and ask you questions about your job, but I know I can’t.”

He laughed and pulled her closer to where her back was snug against his side, and her head was tilted back, resting against his shoulder.

“Believe me when I say there isn’t much you’d like to hear.”

She sat up and turned toward him. “It is really that bad? Like what they portray in the movies or on TV shows?”

Duke shook his head. “Hollywood tends to stretch the truth.”

They sat there for a few minutes, silently enjoying each other’s company, until Duke spoke up.

“I know that Alex and other ladies mentioned the gala that Alex’s Foundation is hosting in two weeks. Would you like to go with me?”

She looked up at him and smiled. “I’d love to. I’ll need to go shopping for a dress.”

He wouldn’t tell her now, but he planned on buying her dress for her.

“So, I guess that means you’ll be sticking around for at least a few weeks.”

“I guess so. Which reminds me, I need to check with the front desk at the hotel and see if I can extend my reservation.”

A thought hit Duke, and he grinned. This was playing right into his plan.

He couldn't have scripted it any better.

He stood up and held out his hand. "I want to show you something," he told her, and she took his hand and walked them up the grand staircase.

Once they got to the top, he made a left and walked down the long hallway until he came to the second door on the left. He opened it and motioned for her to enter.

"A bedroom?" She asked, and her cheeks turned pink. It made Duke wonder what she had on her mind.

"It's not mine," he pointed to the end of the hall. "My room is down there. But this is one of my guest bedrooms."

She scrunched her nose up. "I don't understand."

"You need a room, and I just happen to have a few empty ones."

"You're offering me a room?"

"Yeah. I would offer for you to share mine, but I think that would be moving a little too fast."

She chuckled, walking further into the room and looking around. She moved toward the French doors that led out to the balcony and then turned to look at him.

"Can I go out there?"

"Of course," he told her and walked over and unlocked it.

He let her go out first, and then he followed. She stood at the railing, looking out over the large backyard. The views from the balcony were the main reason he offered her this room first. It had a perfect view of the swimming pool and the colorful flowerbeds. Plus, it was the only room that had furniture on the balcony.

He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, and she leaned back into him.

"This is so pretty." She looked over her shoulder at him. "Are you sure you really don't mind?"

Duke laughed at her questioning him again. It seemed to be a habit of hers.

He slowly turned her around and kissed her lips.

"I'm positive. Living together will give us an opportunity to get to know each other better. Plus, I don't like having you out of my sight."

She smiled and ran her hands up his chest.

"I don't know why fate put both of us at Pearl Harbor the day, but I'm not one to question it," she told him, standing on her tiptoes and kissing him.

He pulled her closer, wanting to feel her body pressed against his. He moved his hands a little lower, wanting to explore her curves. The kiss grew a little wild, and Duke found himself toning it back. He gently took her bottom lip and held it between his teeth before letting it go.

He stared at her swollen lips. Her cheeks were also flushed. She looked beautiful.

“God, you’re perfect,” he told her as he hugged her.

As she pulled away, Duke saw her yawn and knew it was late and that he needed to get her back to her hotel.

As they walked back downstairs, they made plans for him to pick her up in the morning, and he would take her around town and show her some of the sights that Virginia Beach and the surrounding area had to offer.

Then afterward, they would swing back by her hotel so she could check out and pick up her bags.

He couldn’t wait to call his mom and tell her the news. She was going to be so happy.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Hannah was putting away the left-over pizza in the refrigerator when a pair of strong arms came around her waist. She jumped, then heard Duke's low rumble of laughter behind her.

He pulled her flush against him. The front of his body was pressed snugly against her back. His strong, muscular body felt warm and inviting. She felt his lips against her neck as he placed tiny kisses along her skin, sending shivers through her body. The more he touched her, the more comfortable she was getting with him.

She turned in his arms and hugged him around his trim waist. Resting her cheek against his chest, she felt safe, content, and at home.

"Thank you for cleaning up and putting everything away," he told her and kissed the top of her head.

After they ate, Duke had to jump on a call for work. But she had kept herself busy in the kitchen.

"You're welcome. Thank you again for ordering the pizza."

Duke had surprised her by taking her to Norfolk to tour the Naval Base. They had spent all day walking around, and by the time they went by the hotel to get her bags and then drove back to Duke's house, neither of them felt like cooking dinner, so Duke ordered pizza—meat lovers, of course.

They both had already showered and were in their pajamas. She had to admit, Duke looked pretty sexy in flannel lounge pants and a t-shirt.

"You have to work tomorrow, right?"

"Yep. My day starts at o-four-thirty."

Her eyes widened. "Four-thirty in the morning! What on earth do you do at that hour?"

He chuckled. "Normally PT, the weight room, or the 'O' course."

She scrunched her nose up. "I don't mind a good workout, but I prefer to do that on my own terms, not for work, and not at four thirty in the morning," she told him, and he laughed.

"What about you? What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"I have a call in the morning with the company I'm working with right now. Then, around noon, Jocelyn and Clover are picking me up, and we are going to have lunch and then go dress shopping."

"That sounds like fun,"

“I think it will be.”

Duke lifted his nose in the air and sniffed. “Why do I smell cinnamon?”

Hannah grinned. “Well, while you were tied up on your call, I decided that we needed dessert. So, I whipped up something quick for us.”

“You did?”

“Southern fried apples over vanilla ice cream.”

“What’s that?”

“Fresh sliced apples, sauteed in butter and cinnamon sugar. You serve it warm.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“Oh, it is. And it’s even better if you add a splash of bourbon or brandy. But I didn’t add either because I didn’t know if you like them.”

Duke walked over to the dish cabinet, pulled down two bowls, and filled them with ice cream and apples. They sat at the island and ate their desserts. When they were finished, Duke cleaned up, and then they went into the living room and sat on the couch.



Duke lowered himself on the couch and tugged Hannah down next to him, draping his arm over her shoulders. He could get used to this—coming home from work, having dinner with her, and then just relaxing with her. He enjoyed sitting with her even though there was no dialogue. Katie was never like that. She always had to be on the go and never stopped just to enjoy the moment. She was such a cancer. He wished he had seen through her motives earlier in their relationship.

But then again, things happen for a reason. He glanced down at Hannah and knew she was the reason why life steered him in the direction it wanted him to go.

Hannah shifted, leaning more on him, and he grinned.

“Thank you for dessert. It was delicious,” he told her, and she looked up at him and smiled.

“You’re welcome.”

“Where’d you learn to cook like that?”

“My granny. Cooking and baking were her things. In the summer, she had this huge garden where she grew all her vegetables. She produced so much that she would hang buckets along the fence out by the road and fill them for the neighbors. She also canned a lot.”



“She sounds like she was an incredible woman.”

“She was, especially, to put up with me.”

“You?”

“Oh yeah. I wasn’t always this sweet.”

“Now, I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true.”

“Tell me more about this alter ego personality.”

She laughed, and the sound warmed his heart.

“I was twelve when my parents were killed in a plane crash.”

“Damn, Hannah. You mentioned they died in an accident. I’m sorry. If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to.”

She smiled softly.

“It’s okay. Every time I talk about it, it gets a little easier. My parents loved to travel. Since I was homeschooled, I usually went with them. But I didn’t make that trip because I was sick and stayed home with Granny. Granny got the call in the middle of the night that mom and dad’s plane went down during a storm off the coast of Costa Rica.”

“It took me a few years to overcome my anger from losing them. But Granny never got mad at me when I would lose my temper. At the time, I didn’t know what she was doing, but she would re-direct my anger by keeping me busy. That is actually why I have the berry fields. When I would start losing my cool, Granny would send me out to the fields with a bucket of seeds and tell me to go plant a row.” She looked up at Duke and grinned. “I can now thank my temper for my ten acres of strawberries and blueberries.”

Duke chuckled and ran his hand up and down her arm. “But I bet every time you look out at those fields, it makes you smile.”

“You’re right. It does.”

“I loved my parents, and I miss them terribly. But the love I had for Granny was different. She wasn’t just my grandmother, she was my best friend. We did everything together. She taught me most of what I know today. Like cooking, gardening, even fishing.”

“Wait a second. You know how to fish?”

She nodded and gave him a cheeky grin. “You betcha. You are looking at the 1995 Jackson Hole Junior Fly Fishing Champion.”

“Fly fishing! That is pretty cool. And a champion at that.”

Hannah sat back and snuggled into his side.

“Fly fishing on the Snake River is an amazing experience.”

She looked at him, and Duke could hear the emotion behind her words. She released a small sigh. "I'm sorry. That sounded lame, I'm sure."

He turned and scooped her up into his arms and placed her over his lap. His one hand rested on her thigh, though, not in a sexual way, but as a comforting gesture. He cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes.

"Not at all. What the two of you had was special."

"I miss her."

They sat in silence for a bit until Hannah spoke up. But the question she asked made him still.

"Duke, what exactly happened between you and Katie?"

He put his finger under her chin and lifted her face up towards his.

"Hannah...if this is about what you saw—"

"No. It isn't that. I know the truth of what happened that day. I mean, I know she hurt you, but what exactly did she do?"

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and exhaled.

"She and I had dated for a few years. I was ready to marry her."

"You guys were engaged?"

"Almost. I never actually proposed, and thank God I hadn't."

Hannah pressed her small hand against his cheek. Her touch was warm and comforting.

"What happened?"

"I had a few days of leave and flew down to Savannah to surprise her. I was going to propose that weekend. She and I had exchanged keys, so when I got to her place, I let myself in and found her in bed with another guy."

Hannah's hand flew over her mouth in shock. "No!"

Duke nodded. "Yep."

"What did you do?"

"I broke it off with her. She begged me to take her back. She made up every excuse she could think of for why she did what she did. She even tried to blame me because I was always gone."

Hannah stilled, and she gave him a serious look. "Duke, you know I would never do that to you, right?"

He smiled. "I do."

"I'm sorry for overreacting at your parents' house."

"I'm sorry that I made you feel like you couldn't trust me. After I ended things with Katie, I never thought I'd meet someone who I'd be able to open my heart up to again."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What changed that?”

“Meeting you.”

“Really?”

“Since meeting you at Pearl Harbor, I haven’t felt this happy and free in a long time.”

She scooted closer to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I’m glad fate brought us together.” She laughed softly and shook her head. “Or maybe it wasn’t so much fate but a certain angel looking down on us.”

“An angel?” Duke asked.



“You’re going to think I’m crazy, but about a week before Granny passed away, she and I were talking. She was telling me the story about how she and Grandpa Jo had met and fell in love. She told me that day that within the next six months, I would meet the man I’m going to marry.” She wiped a stray tear from her eye, remembering the conversation clearly and how Granny was beaming as she made that grand statement.

As if knowing she needed a little comfort, Duke reached over and gently caressed her cheek. She loved him for his compassion.

Realizing what had just gone through her head, she looked up into Duke’s brown eyes. Did she love him? Could she love him just knowing him for a short amount of time? In her brain, she didn’t think so, but something deep in her heart told her it was definitely possible.

“I don’t think you or your granny are crazy. In fact, I’ll be honest with you. And this is something that I even told my mom, and you can call her to verify it. But when you disappeared from my parent’s house that afternoon, I told my mom that I might have lost my future.”

Hannah’s eyes widened.

“Really?”

He nodded before he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers.

“Really,” he whispered, his warm breath tickling her lips. “There is something about you, Hannah O’Quinn, that grabbed hold of my heart and reeled it in.”

“I really want this to work, Duke.”

He smiled. “I do, too,” he told her and kissed her.

She looked at her watch. “I guess we should go to bed since we both have busy days tomorrow.

He held out his hand, walked her upstairs, and kissed her goodnight.

As she readied herself for bed, she wondered how long it would be until she couldn’t resist him and found herself in his bed.

As she snuggled into her bed and started to fall asleep, a small smile played on her lips as she imagined what sleeping next to him would be like.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hannah took one last look at herself in the full-length mirror, making sure that the dress that Jocelyn and Clover convinced her to buy looked okay and didn't expose too much skin in areas that it shouldn't.

She loved the color. The soft apricot hues against her sunkissed skin looked amazing.

The gown was made of flowy chiffon that fell to the floor. Its strapless, pleated top provided a classy yet sophisticated look. She loved how the dress swished as she walked.

Through the reflection in the mirror, she spotted Duke standing in the doorway. She smiled. He looked dashing in his dark gray suit and tie that matched her dress perfectly.

She twirled around, letting the near-sheer, lightweight fabric ripple in the air.

"Wow! You look stunning," he told her, stepping toward her and drawing her in for a light kiss.

"Thank you. You look very handsome yourself."

He grinned. "It's not often I wear one of these," he said, referring to his suit.

"Is Cinderella ready for her ball?" He asked, and Hannah laughed but then gave him a sly smile.

"Actually, this *Belle* is ready to attend the ball with her *Beast*."

Duke smirked. "Beast, huh?" He put his arm around her waist, drawing her close, and softly kissed that sensitive spot on her neck that he had discovered a few days ago. He knew it drove her crazy.

"Maybe later tonight, I can show you what this Beast can really do."

With those words and how hot she felt, she was ready to tell him to screw the ball and to screw her.

For the past two weeks they've gotten to know each other very well, and had some serious make-out sessions where things could've easily gotten out of hand.

She kissed his cheek. "Maybe if you play your cards right, you can take me back to your lair."

She knew she was playing with fire when she saw his eyes darken, his nostrils flared, and his breathing increase. But if things worked out how she

hoped they would, maybe tonight, they'd be putting out each other's fires.



Duke stood off to the side of the room, talking with Bear and Joker. They were enjoying watching Playboy fawn all over Gabby. All of them really wished he would just ask the woman out. It was more than obvious there was an attraction between the two. Duke just didn't know why they wouldn't act on it.

"So, how are things with Hannah going?" Bear asked.

Duke smiled. "Good. Really good. With her staying at the house, we've been able to spend a lot of time together and get to know one another better."

"That's awesome. I know Jocelyn and Clover already like her a lot," Joker said.

"Hannah likes them as well and enjoys their company."

"Have you all talked about the distance thing yet?" Bear asked.

"Not really. I think we both have sort of danced around the topic. But we will when the time is right."

Both guys nodded, acknowledging his answer.

He looked around the room, trying to find Hannah. He hadn't taken his eyes off of her all night until now. She was so beautiful and full of grace as she walked around the room with some of the other ladies speaking to people.

It had been a fun and enjoyable evening, but there was one thing missing that he wanted to make sure he did before the night ended.

He excused himself from Bear and Joker and headed toward the D.J. After putting in his request, he went in search of his *Belle*.



It was nearing the end of the gala, and Hannah was having a wonderful time. She spent most of the evening talking with Jocelyn and Clover while Duke hung out with the guys.

They had introduced her to so many people. She admitted that she probably wouldn't remember half of them.

She was feeling a little anxious in anticipation of what was still to come of the evening. She hadn't forgotten what Duke had told her before they left the house.

Yes, their relationship was moving fast. But she was comfortable with it.

Nothing was stopping her from wanting to take their relationship to the next level.

She excused herself from the group she was speaking with. As she walked across the dance floor, she saw Duke walking towards her. They met in the middle, and he hugged her.

Whispering in her ear, he said, "Dance with me."

She looked up into his eyes and nodded.

They took their place on the dance floor, and as the music started to play, Hannah burst out laughing. She looked up at Duke, who was grinning.

"You put a lot of thought into this one. But it's a perfect song to end the night with."

Duke pulled her close, and they swayed to the melody of the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack. And the entire time, she truly felt like she was the Belle of the ball with her loveable Beast beside her.



Everyone was gathered in the parking lot outside the hotel. Nobody was ready to go home just yet, so they were making plans to meet up at Bayside for drinks. Once it was decided who was going, everyone dispersed to their vehicles.

Duke took Hannah's hand, and they started across the parking lot where Duke had parked.

"I had so much fun tonight," she told him, and he smiled.

"It was fun. Alex has a way of keeping her events upbeat. But it was even better because you were there." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, making her swoon.

They were close to the vehicle when she heard Clover calling her name.

She and Duke looked back and saw Clover standing on the sidewalk holding Hannah's small black clutch.

"Shoot! I forgot my purse."

She looked at Duke. "Go ahead and get in. I'll be right back," she told him and headed back across the parking lot.

She only took two steps into the roadway when she heard someone scream her name.

Hannah looked over her shoulder as she heard the sound of a car's accelerating engine. She froze in her tracks, seeing the blinding headlights speeding at her.

“Hannah!” She heard Duke yell and saw him running towards her. She jumped to the side to avoid being hit, but the driver of the car swerved toward her as if they were trying to hit her intentionally.

She was saved at the last second when Duke snagged her around the waist and threw them both into a hedge.

She felt the scratches along her arms and shoulders from the unforgiving, dry, prickly branches.

Tires squealed in the distance as the vehicle peeled out of the parking lot and headed south.

Hannah felt herself trembling. Jesus, she could’ve been killed. A set of hands lifted her up and placed her on her feet, though her legs were a little wobbly. She looked up and saw it was Duke. He looked so scared but angry at the same time.

“Fuck, are you okay?” He asked her, sounding harsh, but Hannah figured it stemmed from the shock of what just happened. He ran his hands up and down her arms, and she wasn’t sure if he was doing it to try and soothe her or himself.

“Are you guys alright? Jesus, he almost hit you, Hannah.” Bear barked as he and the others ran over to make sure they were okay.

“Did anyone catch his plates?” Duke asked, and Hannah could hear anger surfacing in his tone.

“No plates.”

Duke looked back down at her; she could see the storm brewing in his eyes as the many emotions swirled around. However, as he looked over her arms and saw the bright red raised scratches marking her skin, those emotions morphed into only one—anger.

His expression softened as he locked gazes with her again, and he cupped her cheek.

“Are you sure that you’re okay?”

Hannah could tell that Duke was really worked up. She ran her hands up his chest, hoping her touch would help calm him down.

“I’m good. Just a few scratches, that’s all.”

Without a moment's notice, he pulled her against his body and hugged her tight.

“When I saw that car coming at you, I was so scared,” he told her and felt her lip start to quiver.

“I know. I was scared, too. But I’m okay because you saved me.”



“But you got hurt, and that is not okay.”

“Scratches will heal,” she told him, smiling softly, then taking his hand in hers.

“Let’s not let some whacko ruin our night.”

He stared into her eyes. His eyes burned with the same passion, lust, and desire she felt. This man was her future. The man that she belonged with.

He slowly lowered his head, pressing his forehead against hers, as they stared deep into one another’s eyes, breathing each other in.

It seemed like he wanted to say something, but he was holding back.

Then, just as it appeared he would open up, Joker and Clover walked up.

“Hey, we’re still going to head over to Bayside. Are you guys coming? Or are you going to call it a night?”

Duke looked at her, letting her make the decision. As much as she wanted just to go back to the house, she still felt a little on edge with what had just happened.

“It’s up to you,” Duke told her.

“Honestly, I think a drink or two would help calm my nerves right now.”

Duke smiled and nodded before looking at Joker. “We’ll meet you there.”



An hour and a half later and consuming four Modelos, Hannah seemed to be feeling cool as a cucumber as she and Clover did the Copperhead Road line dance around Bayside.

Duke and Joker tried not to laugh too much, watching their over-beveraged women try to keep up with the steps while they bumped into each other. Thankfully, the place had pretty much cleared out for the night.

As the song was coming to an end, Joker looked at Duke. “I think it’s time to take the ‘dancing duo’ home.”

Duke chuckled. “I think you’re right.”

They paid their tabs, collected their women, and walked out to the parking lot.

Joker and Clover were parked right outside the door. They said bye and went on their way.



As Hannah walked through the parking lot she felt the salty air hit her flushed cheeks. She was drunk—something she didn't do often.

She stopped walking and started twirling around in circles, until Duke caught her around the waist and pulled her flush against his body.

She gave him a goofy grin. "I think I'm drunk," she said then hiccuped. "Yep, definitely drunk," and then giggled.

She looked up at Duke. "I don't want to leave."

Duke caressed her cheek. "What do you mean that you don't want to leave?"

"I don't want to leave here. I don't want to leave you."

"Darlin', nobody said you had to."

"There's something I want to say to you, but I don't want you to think I'm saying it because I've had too much to drink."

"Hannah, you can tell whatever you want, and I'll always believe you."

She placed her hands against his chest and stared into his eyes. It was now or never, she thought to herself. She was also one to live in the moment.

"I'm falling in love with you, Garrison Reid."

Duke's eyes widened, followed by a slow-spreading smile that took over his face.

He lifted her off her feet, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Holding her close to him and looking into her eyes, he crashed his lips down on hers. He took what he wanted, and she let him. When he finally released her lips, they were both breathing heavily.

"I love you, Hannah. And just for the record. I don't want you to leave either.

Her heart felt like it would burst, and she hugged him, not wanting to let him go.



She loved him! Duke's chest hurt so much because of how full his heart felt.

Earlier in the evening, when Hannah had almost been hit by that car, he wanted to tell her then how he felt. But he chickened out.

He carried her over to the car and helped her into the front passenger seat. She grinned at him and he chuckled. She was cute and happy when she drank. But he'd take her any which way he could because he loved her.

He slid into the driver's seat and started the car. When he looked over at

her, her eyes were droopy, and he knew she'd be asleep before they got home.

He may not get to show her the Beast tonight. But his Belle would be sleeping in his bed from now on.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Buzz...Buzz...Buzz...*

Duke groaned, releasing the warm body entwined with him to find his cell phone on the nightstand beside the bed.

Finding the vibrating device, he glanced at the time, 0342. *Shit!* There was only one reason that he got a call that early in the morning.

He looked at who was calling, Bear.

He pushed the covers back and slid out of bed, being careful not to wake Hannah, who was sprawled out on the bed. Thank goodness he had a large bed. But she looked good in his bed.

He grabbed his lounge pants from the bottom of the bed and pulled them over his boxers before walking out into the hall.

“What’s up?” He asked although he had a feeling what was up.

Bear chuckled. “You sound about as bad as Joker does.”

“Hahaha, is that why you called me at quarter to four in the morning?” He asked sarcastically, making Bear laugh again.

“Actually, I wanted to know if you could teach me the Copperhead Road,” Bear said laughingly, and Duke pointed his middle finger at the phone. “No, in all seriousness, the Commander just called. We’ve been put on notice and have to bug out to Arizona for a few days.”

“Arizona?”

“The training facility.”

“Shit. Alright. What time?”

“Wheels up at o-eight-hundred.”

“Roger that.”

He disconnected the call and walked back into the bedroom. He looked at the bed and saw that Hannah moved. Now she was curled up on his side of the bed hugging his pillow. Had she known in her conscience that he was leaving?

He knew he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, so he went into his closet, got dressed, and packed his bag. Next, he went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, gathered his toiletries, and packed those as well.

When he walked back into the bedroom, he was met by a pair of brown eyes staring at him. Her hair, still pinned up from last night, looked wild—

strands were falling out all over, and some were sticking straight up. He wanted to laugh at how cute she looked.

“Hi,” he said a little too loud, and she covered her head with her hands.

*Hangover.*

He walked into the bathroom, shook out two pills from the bottle of Tylenol, got a cup and filled it with water.

“Here, my little party girl, take these,” he handed her two Tylenol and a cup of water.”

She sat up popped the pills in her mouth, and washed them down with the water.

She rubbed her eyes and tried to tame her hair, but it wasn’t working. She looked at the clock.

“What are you doing up so early?” She asked, her voice held a little sexy rasp to it, which made his cock stir.

“Bear called.”

“What did he want?”

“My team and I were put on notice.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, sitting up a little straighter.

“Normally, it’s meant as a heads up for us and letting us know that there’s a good possibility that we’ll get called up.”

“Oh. But why are you dressed then?”

“Well, in this particular case, getting put on notice could also mean that we need to prepare for the potential mission. It could include specialized training, briefings, etc.”

“So you have to leave?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. Do you know how long you’ll be gone?”

“No. I won’t know until we get there.”

She nodded her head. “Can you promise to call if you can?”

He grinned. “Of course. But just know that sometimes there is absolutely no communication.”

“I understand.”

“But you have to promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“Promise me you’ll keep my side of the bed warm.”

She smiled. “I think I can handle that.”

For the next hour, until he needed to leave, he sat in bed with her, and

they talked. He went over some things with her about the house. He also gave her a list of phone numbers, including his commander's.

"God, this sucks," he mumbled, giving her a kiss.

Hannah laughed. "Duke, just go before you work yourself up even more. I promised you that I wouldn't leave unless there was an emergency. Now go. I don't want you to get in trouble for being late."

Hi kissed her again. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

"And, I'll hold you to that. Now GO!"

He bit down on his lip, looking at her lying in his bed with her hair tousled. She was beautiful even with a hangover.

"Duke?"

Shaking his head, he couldn't stop the naughty thoughts going through his mind and things he couldn't wait to do with her in that bed. A slow grin spread on his lips.

"Sorry. Seeing you in my bed does things to me." She blushed, making him chuckle. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Even though nothing sexually happened between us, just waking up in bed with you beside me made me the happiest man."

She smiled. "Same. It's a strange but a great feeling."

"Strange?"

She blushed again. "I don't make it a habit of sharing someone's bed unless I'm serious about the person."

He grinned. "So, does that mean you're serious about me?"

She leaned into him and gave him a quick peck on the lips.

"Yes. You know that I love you. Now, come on before you're late," she told him, getting out of bed herself.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You don't need to get out of bed. You can go back to sleep."

"And that is one of the qualities I've come to love about you. You always think of others before yourself." She grabbed his hand. "I'm walking you out to your vehicle because that is what someone should do for the person they care about who is going away, and you don't know when you'll see them again."

Duke stopped in his tracks and turned to look at her. He pulled her body flush against him, cupping her cheek with his large hand.

"That is the most thoughtful gesture." He stared down into her eyes. "I

wish I didn't have to leave.”

She offered him a smile. “But you have to because somewhere in our great big world, someone needs a hero, and you were summoned. And I'll still be here when you return.”

“Promise?”

She leaned up on her tiptoes like she was going to kiss him. She smiled against his lips. “Promise. I love you, and be safe,” she whispered, then planted a kiss on him that would satisfy him until he saw her again.

“I love you, too,” he told her as he walked out the door, praying their trip would only turn into a training mission so that he could get back to Hannah sooner.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hannah ran the back of her hand across her forehead, wiping the sweat from her skin as her feet pounded on the pavement. According to the news she watched earlier, the temperature was forecasted to be in the mid-eighties. Slightly higher than the average temperature for the area this time of the year. Though, she wasn't complaining because back home in Wyoming, it could be a crap shoot with the weather. One day it was in the seventies, and the next day, you walked outside and were met with several feet of snow.

She enjoyed running the trails at the park near Duke's house. She loved being able to exercise outdoors. Not only did she like breathing in the fresh air, but she also appreciated the scenic view of what nature in the area offered her.

She made the turn down Duke's street and heard a vehicle's engine approaching from behind her. She quickly glanced over her shoulder and saw a truck approaching her. She moved onto the grassy shoulder without missing a step in her stride.

The truck passed by, and she stepped back onto the pavement, continuing down the road as her ponytail swung in tandem with her cadence.

Her eyes focused on the back of the green truck that passed her, even though it was a way down the road. She saw the red brake lights illuminate as the truck slowed down and stopped in front of Duke's driveway.

Curious, Hannah slowed her pace as she approached, waiting to see if anyone would get out. As she got closer, she saw the truck belonged to a local pest control company, and she wondered if Duke scheduled service, and in his rush to leave, he just forgot.

As she approached both the truck and the pedestrian gate to enter Duke's property, the driver's side door opened, and a tall man with an average build dressed in a uniform matching the truck stepped out with a clipboard in his hand.

When he didn't say anything, Hannah greeted him with a smile.

"Hi. Can I help you?" She asked, keeping a good distance between her and the truck. Something odd about the guy creeped her out. Maybe because his dark green ball cap was pulled way down, covering his eyes. But even so, she felt his eyes looking over her body.

He looked down at the clipboard as he readjusted his hat on his head.



When he raised his head, and she could see his eyes, it made her want to take a few more steps backward. His eyes were dark and cold. Nothing about the guy made her feel good.

“Are you Mrs. Reid?” The man asked. His deep voice held a heavy accent that she couldn’t grasp. However, asking her if she was Duke’s wife sent an electric current through her body. *Hannah Reid did have a ring to it*, she thought to herself before giving her a head shake. Jesus, what was she thinking?

She cleared her throat.

“No.”

The guy seemed surprised by her answer. “Oh. Then I’m looking for Garrison Reid. He made an appointment with us to have his property looked at so we could provide a quote to him.”

*Crap!* She wasn’t sure what to do. Duke never mentioned anything about it. But it might have slipped his mind since he was in a hurry when he left.

However, there was something about the guy that made her uncomfortable.

“Uhm...I’m not sure where he is at the moment.”

“Do you live here?” He asked, appearing agitated, or maybe he was just impatient. Either way, his hard and sinister expression warned her to answer his question carefully. She didn’t know this guy from Adam. As far as she knew, he could be some serial killer or rapist who lured his victims in by posing as a pest control employee.

“No. I’m just visiting Mr. Reid for a few days.” She hurried to think of something, and then it hit her. She lifted her arm and glanced at her watch. “Now that I think about it, he’s probably at work.” There, she technically didn’t lie.

He was silent for a few moments.

“Well, if we don’t get this appointment in today, our next available one isn’t until three weeks from now.”

The man certainly wasn’t letting it go. But maybe he worked off a commission, and getting this account would probably pay well, considering how big Duke’s property was. Hannah also didn’t want to screw up anything for Duke by postponing the appointment. Damn! Who could she call to ask if it was okay to let someone in? After thinking about it for a few seconds, she looked at the guy and held her finger up.

“Give me a second, and let me try calling him.”

She pulled her phone from her pocket and searched her contacts until she found the number she was looking for. It rang three times, and just when she didn't think they'd pick up, a bubbly voice answered.

“Hey, Hannah!”

Hannah felt some of the weight lift from her shoulders hearing Clover's voice.

“Hi. I'm so sorry to bother you at work, but I've got a little issue here at Duke's house, and I wasn't sure who to call, and your name was the first one that popped into my head.”

“What's going on?”

Hannah quickly ran through the ordeal and asked Clover what she thought she should do.

“Oh! Hang on a second,” Clover told her, and Hannah could hear some shuffling of things through the phone, followed by Clover speaking to someone.

Hannah took that moment to glance over at the guy and could see him watching her like a hawk, still giving off that creepy vibe she felt the first time she met his dark gaze.

Minutes later, Clover returned to the call.

“Sorry about that. Tink, my boss and the one you met at Alex's Gala, is actually on his way there now. He lives just around the corner. He was heading your way to look at Duke's alarm system.”

Hannah did remember Duke telling her about someone coming by to look at the alarm system.

As if right on cue, a large, black Chevy Silverado pulled up, and Hannah recognized Tink in the driver's seat.

“He actually just pulled up,” Hannah told Clover.

Hannah felt a little better, though she felt a bit embarrassed about the situation.

“Oh! Good!”

“Okay. Well, thank you. And again, I'm sorry for interrupting your workday.”

As if sensing Hannah's shame, Clover said, “Hannah, there's no need for an apology. Most people wouldn't have thought to ask and just allowed the guy in. Even Tink said you did the right thing by calling. So, don't think you did something wrong.”

At least she hadn't annoyed anyone.

"Okay. Well, I don't want to keep you any longer."

Before she could end the call, Clover called out to her.

"While I have you, Jocelyn, and I wanted to see if you wanted to have dinner with us tomorrow night?"

"Really?"

"Yes, silly. She and I really enjoyed hanging out with you last week at Ace and Alex's house, while dress shopping, and at the Gala. Plus, Duke made sure to remind both of us to make sure that we kept in contact with you while he was gone. He didn't want you to get lonely and leave." Hannah didn't miss the amusement in Clover's voice.

Hearing Clover say that she and Jocelyn enjoyed spending time with her excited her and made her feel like she hadn't been as awkward as she had felt when they had all hung out. It warmed her knowing that Duke had thought of her and reached out to the ladies.

"Sure. I'd like that," she responded.

"Awesome! Does seven at Bayside work for you?"

"Seven is good. I'll see you then."

"Can't wait! Bye!"

With a smile spreading across her face, Hannah slipped her phone back into the side pocket of her leggings as she walked back toward the guy who was now eyeing Tink.

Tink hopped out of his truck and walked toward her.

"Hey, Hannah. Good to see you again."

Hannah smiled at the extra-large man. Tink was a former SEAL. When he retired from the teams, he formed his own elite security company in Virginia Beach. They did various work ranging from personal security to classified black ops for the government.

"Hi, Tink. Good to see you, too. Duke mentioned you were going to be coming by to look at the alarm system."

"Yeah, I brought that part to replace," he told her, holding up a small box.

Tink then looked at the pest control guy and nodded.

"Hello,"

The guy nodded back, saying hello. However, he seemed to be really eyeing Tink.

Hannah then spoke to the pest guy.

“Sorry about that. Let me open the gate, and you can go ahead in. Do you only need access to the outside?”

The guy looked at Tink again, then nodded his head.

“Yes, just the outside. Once I’m through with the inspection, do I need to check out with you to get back out the gate?” he asked.

“No. The gate will automatically open for you when you leave.”

He gave her a nod and then returned to the truck and waited for her to open the gate.

*Rude!* She thought to herself as she unlocked the walkway gate and hit the button to open the main gate.

The guy drove through and proceeded up to the house.

She looked at Tink.

“He’s not a very social person.”

Tink laughed. “No, he isn’t, which is uncommon for a salesman. Are you headed up to the house?” He asked her.

“Yep. I just finished up my run.”

“Well, hop in the truck, and I’ll drive you up.”

“Thanks.”

Once they passed through the gate, it closed behind them. At least she didn’t have to interact with the guy anymore. Once he was done with his inspection, he could let himself out.

By the time they made it up to the house, the guy had already gotten out and was walking around the side of the house with his clipboard in hand. Too bad she didn’t get his name off his name tag. If she had, she’d definitely let Duke know to ask for another technician. That is if he decided to go with that company.

She unlocked the front door and let herself and Tink inside.

“It should only take me a few minutes,” Tink told her, walking over to the alarm’s main control panel.

Hannah went to the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee and a bagel. Just as she sat down at the island, Tink walked in.

“Alright. Everything on the alarm looks like it’s working now. It was definitely the sensor causing the light on the panel to malfunction.

“Great. That will make Duke happy. It’s been driving him crazy.”

Tink laughed. “I bet. Guys like us tend to get a little anal regarding safety and protection.”

“I’m sure.” She pointed to her coffee cup. “Would you like a cup of

coffee?”

“No, thank you. I need to head into the office.”

Hannah walked Tink to the front door. Before he left, he turned toward her.

“You made the right call in calling Clover this morning.”

“I just wasn’t sure.”

“It’s better to be safe than sorry. Anytime you’re not sure or if something doesn’t feel right, don’t hesitate to call someone.”

Hearing Tink say that made her feel a lot better.

“Thanks.”

He smiled. “Make sure you lock up behind me,” he told her as he walked out.

Oh, he didn’t have to worry about that. She’d make sure the house was locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

She said bye, then secured the lock and deadbolt. She hung the house keys in her pocket on the key hook next to the front door, then toed off her running shoes, leaving them on the mat near the door.

Her cup of coffee was calling her name. She walked back into the kitchen and sat back down at the island. Just as she brought the large gray mug to her mouth, the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

When she looked up, she saw the pest guy standing at the kitchen window. He appeared to be inspecting the area around the window, but she swore it felt like he had been watching her.

When he moved on to his next task, she got up and closed all the blinds on the lower level, then double-checked all the doors to ensure they were locked.

He may be innocent, but she couldn’t shake the bad vibe she got from him.

Deciding to keep her mind busy, she headed upstairs to work on a few documents she needed to send to the company she was working for.

She was looking forward to having dinner with Jocelyn and Clover tomorrow night.



Rakin was furious. He had her right there. All he had to do was get her inside the gate so that if someone had driven by, they wouldn’t have seen them.

Posing as a pest control guy was brilliant, and his plan was flawless. All he needed was one shot. One shot, and he'd have his revenge.

But then that guy had shown up, squashing his master plan.

He didn't like the way the guy had looked at him. The intensity of his ice-cold stare made it hard to keep eye contact with him. It made Rakin feel like the guy could see right through him, knowing his intentions.

From casing the house for the last week or two, he knew that the SEAL wasn't home. He'd watched him leave two days ago, and he hadn't returned since.

He clenched his fist in a tight ball. Coming home and finding his girlfriend dead with a bullet hole in her head would've been the perfect welcome-home gift.

Now, he would have to re-group. But as he walked the property, another plan began to form in his corrupted mind. He was one of the best sharpshooters in Othana's military. Who wasn't to say he couldn't take the shot when she least expected it? Even through a window, he could hit his mark.

She'd get to live today, but by the end of the week, she'd join his Ghalia in death.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“To friendship!” Clover exclaimed, raising her Sprite into the air.

“To friendship,” Jocelyn and Hannah shouted, raising their Cokes and clinking them with Clover’s.

All three of them decided to pass on the alcohol. Hannah had drunk enough to last her through the year the night of the gala. She still couldn’t believe she had done that. Everyone at Bayside was now calling her and Clover the Copperhead Road Twins.

“So, are you doing okay without Duke around?” Jocelyn asked.

Hannah smiled. “I am. I’m keeping myself busy with work and finding things to do around the house.”

“That’s good. Normally, when the guys get called up, we try to get together at least once or twice a week, depending on how long their deployment is.”

“You know, I can’t thank you both enough for making me feel so welcomed. It really means a lot, especially since I know nobody here.”

“Well, you know us now,” Jocelyn said. “Plus, you have Alex and the other ladies from Alpha Team. The SEAL community is like its own little family. Everyone looks after each other. We have a great support system in place. What it comes down to is that our tight-knit community takes care of their own.”

“So, I have to gossip a little bit,” Clover announced, practically bouncing in her seat.

“Do tell,” Jocelyn said, taking a sip of her drink.

“Did you guys notice that Playboy left the gala with Gabby?”

“No! Seriously?” Jocelyn exclaimed, seeming excited.

Clover nodded. “Yep. I watched them walk out together, and both of them get into Playboy’s car.”

Hannah felt lost. “Okay. Back up a second. I know Playboy. But this Gabby—is she the one who was sitting next to Playboy at the other table during the gala?”

“Yep. The really pretty blonde. Playboy has had a crush on her for months.”

“So, why doesn’t he just ask her out?”

“That’s what we’ve all been asking.”

“Well, has anybody ever actually asked Playboy that?”

Clover and Jocelyn both became quiet.

“That’s a really good question, Hannah. I have no idea,” Jocelyn said.

“Either way, I’m telling you there’s chemistry between them. It’s just a matter of time before the love takes another victim in BRAVO team.”



Hannah was still smiling as she exited through the side door leading to the parking lot. She had enjoyed the evening hanging out with Clover and Jocelyn. Not only were they nice and fun to be around, but they were also a wealth of information, especially when she had questions about the SEALs.

And she finally got to order the prime rib special. She found out Paul, the owner, uses his own special blended spices. It was so good she ordered a second one to heat up for lunch the next day.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, taking in the scent of the warm ocean air. It was a big contrast to the mountain air she was accustomed to.

She was startled when her phone started ringing. She pulled it out of her purse and smiled when she saw it was Duke calling.

“Hello?”

“Hey beautiful,” his deep, sexy southern drawl sent tingles through her body.

“Hey yourself, handsome,” she replied, drawing a laugh from him. “This is a nice surprise. I didn’t expect to hear from you.”

“I had a few minutes, so I wanted to check in and see how you were doing.”

“I’m doing pretty good. Though I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

The door flew open, and a couple of guys stumbled out. They were being loud, and of course, Duke heard them.

“Where are you?” He asked.

“At Bayside. Well, actually, I’m standing in the parking lot.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I had dinner with Clover and Jocelyn.”

“Oh lord. That sounds like trouble.” She could hear the amusement in his voice, which made her smile.

“A little trouble never hurt anybody.”



“You three together could spell big trouble. Did you have fun?”

“I did. We did a lot of talking and laughing. They’re great to be around.”

“Yeah, they are, and I’m glad you’re having fun. Hang on a sec,” he told her, and she could hear someone in the background talking to him. She thought it sounded like Aussie. His hybrid Aussie/American accent gave it away.

“Sorry about that. I need to cut this call short.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, thanks for calling.”

“Of course. Anytime I get the chance to hear your voice, you can bet your ass I’ll call.”

She smiled.

“I miss you and love you. Be safe.”

“Always, darlin’. I love you, too. I’ll see you in two days. Be safe driving home.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Bye.”

She disconnected the call and stood there for a minute. She needed to think of something special to do to welcome him home. Maybe a nice quiet, and romantic dinner.

She slipped her phone back into her purse and walked toward her car. She was going over different dishes she could cook in her head when suddenly she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was the same eerie sensation that she got when the pest control guy was at the house.

The feeling caused her to stop walking, and she scanned the well-lit parking lot. She saw a few people she recognized from inside who were walking to their vehicles. She couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

Her gut warned her to get to the car. She quickened her pace, and once she was in range, she hit the key fob to unlock the car. Once she got inside, she locked the doors, her eyes still looking around for anything that looked out of place.

Not wanting to stick around, she started the car and pulled out. She kept an eye on her rearview mirror for the first few miles, watching to make sure she wasn’t being followed. As she drove toward Duke’s estate, she was rethinking those self-defense classes that Clover and Jocelyn were telling her about. It couldn’t hurt to learn a few moves, especially if it could benefit her one day.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hannah stepped back inside the back door as thunder rumbled in the distance. She watched through the French doors as the wind picked up. The earlier weather forecast predicted it was going to be a good one, and seeing the blanket of storm clouds rolling in, they weren't wrong.

Normally, she enjoyed stormy weather. The howling winds, the pitter-patter of the rain tapping against the windows, and the dark clouds that reminded her of boulders rolling over the mountain peaks created a calming soundscape that would help conceal distractions. However, something had her on edge today, and she couldn't shake it. She didn't even go outside and sit by the pool while the sun was shining. Instead, she stayed inside with all the doors locked and kept herself busy cleaning the entire house. Not that it needed it because Duke kept his home spotless, but it gave her something to do and left her feeling like she accomplished something.

She turned away from the doors and walked over to the stove to turn the burner off. She was craving homemade mashed potatoes, so she made a pot. Picking up the pot and moving to the sink, she poured the potatoes into the strainer and then dumped them into the mixing bowl. She added canned milk, butter, and salt just like her granny had taught her. Then she started mashing.

After quickly cleaning the kitchen, she sat on the couch with her bowl of potatoes. She glanced at her cell phone and saw she had missed several calls. One was Thomas. Calling him back could wait. God only knew what shit might fly out of his mouth. The other calls were from clients which she would return tomorrow.

She wasn't a huge TV fan, but with nothing else to do, and to help take her mind off her uneasy feeling, she flicked the TV on and found a *Hallmark* movie. She was a sucker for romance movies. She pulled on the soft throw that was folded over the back of the couch and covered herself.

Settling back into the corner of the plush sectional, she felt her nerves finally start to settle. She swapped her cell phone for the bowl of creamy mashed potatoes and moaned as the rich, buttery flavor hit her tastebuds on the first bite.

She soon found herself smiling and laughing when the couple in the movie were reunited after being separated for years. The film's plot was a reminder of her and Duke's journey.

Hannah considered herself lucky. She knew there were a slew of amazing men out in the world. But finding a guy with extraordinary qualities like Duke didn't come along too often. In her opinion, he was the whole package—intelligent, compassionate, brave, fun-loving, and handsome. The list could go on. But the most important quality was respect. He treated her with the utmost respect, which went a long way in her book. Granny always told her that respect was the backbone of every relationship.

Just as the movie was getting to the good part, a strong gust of wind blew through, producing that eerie howling sound outside. She sunk further into the couch and turned up the volume on the TV, trying to tune out the storm's ferocity as her nerves started to unsettle. She hated the edgy feeling flowing through her. It made her feel like she was in a horror movie and she was the killer's next victim.

"Get a grip!" She said to herself out loud. "I'm in a house secured with a state-of-the-art security system."

The wind picked up again, and Hannah heard a loud crash outside the back door. She jumped up and slowly walked over to the door, opened the blinds, and flipped on the patio lights.

"Shit!" She said aloud, eyeing the dirt and pebble mix spread all over the concrete patio just a few feet from the door. Then, her eyes landed on the large flowerpot broken into several pieces. Her heart sank when she saw it was the lucky bamboo plant and flowerpot that Duke's mom had given him when he became a SEAL. He took so much pride in caring for it. He was going to be so upset. She may not be able to save the pot, but she could definitely save the plant.

She flipped the lock and opened the door. The wind was blowing steadily, and the metal chimes hanging from the arbor above were clanging together, which, mixed with the gloomy weather, created an eerie vibe. Still, she pulled on her big girl pants and, for the moment, pushed the spooky feeling aside and worked quickly to clean up the mess.

A few minutes later, she was optimistic she could piece the pot back together. But the fierce storm barreling down on the area was spitting out some serious, dangerous lightning, forcing Hannah to hurry back inside where it was safe.

She scraped up as much of the soil and pebbles as she could and placed them into another pot she found sitting by the door. She gently picked up the plant and then hurried inside the safety of the house just before the sky

opened, unleashing its fury on everything below it.

She set the pot and plant on the counter, then went back over to lock the door and reset the alarm. As she walked back to the kitchen, a monstrous lightning bolt split the pitch-black sky, and a crashing thunder sent a shockwave through the electrifying air, shaking the house.

The lights flickered a few times before the whole house plunged into complete darkness. But as she stood in the middle of the kitchen in the dark, the deafening silence made her insides crawl.

She hated to think it but couldn't help, as the horror movie scenario crept back into her mind. The only thing keeping her from running upstairs and hiding under the covers was that the alarm panel next to the back door was still lit. She then took a few steps backward to see the front door where the main panel was located, and her heart began to race with worry when she saw it was doing that fast blinking thing that had caused Tink to come out and replace a sensor.

She wasn't sure what to do about the alarm. But she knew that she needed to quiet her fears. She kept reminding herself that all the doors were locked, and she had the security of an alarm. Well, at least at the back door. She wasn't sure about the front.

She had no idea where Duke kept any flashlights, but she at least had her phone, which had a full battery and a power bank fully charged upstairs in her bag.

She found her way in the dark over to the couch and found her phone on the coffee table. She turned the flashlight on and found her favorite music app.

With some upbeat country music drowning out the storm's noise raging outside, Hannah returned to the kitchen and used the pot she found outside to replant Duke's lucky bamboo.

It only took her a few minutes to get the bamboo planted in the bowl. Once she cleaned up and wiped the counters down, she decided to head upstairs. At least up there, she could lay in bed, plus her e-reader was there on the nightstand where she left it the night before.

She walked back over to the back door to close the blinds, and just as she was about to pull the string, a flash of lightning lit up the backyard. Hannah's eyes widened as a cold chill of terror raced down her spine.

Standing at the left front corner of the pool house was a figure of a person. Feeling a surge of adrenaline, she managed to get her mind and body

moving, and she flung herself up against the wall to the right of the door.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. Then came the question of whether she imagined what she saw or if someone was outside.

She knew what she needed to do. She dialed Tink.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Tink?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Hannah, Duke’s girlfriend.”

“Oh. Hey, Hannah. Is everything okay?”

“No. Well, I’m not sure. Shit.”

Tink chuckled. “You don’t sound fine. What’s wrong?”

She told him about the power going out and the alarm panel doing its blinky thing. But something in her voice must have alerted him that something else was wrong.

“Hannah, you sound scared.”

“Well, I might have seen someone in the back yard.”

“What do you mean you might have seen someone?”

“Well, I had walked over to close the blinds, and there was a huge bolt of lightning, and when it flashed, I think I saw someone standing by the pool house.”

She could hear through the phone that he was moving around.

“Hannah, where are you right now?”

Sitting on the floor, next to the back door, because I’m afraid to move.”

“Are the doors locked?”

“Yes.”

“I’m on my way. I’ve got one of my employees with me in the truck as well. We should be there in about two or three minutes.”

She pressed her hand to her forehead. God, was she making this situation more than what it was? What if it wasn’t a person?

“Hannah? Are you still with me?”

“I’m still here. Tink, what if it wasn’t a person that I saw?”

“What if it was?” He countered.

She knew he was right. It was better to be safe than sorry. Just then, the lights in the house came back on, and she breathed a little sigh of relief.

“The lights just came back on,” she informed him.

“Okay, good. We’re at the gate.”

“Okay, I can let you in.”

“No need. I have the code,” he told her. “I’ll see you in just a minute.”

“Alright.” Knowing that Tink was there, she felt a little more secure. She disconnected the call and stood up. She could still feel how shaky her legs were.

She walked to the front door and punched in the alarm code. When she opened the door, Tink and another gentleman about the same size as Tink were walking up the steps.

“Hi,” she greeted them.

Tink gave her a small smile, but she could see that he was on full alert.

“Are you okay?” He asked her, and she nodded.

“A little on edge, but now that the lights are back on, I feel a little better.”

“I bet.” He motioned to the guy standing next to him. “This is Rob. Rob, meet Hannah.”

Hannah smiled and shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Sorry to drag you guys out here.”

“Hannah, I told you that it was fine.” Tink looked at Rob. “Do you want to have a look around back while I take a look at the alarm?”

Rob nodded and took off down the steps, then darted around the side of the house.

Tink motioned for Hannah to go back inside, and he followed her. He went straight over to the alarm panel and started hitting a bunch of buttons. Watching the different colored lights blink and then him pressing a button reminded Hannah of the old electronic *Simon* game.

After a few minutes of button pushing, the alarm panel went to a solid green. Tink turned around and grinned.

“All fixed.”

“What happened?”

“Even though the alarm system is backed up on a generator, a power outage can sometimes mess with it. Even though it was doing that blinking thing, the alarm was still engaged.”

That detail made Hannah feel better.

They walked into the kitchen. He saw the bamboo plant and the broken pot on the counter.

“What happened?” He asked, and Hannah told him about the wind knocking it off the table.

Minutes later, Rob came inside.

“Anything? Tink asked, and Rob shook his head.

“No, it was all clear. Though there were some boot prints near the pool house, mainly around the pump, but I couldn’t tell if they were fresh or not.”

“The pool guy was here just the other day,” Hannah told them, and Tink nodded.

“That could definitely—”

His sentence was cut off when the large picture window above the sofa exploded. A half a second later, Hannah felt herself being tackled to the ground. She screamed and threw her arms up to shield her face as she hit the ground hard.

“You got Hannah?” Rob yelled to Tink as he was by the window with his gun aimed into the darkness.

“I got her!” Tink shouted back over the loud blaring of the house alarm. Moments later, she heard Tink shouting into his phone, presumably with the police. She heard him say something about a shooter and then rattled off Duke’s address.

When the solid wall of muscle shielding her body began to rise, she opened her eyes and was met by a wrath of fury like no other.

She could hear sirens in the distance as she looked at what was left of the window.

Looking back at Tink, who looked madder than a wet hen with a pistol in his hand, Hannah had difficulty processing what just happened.

He must have seen the fear etched on her face because he knelt in front of her.

“Are you okay?” He asked, looking her over.

She nodded. “What happened?” she asked, feeling a little dizzy.

“Someone just shot the window out.”

Hannah’s eyes widened as she thought back to the figure she thought she saw in the back yard. Maybe those prints weren’t from the pool guy after all. Her body started to shake. Tink tried to soothe her.

“Hey, you’re okay,” he told her. But was she?

Rob appeared next to them. “Everyone okay?” He asked, and Tink nodded.

“Yeah. Did you see anything?”

Rob shook his head. “No, but at least we’ll have an idea of what type of weapon was used.” He pointed to the wall that Hannah had been standing in front of, which now had a bullet hole.

“Oh, God!” Hannah stated and felt tears form in her eyes.

Tink helped Hannah get to her feet.

“Here, let me get you out of the glass so you don’t cut your feet up,” Tink said, lifting her up, moving her over to the kitchen, and placing her on one of the stools. He looked her over again, making sure she wasn’t seriously injured.

“I’m sorry for hitting you so hard. I heard the shot, and I reacted.”

He heard the shot? Was her mind so frazzled with everything that she had missed it?

“I’m okay. A little shaken up, but physically, I’m good,” she assured him, though she was sure she was going to have some bruising from where she hit the floor. But that was better than having a bullet hole in her.

Soon, the house was swarmed with police, more employees from Tink’s firm, Derek, the team’s commander, and even Clover showed up.



Two hours later, Derek stood in the kitchen listening to the Chief of Police explain his thoughts on the shooter situation.

“So, you think this shooting is part of the string of vandalism hitting some of the neighboring communities?” Tink asked.

“That’s my opinion. We had three houses and a few vehicles hit with gunfire within the last few weeks. Similar cases, a shot out window, same caliber bullet.”

“What about the person that Hannah saw in the back yard before the shot was fired?” Tink questioned.

“You mean the person that I *thought* I saw,” Hannah stated, walking into the kitchen with Clover and taking a seat at the island.

The Chief excused himself as he got a call over his radio and needed to head out.

Derek walked over to Hannah. “How are you doing, honey?”

She gave him a small smile. “Considering what happened, besides a few bruises, I think I’m doing okay.”

Tink grimaced. “I’m so sorry, Hannah.” Derek could see the pain in Tink’s expression, knowing his instincts and actions had caused Hannah pain.

She waved him off. “Hey, I’d rather have a few bruises that will heal overtime than a gun shot wound that could have ultimately killed me or seriously injured me.” She looked back at Derek. “Were you able to get a



hold of Duke?”

Derek shook his head. “No. They’re out of range and will be until tomorrow night when they land.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Rob walked into the kitchen with a few other men from Tink’s firm.

“We got the window boarded up and made a call to a local window company. They have a replacement window in stock, and after explaining what happened, the owner said they could come out and replace the window tomorrow.”

“That’s great news,” Tink stated, then looked at his team. “Thank you all for coming over and helping secure the house.”

Derek watched Hannah fidget with her fingers. He knew she was still rattled from earlier, but he was damn proud of her for keeping her shit together. She reminded him of Clover and Jocelyn, as well as his daughter Alex and all the other ladies from Alpha team. All of them were strong and brave.

“Speaking of securing the house, Hannah, are you comfortable staying here? A few of Tink’s guys will be here, and the Chief said he would also have a few patrol cars in the area.”

“Uhm...” Derek could see she was torn on what to do.

“Or...Hannah can come with me, and we can stay over at Jocelyn’s house. At least until the guys get back tomorrow night,” Clover suggested, and Derek thought that was a great idea. Hannah needed to be around people she knew tonight because he had a feeling that after everyone left and she was able to let the whole situation sink in more, she might need someone she was comfortable with to talk to, and Jocelyn and Clover would be the perfect pair to help get her through that. Plus, he knew Tink already arranged to have a few of his men stationed at both Clover and Jocelyn’s houses as a precaution.

Hannah looked at Clover. “Are you sure?”

Clover smiled. “Positive. I already spoke with Joce.”

Hannah turned back to Derek. “I think I’d feel more comfortable with Clover and Jocelyn. At least until Duke gets back.”

Derek grinned. “I think that’s a wise decision.”

“Well, now that’s been decided, let’s get your bag packed, and I’ll follow you ladies over to Jocelyn’s,” Tink said.

Derek watched Clover and Hannah head upstairs to get Hannah’s things.

Tink walked over and stood beside him, his arms folded across his chest.

“Something’s on your mind,” Tink said.

“I know what the Chief said, but my gut is telling me that tonight’s incident isn’t related to the vandalism going around.”

“Do you think this could be related to that breach at the DOD?”

Derek shrugged his shoulders. It crossed his mind, but he couldn’t be sure. “I don’t know, but something doesn’t feel right.”

“We both know to never go against your gut.”

“I know, and that is what has me on edge right now. Until we can get anything more concrete, we just all need to watch our backs.”

“I don’t have any pressing jobs right now, so I can spare my guys for a few days.”

“That would be appreciated.”

“How do you think Duke will take it when you tell him what happened tonight?”

Derek blew out a breath. “I’d imagine his reaction will be the same as any of the other guys when their women were put in danger. He’s going to be pissed off but also concerned about Hannah.”

“Okay, I think we’re ready,” Clover announced as she and Hannah walked into the room.

Hannah walked over to Tink. “Are you sure your guys don’t mind hanging around here?”

“Not at all. This is the kind of work that we’re paid to do,” he told her, and she nodded.

“I never told you, but thank you for saving my life tonight,” she told him, then hugged him, which Derek found amusing because Tink wasn’t the lovey, dovey type unless it was towards his wife.

Tink awkwardly patted her back. “You’re welcome. Like I said before, anytime you don’t feel like something is right, we are just a phone call away.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Duke felt his excitement skyrocket as the team's small plane touched down at the Naval Air Station Oceana. Being away from Hannah made him realize how Bear and Joker felt when they left Jocelyn and Clover.

"It's a great feeling, isn't it?" Joker asked with a smile as if he knew what Duke was just thinking about.

Duke grinned, not feeling the least embarrassed about letting his feelings show.

"Yeah, it is. The funny thing is, I never once felt this way when I was with Katie."

"Maybe your subconscious knew something was a miss with her. Either way, embrace this feeling."

"I'm just glad that the actual mission got scrubbed."

"You and me both."

Once the plane pulled into the hangar, everyone grabbed their gear and loaded into two vans that drove them to their building on base in Little Creek.

"Ah, shit!" Bear said out loud as they were pulling up to the building.

"Is that Derek," Aussie asked, trying to look out the window.

"Sure is," Joker stated.

"Commander, we didn't expect to see you tonight," Bear stated as the team gathered around Derek, who didn't look like he was there for a friendly welcome home. But then again, spontaneous visits like this from Derek usually weren't good.

Duke stood next to Joker, hoping they weren't getting recalled.

"I had no intention of being here this evening, but due to a situation that occurred last night, I felt my presence was needed here to explain things before everyone headed home.

Before I go any further, know that all the women and kids are safe."

Shit. For Derek to begin a talk like that, then whatever happened definitely wasn't good. Duke glanced at Joker and Bear, knowing they felt on edge just as much as he was.

"What happened?" Bear asked.

Derek took a deep breath and turned his attention to Duke, and immediately, Duke felt like he was punched in the gut.

"Someone targeted your house last night."

Duke's eyes widened. "Targeted? How?"

"They shot out the picture window in your living room."

"Someone used my window for fucking target practice? Jesus Christ. Was Hannah home? Is she okay?"

Derek held his hand up to stop the questions, but Duke didn't want to stop. He wanted answers now.

"Hannah's safe. And yes, she was home when it occurred."

Knowing she was safe made him feel a little better. But he didn't miss how Derek avoided the latter question.

"Derek, is Hannah okay?"

Derek pressed his lips together. "She's a little shaken up by the ordeal. She does have some bruising. Tink got to her just in time."

"Wait. Why was Tink there?"

"Hannah had called him because something happened with the alarm panel during the storm, and she also thought she had seen someone in the backyard standing near the pool house."

Derek paused briefly, and Duke could tell that the incident had shaken his Commander.

"Let's just say that if Tink hadn't been there, we'd be dealing with a completely different outcome. And not for the better. When Tink heard the gunshot, he tackled Hannah to the ground. Seeing where the bullet hit the wall compared to where Tink said Hannah had been standing, I honestly don't think Hannah would be with us today. Not seeing where the bullet hit the wall."

Duke couldn't speak. His Hannah could've been killed. Thinking that caused rage to surge within him.

"I hope they have the bastard locked up," Duke seethed angrily, but then Derek delivered more bad news.

"No. The police believe the shooter fired from a tree in the woods next to your property. The Chief thinks the incident is part of the vandalism going around the community right now."

Duke ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Derek clapped his shoulder.

"Believe me when I say we've got everyone on this."

"Who is everyone?" Bear asked before Duke could.

"Local PD, NCIS, FBI, and CIA."

"CIA?" Duke asked. He could understand the others, but for the CIA to

be involved meant this could span internationally.

“For now, the CIA is just acting in the capacity of being in the know.

“So, this guy or woman is still out there?”

“For now.”

“Fuck! Where is Hannah now?”

“She’s at Bear’s house with Jocelyn and Clover. Tink has a couple of his men there watching the house.”

Duke needed to see her. He needed to see with his own two eyes that she was okay.



Duke pulled into Bear’s driveway, and right away, he saw two of Tink’s guys standing at the front door. He knew three others were around somewhere and one inside the house.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. He told himself on the way there that he needed to be level-headed when he saw Hannah. Yes, he was pissed, but he didn’t want Hannah to witness that side of him.

He was still concerned about her injuries. Even though Derek said she was okay and had refused to go to the hospital, he was still worried.

He exited his vehicle and walked with Bear and Joker to the front door. They shook hands with Brad and Craig and thanked them for being there.

As soon as they entered the house, Dylan greeted them.

“Where are the girls?” Bear asked, and Dylan pointed up the stairs.

“They’re up in your bedroom. Everything has been quiet all day.”

That was a sliver of good news, but Duke wondered if it would stay that way. Before Dylan could speak, all three men started up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. They may have looked calm and collected, but they were anything but. Someone had attacked one of theirs, and if you messed with anyone, a team member or a member of a teammate's family, that person was now a target of the whole team.

As they walked by the kids’ room, Bear peeked in to check on them. Amira and Max were sound asleep in their beds, probably unaware of what had happened. And they shouldn’t.

When the three pushed open the master bedroom door, Duke wanted to laugh. And from the silly grins on Joker and Bear’s faces, he could tell they were thinking the same. Bear even took his phone out and snapped a couple of pictures. Duke wanted to take some to document the moment, but he knew

Bear would share.

Seeing all three women gathered in the middle of the huge king-size bed, their legs and arms thrown across one another, and looking like they were in the middle of playing a game of Twister when they had fallen asleep, was fucking hilarious.

“How in the hell can they sleep like that?” Bear asked aloud, and Duke just laughed.

“Beats me, but I needed that laugh right now. Ever since Derek told us what happened, I haven’t been able to calm down.”

“I hear ya, man,” Joker told him. “Both Bear and I know firsthand what it’s like to be in your shoes.”

Duke walked closer to the bed, trying to see if he could see any of Hannah’s injuries. Derek had told him she mainly sustained bruises from when Tink tackled her. Thankfully, she had been wearing leggings and a long-sleeved shirt, which protected her from getting cut up by any glass.

“You guys are welcome to stay here for the night,” Bear offered to Duke and Joker.

Joker said he would. However, Duke wanted to take Hannah home to their house. That is if she wanted to go back there. He wasn’t sure what her reaction would be to returning to a place where some psycho almost killed her.

He prayed that the police would get a lead because until they caught the son of a bitch, he didn’t want Hannah to have to live in fear.



Duke pulled his Blazer into the garage. It was late, as he sat around and talked with Joker and Bear before he gathered Hannah and got her into the vehicle. She had barely stirred when he untangled her from Clover and Jocelyn and scooped her into his arms.

She had opened her eyes long enough to give him a small smile before they had closed again. Dylan had told him she had taken a pain pill before they had all gone upstairs.

He still uneasy knowing the asshole who fired a bullet into his house was still on the loose, but he felt better knowing that Hannah was secure with him. There were also two police cars he passed that were driving around the community. Derek told him that Tink had two of his positioned outside Duke’s house for the time being, which he appreciated.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the headrest and ran his hands down his face. This had definitely not been what he intended to come home to. It wasn't even close. He had been looking forward to walking through the garage door, seeing Hannah's radiant smile waiting for him, then sweeping her into his arms and giving her a big kiss.

He opened his eyes and peered over at Hannah and was surprised when he saw her sleepy brown eye staring back at him.

Unbuckling his seat belt, he leaned over and brushed his knuckles against her cheek.

"Hey, darlin'."

She smiled. "Hey, handsome," she whispered, and he could tell she was still tired.

"How are you holding up?" He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

"Surprisingly, I'm doing okay. I feel a little better after talking things out with Clover and Jocelyn."

"Yeah? What did you all talk about? That is, if you don't mind me asking."

"Of course, I don't mind you asking. They each told me about their own troubles they encountered."

Duke took a deep breath. Those had been some very turbulent times. Clover was kidnapped by the former Vice President and was nearly killed after she was shot. Then there was Jocelyn. She, too, had been taken against her will by an obsessed power-hungry man. However, her ordeal occurred in Africa. Even though they each survived, they still had physical and mental scars. But he was glad they had opened up and shared their stories with Hannah.

He cupped her cheek. "They are both survivors. They are strong and brave," he told her, leaning over and gently brushing his lips against hers.

He went to pull back, but she surprised him by placing her hand behind his head and pressing closer to him, kissing him deeper. He felt cock start to grow in his jeans, and wild and carnal thoughts popped into his mind as he swallowed her moans. He wanted to mark her with his cum as he made love to her.

He started to pull her across the console, but she tore her mouth away and cringed.

"Ouch!"

"What's wrong?" He asked as the sexual desire burning inside was

doused hearing her cry of pain.

“My hip. I just hit it on the console.”

“Shit!” He reached out and cupped her cheek. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I was just so into the moment of wanting you, having you here, and knowing that you were safe I totally forgot that you were hurt. I’m sorry,” he apologized again, but she cut him off with another kiss. It was quick.

She smiled. “No need to apologize. I think we were both caught up in the moment. And if we’re being honest, I want you too.”

He pulled back a bit but couldn’t stop the corner of his lips turning upward. “You want me?”

She rubbed her hands against his chest. “I had planned this whole romantic welcome home dinner for you, with the possibility of moving things into the bedroom afterward.” He could see her pink cheeks even in the dark, and she shyly lowered her eyes as if embarrassed by her admission. However, he wasn’t having it. Hearing what she had planned made his heart grow bigger.

Without saying a word, he got out of the vehicle and came around to her side. He opened her door, reached in, and lifted her against his chest, and he smiled when she went willingly.

He walked them inside and straight up to their bedroom. He set her down, and once her feet hit the floor, Duke lifted her chin and tilted her face toward him. He stared down into her gorgeous brown eyes and saw nothing but lust and desire.

She pressed her hand against his cheek, and he closed his eyes. The warmth of her hand gave him comfort. How ridiculous that was. She was the one who went through a traumatic ordeal, but she was the one who was comforting him.

Just as he was about to open his eyes, he felt her lips against his chin. Kissing his skin, she moved her lips up to his jaw before landing on his lips.

He was aroused and felt his cock press against the zipper of his jeans. He needed her. Pulling his lips from Hannah’s, he stared down into her eyes, which were brighter than they were. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her. But if she wasn’t ready for that much intimacy, he was okay with that.

He wasn’t one to just jump in bed with someone for the fun of it. For him, sex needed to be meaningful, especially the first time. Again, if she weren’t quite ready for that step, he would be content just holding her in his



arms.

He cupped her cheek, still looking directly into her eyes.

“I’m not gonna lie. I would love nothing more than to strip you down and worship your beautiful body. But I can understand if you aren’t ready, especially after everything that you went through. There is no pressure.” He gently caressed her cheek, loving the feel of her soft skin.

Her breathing increased as he watched her chest rise and fall. She was still staring up into his eyes. There was a deep connection between the two of them.

“I don’t want to wait,” she whispered.

They quickly divested each other’s clothes, and when Duke’s eyes roamed over her naked body, he couldn’t stop the smile from growing on his face.

“You are absolutely gorgeous.”

She smiled and closed the little bit of space between them. “I love you,” she whispered, kissing his bare chest right over his heart.

The sound of her low, husky voice was sexy as fuck, had him trying to maintain his composure.

He slowly walked her backward until the back of her legs hit the bed and gently lowered her until she was lying on her back.

He kissed her. Then he moved down her jaw to her neck. He suckled the sensitive skin against her neck, and she ran her hands along his ribs before running them through his hair as he moved lower, leaving a trail of wet kisses along her beautiful breasts, then her belly. She wiggled her hips, but he noticed a slight discomfort look on her face, and he became concerned.

He crawled up her body, resting on his elbows as he hovered over her.

“Are you okay like this?” He asked.

“I’m good,” she replied, smiling at him.

He leaned down and kissed her lips. “I don’t want to see you hurting. It already pisses me off knowing that you were injured.”

She lifted up to kiss him.

“What’s done is done. There is nothing we can do to change the past. Looping her arms around his neck and pulling his body on hers, she grinned. “But we can work on our future.”

He lifted up a tad and smirked. “Our future, huh?”

“Yep!” She told him, popping the “p.” “I see a long and prosperous future ahead of us.”

“Thank God, I’m not the only one.”

“I like where things are headed for us, Duke.”

He glanced down at their naked bodies pressed snugly together and chuckled. “So do I.” His eyebrows jumped playfully, making Hannah laugh.

He kissed her again. “You are so beautiful. I thank the heavens daily for putting us in the same place at the same time.”

“I feel the same way.” She cupped his cheek. “You are so different from every other man I’ve met.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“You look at me as a person and not an object. You see not only what’s on the outside but what I’m made of on the inside.”

“And I love everything about you. I promise to take care of you, protect you, and most importantly, I promise to love you every single day for the rest of our lives,” he whispered, holding her gaze.

“I love you, Duke,” she whispered, her voice coming out breathy.

He grinned, “I love you, too. You let me know if you experience any pain.”

“I promise.”



Hannah’s body was humming with need, with Duke’s large body pressed against her.

She couldn’t believe how happy and content she was. Who would’ve thought a bucket list would have landed her where she was right now?

She couldn’t help herself as she ran her hands all over his sculpted abs, chest, and arms. She wanted to explore every inch of his body.

“You let me know if you experience any pain, okay?”

She smiled at him. “I promise,” she told him, though she wouldn’t let a few bruises get in her way of making love to her man.

She was lost in sensation as he ran his hands all over her body. His touch was gentle, warm, and loving.

His lips made another pass down her body, then he slowly kissed his way back up before covering her with his body.

She was so strung tight that when she felt his cock tap against her pussy, she thought she would explode. The sensations she was feeling were almost unbearable. She needed him so badly.

He stared at her, his gaze sensual and intense.

“The moment our eyes met by the water in Pearl, I knew there was something special about you. You were meant to be mine.”

“I’ll always be yours,” she told him, pulling him down against her.

He hovered over her and took her lips in another mind-blowing kiss that left her reeling for more. As he released her lips, he settled his large body between her thighs. Seconds later, she felt his cock nudge against her entrance, and she sucked in a breath and held it as her eyes closed.

But when nothing happened, she opened her eyes and found a concerned but hungry set of dark brown eyes looking down at her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and she nodded and gave him a warm smile.

She reached up and cupped his cheek. “Please make love to me.”

He lowered his mouth and kissed her slowly as he gently and slowly pushed his cock into her pussy. She was already panting, feeling the stretch of her vaginal walls from his large size.

As he thrust his hips slowly, she ran her hands up his chest and over his broad, muscular shoulders. He was a work of sculpted art.

He hit her sweet spot, and she careened her neck back, leaving her neck open for Duke to feast on, which he did, placing his warm lips against her jaw, then kissed her neck and licked along the dip in her collarbone. She was ready to combust between his magical mouth and him thrusting into her.

He lifted up to his knees, his cock still inside her. He lifted her thighs against his hips and began to thrust deep, and her breath caught in her throat as his cock bumped that special button inside her that started the denotation sequence of her orgasm.

“Duke...please...I’m going to...”

His breathing increased, and he began to move faster. “I’m right there with you, darlin’. Let go. Let go with me.”

His thrusts became a little harder, and it was just enough to send her over the edge as sparks exploded behind her closed eyes.

She felt Duke tighten up, then lean over and bury his face in the crook of her neck as he released his seed inside her.

As they both came down from their sexual highs, Duke kissed her as he rolled them to the side. Their eyes locked, and he smiled, his dimple appearing. She reached up to touch his face and to feel his whiskers beneath the palms of her hands.

For some reason, she suddenly felt very emotional, and her eyes filled up with tears. Being attentive, Duke noticed right away and scrunched his

eyebrows together.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

She shook her head as the tears began to spill over.

He moved his body half over her with one of his legs pressed between her legs. He gently wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Why the tears, darlin’?”

She took a minute to compose herself, and she cupped his cheek. She hated that she made him worry and think he might have hurt her. He could never hurt her unless he broke her heart.

“That was so beautiful,” she admitted, and he smiled, caressing her cheek.

“It was very beautiful. You are an amazing lover.” He looked deep into her eyes. His eyes were filled with warmth and love. “I can’t begin to express how much you mean to me, Hannah. I love you so much. You have all of me.”

“I love you, too—with all my heart,” she told him.

He shifted their bodies so he was lying on his back, and Hannah curled her body around him, resting her head on his chest. Knowing in the back of her mind that her man was watching over her, she allowed herself to fall into a deep sleep.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Duke looked down at Hannah's shirt and smirked as they walked across the parking lot and prepared to enter Bayside. They were meeting the team to watch the *Denver Broncos* take on the *Washington Redskins*.

"Okay, that's like the fifth or sixth time I've caught you looking and smirking at my shirt. Is there something wrong with it?" She asked, looking down at her orange Denver Broncos jersey. She was starting to feel a little self-conscious. Duke was wearing his *Redskins* jersey.

Chuckling, Duke shook his head. "Nope—nothing wrong at all. After you, my little bucking bronco," he told her and let go of her hand to hold the door open for her.

She gave him an odd look as she walked in. The second she stepped inside and saw all the burgundy and gold jerseys, she knew why Duke had been teasing her. She was definitely the odd man—or she should say odd woman out.

She laughed, looking up at Duke. "Guess there aren't many *Broncos* fans in this part of town."

Duke kissed the top of her head. "Nope. There sure aren't darlin'."

"Really, Hannah? And here I thought we were friends." Nails teased her, gesturing to her jersey.

"Stop teasing her, Nails," Clover said as she approached them. "Anyways, that orange looks amazing on her."

"Says the one wearing a baby blue Titans jersey," Nails mumbled, rolling his eyes, which earned him a playful slap in the gut from Clover.

"It's good to see you," Clover hugged Hannah.

"It's good to see you, too."

"We need to plan another girl's night. Well, that's if Duke is willing to share you," Clover teased.

Hannah felt her cheeks warm. For the past two weeks, since the night she and Duke first made love, they had been inseparable, spending as much time with each other as they could.

While he was at work, she was finishing up the work she was doing for her client. She had also been making some calls regarding the idea she had for using the forty acres of land she had. She was waiting for one more person to get back to her before she told anybody.

“A girl's night does sound good,” Hannah told Clover.

“Perfect! Now, come on. We’ve got several tables reserved.”

Hannah started to follow Clover, but an arm came around her waist, and Duke’s hard body pressed against her back.

“Clover is right; the color orange does look amazing on you. But that jersey will look even better on our bedroom floor after I take it off of you,” he whispered in her ear, then gave her ass a light tap.

Her light and airy gasp made Duke chuckle. He took her by the hand and led her over to the table.

She hugged Jocelyn and then took an empty seat across from Clover, and Duke sat next to her, holding her hand against his thick thigh.

With him touching her and what he promised her, she would be horny for the rest of the day.



“Woo Hoo!” Hannah clapped and cheered as the *Broncos* took a fourteen-point lead as they headed into halftime.

Duke smiled. “I had no idea that you were this into football.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I told you that I liked sports.”

“Yeah, but we mainly talked about hockey.”

“Well, hockey is my favorite sport, but football is a close second.”

“I can’t wait until hockey starts in another month. We’ll have to think of a little wager,” he told her, wiggling his eyebrows.

Good lord, was the man trying to kill her with all his sexual innuendos?

“A little wager couldn’t hurt,” she told him, running her hand up his thigh. She saw his nostrils flare and cheered to herself for making him feel what he’d been doing to her all day.

“Hey, Duke. Can you help us move some of these tables to the other wall?” Bear called out.

Duke looked into her eyes, “We’ll continue this conversation when I get back.” He gave her a quick kiss.

Her heart was whole, and she felt content. She sat back and looked around her. She couldn’t have asked for better friends to surround herself with. She enjoyed spending time with the team and getting to know all the guys, as well as Clover and Jocelyn, who have become her best friends.

With things as serious as they were between her and Duke, she knew that changes were on the horizon, but what those things entailed was still to

be determined.

They had spoken a little about their living arrangement and the idea of splitting their time between Virginia Beach and Jackson Hole. They still had a lot to hash out. But Hannah knew for certain that she didn't want to be away from him.

The last two weeks, they had grown closer, and her love for him grew with each passing day.

"Everything okay?" Duke asked, sitting back down and kissing the side of her head.

Smiling up at him, she nodded. "Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?"

"You looked like you zoned out there for a bit."

"I was just thinking," she told him, then picked up her drink and took a sip.

"Yeah? What were you thinking about?"

"Us, and how happy and complete I feel being with you."

He cupped her cheek and leaned in to kiss her. It was just a peck, but his lips hovered over hers.

"You make me happy too. I love you so much."

She grinned. "I love you, too."

"Food is ready!" Nails shouted.

Duke smiled. "Come on, let's get some food in you."

Hannah was standing in line for the buffet when she felt her phone vibrate. She pulled it from her back pocket, looked at the caller ID, and saw it was Angie.

She looked at Duke. "I need to take this. It's Angie."

"Okay. What do you want, and I'll make you a plate."

She eyed the food. She was craving fried and greasy. "I'll take chicken tenders and onion rings, please."

"You got it."

She leaned up and kissed him. "I'll be right back."

She answered as she walked toward the side hallway, where it was a little less noisy.

"Hey, Angie."

"Oh, Hannah, thank God I got a hold of you."

The sound of Angie's panicked tone caused Hannah's gut to tighten with concern.

"What's wrong?"

“The blueberry fields are flooded.”

“What do you mean flooded?”

“The water is a little over a foot deep.”

“How? I mean, what happened? Has there been a lot of rain?”

“No. The main water line burst.”

“Oh, shit!”

“Yeah. That was my reaction when I got here this morning. I shut off the water to the fields.”

“That’s good. How are the strawberry fields?”

“They weren’t affected, thank goodness.”

Hannah agreed. The strawberry fields brought in more money than the blueberries. But still, if the main water line is shut down, that meant they couldn’t get water to the strawberry fields.”

“Did you call Lou?” Lou was the irrigation specialist who handled any issues with the sprinklers. His dad was the one who originally installed the sprinkler system.

“Yeah, but he can’t make it out here until tomorrow.”

“Crap.”

“Can you hook up the pumps and pump the water into the pond?”

“I already have them going, but it’s a slow process.”

Hannah pressed her hand against her forehead. She couldn’t believe this was happening. The berry fields were Hannah’s responsibility. She couldn’t leave everything for Angie to deal with. She would need to go back home to take care of the problem.

“Okay, let me check flights and see if there is one I can get out on tonight.”

“Oh, Hannah! I don’t want you to have to rush back here,” Angie rushed to tell her. But Hannah was shaking her head even though Angie couldn’t see her.

“No, it isn’t right for you to deal with that all alone. Plus, I have some other things I need to take care of, and I was just putting them off. Let me see what I can do, and I’ll call you back and let you know.”

“If you’re really sure.”

“I am. I’ll give you a callback.”

“Alright. Bye.”

She disconnected the call and leaned back against the wall. She knew she would have to go home eventually, but this wasn’t how she expected it to



go down.

She pulled up the app for the airline she used and checked for flights out that evening. She found one, but it involved an overnight layover in Philadelphia. Yeah, that wasn't going to work. She did find a few that departed the next morning and got her into Jackson Hole in the late afternoon. She wished there was a direct flight, but that wasn't the case.

"Dammit!" She said aloud.

"Hannah?"

When she looked up, she found Duke standing there looking concerned.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"I have to go home."

He stepped closer and ran his hands up and down her arms. "Why? What happened?"

She explained the situation to him and then told him about the flights.

"As much as I don't want you to go, I understand. However, it's no use leaving tonight when you'd have to stay overnight in Philadelphia," he told her, and she agreed.

"I know. I'm thinking I'll take the mid-morning flight out. It has the shortest layover and gets me into Jackson Hole in the late afternoon."

He pulled her into a hug.

"I wish I could go with you."

She tilted her head back to look up at him.

"I wish you could, too. I'm going to miss you."

"Do you know how long you'll stay out there?"

"I honestly don't know. I've been gone for almost a month. I know I have some things that I need to take care of. Plus, if I'm planning on coming back here, I will need to make more permanent arrangements to ensure things around the ranch are taken care of."

"Is there anything I can help with?"

She smiled, loving how caring he was.

"I don't think so but thank you."

"I'll talk to Derek and see if I can maybe take a few days of leave, and I could come out there toward the end of the week."

"I'd like that."

"Then maybe we can travel back here together—maybe bring some of your things to the house here," he said looking hopeful.

Smiling, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. "That sounds like a

wonderful idea.”

He offered an encouraging smile, but she could tell he was affected by the news that she would have to leave.

“Do you want to leave?” He asked.

She shook her head. “No. Let’s finish watching the game with our friends.”

“Alright. But as soon as the game is over, I’m taking you home and taking you to bed,” his smile was promising and full of mischief.

She decided to have a little fun herself. She pretended to yawn. “Sleep sounds great. I’ll need all the rest I can get since I have to travel tomorrow.”

She started walking away, but he snagged her around her waist and then scooped her into his arms. She laughed as he cradled her close to his chest.

“Who said anything about sleep? You’ll have plenty of time to sleep on the plane. Once I get you home, I plan on making love to you all night long.”

She felt her breathing increase, and she tipped her head back to stare into his hungry eyes. She licked her bottom lip.

“Is that a promise?” She whispered as she cupped his cheek, his beard tickling her palm.

His nostrils flared, and he squeezed her tighter against him.

“Darlin’, you don’t want to tease me right now because I’m very tempted to haul you out of here right now and make use of the back seat of my car.”

She gasped, then felt his lips against her ear.

“Now, I suggest you go back to the table and eat all the food I put on your plate because you’ll need that energy for what I planned for us tonight.”

Before she could respond, he kissed her hard, giving her a taste of what would come later that evening.



Rakin couldn’t believe his luck. Ever since his botched attempt to kill the woman dating the SEAL, he had been watching their house from a safe distance.

He went back a few nights later hoping to finish the job, but he was surprised when he was met with a high number of security personnel outside the perimeter of the property and the men inside the fenced estate. It seemed the SEAL took the attempt on his girlfriend’s life seriously and stepped up security.

He had hoped she would leave the house eventually, but that never happened. Only Reid had left, presumably to go to work. Today had been the first day he got a glimpse of the woman since the night she escaped the bullet with her name on it.

He followed the couple to Bayside and watched them from the far side of the packed bar as they watched the football game with their friends.

He had tried to get any information on the woman he could over the last two weeks, but again, he came up empty. When the local newspaper wrote an article on the shooting, he hoped to catch the woman's name at least.

But now, as he hid in the little alcove where the restrooms were located off the hallway, eavesdropping on the couple discussing the woman's problems back home, he learned a few interesting facts, starting with her name—Hannah.

From the conversation the two were having, it sounded like Hannah was leaving tomorrow to head home. And it appeared she would be traveling all alone. A cold, cruel smile spread across his lips as a new idea formed in his demented mind.

As the pair wandered back to their table of friends, Rakin made a beeline for the exit as he pulled up the airline's website. It appeared he was going on a hunting trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming. And by the end of the week, he had high hopes of bagging his prize.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Oh, my gosh! Hannah, this is gorgeous,” Clover stated, and the two of them walked through the double front door of Hannah’s house and set their bags down.

“Thanks! It’s my little slice of paradise,” Hannah said, walking over to the sliding glass doors just off the kitchen and opening them up.

Clover walked over and joined her out on the back patio deck that spanned the entire length of the house and had multiple levels with seating areas.

Clover leaned against the wooden railing. “This is amazing. I mean, you’ve got the famous Snake River right in your backyard.”

Hannah smiled and took a deep breath. It felt good to be back, but she already missed Duke. “I know. This view never gets old.”

“I’m so jealous. I might need to visit here more often.”

“You’re welcome to spend as much time as you’d like here.”

Clover grinned. “I’m going to take you up on that offer.”

Hannah was so excited when Clover volunteered to fly back with her. The best part was flying on a private jet. Tink had offered his company’s jet to Hannah and Clover. At first, she objected because she knew that couldn’t have been cheap. But Tink was adamant, citing that his new pilot needed the flight hours.

Hannah looked toward the right, where the berry fields were located. She recognized the work truck parked near the office.

“I’m going to head over to the berry fields and see what the irrigation guy found,” Hannah told Clover.

“Do you mind if I tag along with you?”

Hannah smiled. “Of course not. While you’re there, feel free to grab a bucket and pick some strawberries.”

“Oh! Yum!”

Thinking about strawberries brought a bigger smile to Hannah’s lips as she thought about Duke and his delicious strawberry shortcakes. Before she left to return to Virginia Beach, she would need to pick several containers, freeze them, and ship them to Duke so they’d have strawberries.



“What’s the verdict, Lou?” Hannah worriedly asked as she, Angie, and Clover stood at the entrance to the berry fields. He had just finished walking the fields and inspecting the lines.

Lou’s forehead wrinkled. Hannah didn’t like the perplexed expression on his face.

“Has anyone been in the fields and messed with the lines?”

Hannah looked at Angie, and Angie shrugged her shoulders.

“We have people here daily, Lou,” Angie told him.

“Why are you asking that?” Hannah questioned, standing with her arms folded across her chest.

He held up a section of the rubber drip tape used for the irrigation in the fields. She could see the slice down the middle of it.

“How would that happen?”

“Someone did it.”

“Are you saying the lines were deliberately cut?” Hannah asked Lou, feeling the anger inside of her begin to rise.

“Yeah. I mean if it was one section, I could maybe say that an animal or something else could’ve caused it. But there are sections of lines all throughout the field with the same cut.”

“I can’t believe this,” Hannah said aloud. She then looked at Lou. “I’m assuming the lines to the strawberry fields weren’t touched.”

“No. I checked them, and they are fine.”

“Alright. Well, I can’t have the blueberries drying up. Though, I’m sure they got enough water to last them until the end of the season. Lou, when could you start replacing the lines?”

“I can start tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Just finished up our last job yesterday. That’s why I couldn’t get out here until now.”

“That would be great! Just let me know how much it’ll cost, and I’ll write you a check to get you started.”

Lou smiled. “Hannah, I’ve known your family for years. I’ll just give you an invoice when it’s all finished. I have all the materials.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Lou. Feel free to take a container of strawberries and blueberries back to Sheila.”

Lou chuckled. “You know my wife loves these berries. She’ll love that.”

Thank you, and I'll see you tomorrow morning."

After Lou packed up his things and left, Hannah stared at the fields, wondering who would have been so brazen to cut the lines. And was it done during normal hours when the fields would've been packed with people, or did someone sneak in overnight before the water turned on to vandalize the property? The main question was who had done it. Nobody locally came to mind. She got along with everyone.

"Hannah, who do you think would've done this?" Angie asked, and Hannah shook her head.

"That's what I was just thinking about. I have no idea. We don't have trouble with anyone."

Well, the only person she had issues with was Thomas. But even he wouldn't have sunk that low.

"Angie, thank you again for handling all this mess."

Angie waved her off. "I love working these fields."

Hannah turned toward Clover. "I'm going to give the Sheriff to file a report. Help yourself to anything at the house. And feel free to wander around. Maybe later, we can go fishing."

Clover's eyes lit up. "Girl, I haven't been fishing in so long. That would be so much fun."

"Cool. Let me just take care of this and make a few other calls, and we can go."

As Hannah returned to the house, she felt that icky feeling again, like someone had their eyes on her. After speaking with the Sheriff, she'd call Duke and let him know what happened. Plus, she just needed to hear his voice.



Thomas gave a smug victory smile as he lowered the binoculars from his eyes. His plan worked beautifully and had only cost him a couple of hundred dollars, which he'd make up for once he got Hannah to sign those papers.

He knew what those fields meant to Hannah and that if anything happened to them, she would drop what she was doing and come home. Paying a couple of teenagers from a neighboring town to come in and tamper with the water lines had been a brilliant idea.

He'd give her a day or two before he went over to welcome her home.

After all, he didn't want to seem too eager. Then, after she told him what happened, he would play the caring friend and neighbor, even convincing her that she should install cameras on that section of the property.

He chuckled. Goddamn, he was brilliant. He picked up his glass of expensive whiskey and downed it. Cheers to a deal that would put him on top.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Derek was in the middle of replying to an email when there was a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he instructed as he hit the send button, then leaned back in his chair.

The door opened, and Derek was surprised to see his good friend, not to mention his superior, The Secretary of the Navy, Craig Thornwall, who didn’t seem thrilled to be there.

“Mr. Secretary,” Derek greeted as he stood up, but the SECNAV waved him off.

“Screw the formalities, Derek.”

Shit, whatever the reason is for his visit must be bad, Derek thought to himself as he sat back down. Craig took one of the chairs in front of Derek’s desk.

“You’re pretty far from Washington. And not that I’m unhappy to see you, but something must be going on to warrant an in-person visit from you. What brings you here?” Derek asked.

Craig smiled weakly. “Unfortunately, I come with mixed news.”

Derek sat up straighter.

“Before I tell you why I’m here, how’s Duke’s girlfriend? Hannah, right? The one who was involved in that shooting.”

Derek offered a small smile. “Yeah, Hannah. She’s a tough cookie. Duke said that she was holding up okay.”

“The police still don’t have any leads?”

“Nope. They think the shooting could be tied to the string of burglaries hitting the neighborhoods on that side of town.”

“But that’s not what you think?” Craig gave Derek a knowing look.

“No. No, I don’t.”

“I know that look of yours. What’s your take on it?”

“It’s just a gut feeling.”

Craig chuckled. “How often is your gut wrong?”

“Not very often.”

“Exactly. So, talk to me.”

“I think it’s personal.”

“Duke or his girlfriend?”



“That’s the part that I’m on the fence about.”

“Does Duke have any known enemies around town?”

Derek laughed dryly. “I think all SEALs have enemies.”

“True. I guess that question didn’t come out correctly. Has Duke had any problems around town?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“And the girlfriend? Has she had any problems since she’s been here?”

“I don’t believe so. She does have this guy back home who has been harassing her about some property she owns.”

“Hmm...I’m not sure what to tell you. However, the news I’m about to tell you isn’t going to make you feel any better.”

“I don’t know about that. I’d feel a little better if you were to tell me that they caught the fucker who hacked the personnel records of my team.”

Craig pursed his lips, and Derek sat forward.

“That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” Derek pressed.

“That’s one reason. Evidence is pointing that the Serpent Group is responsible for the breach.”

The Serpent Group was a rogue black ops group that worked for the highest bidder. One name came to mind, and Derek hoped to God that he was wrong.

“Anyone particular at Serpent,” Derek asked with a raised eyebrow.

Craig took a deep breath and exhaled. “Scorpion.”

Derek ran his hands down his face. This wasn’t good news.

“He’s got many contacts. The Feds still don’t know who he used to access the information, but they were able to trace the I.P. address back to an associate with known ties with Serpent, along with a wire transfer of twenty-five thousand dollars that was then sent to a Swiss bank account to an alias used at Serpent.”

Craig looked at Derek, “I know that Scorpion was involved in the mission when Jacob was killed.”

Derek gritted his teeth. That had been the worst day of his life. He held his best friend’s hand while he died from a gunshot to the stomach. Then, he had to go home and tell Jacob’s six-year-old daughter that her daddy wasn’t ever coming home. It was never proven, but Scorpion and his team were the only people who knew Derek and his team were in Fallujah that day.

“Yeah. Somebody tipped off the target we were there for. Nobody has been held responsible for Jacob’s death, but I have always suspected that

Scorpion was involved. He had been involved in some shady operations prior to that specific mission. He was there and knew our location. It was ironic that he left the SEALs after that mission.”

Derek would love to bring that bastard down, even more so now that it appears he had a hand in putting his teams at risk.

Craig leaned forward.

“I was going to wait, but I feel like you need to know this. I’m only telling you this because you were Jacob’s best friend.” Craig took a deep breath. “While the Feds had been investigating, they believe they found the smoking gun to prove that Scorpion was behind the ambush that killed Jacob.”

Derek’s eyes widened before they narrowed.

“How?”

“They are still unraveling it all, but all signs point to Scorpion who gave away your team’s position on that ridge twenty-six years ago. The government has a witness who has agreed to come forward.”

“Why now?” Derek asked, skeptical as to why the person felt the need to come forward now.

“Let’s just say a few people have disappeared.”

“Are you saying Scorpion has been killing off people so they don’t talk?”

“We believe so. The person willing to testify against Scorpion has recordings, amongst other evidence.”

Derek ran his hand over his jaw. “This is fucking crazy.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Do they know where he is?”

“They have eyes on him.”

“What’s next, then?”

“The Feds, along with some international agencies, are gathering additional information. The President wants to make sure we nail the bastard so he can’t find any loopholes. They’ll move in and arrest him once they have the information they need.”

“It eats me up knowing people like him exist.”

“Same.”

Derek hated to see the guy walk freely when there was evidence to bring him in. But he understood the importance of bringing a solid case against the guy.

“Anyway, I wanted to come and deliver that news to you personally.

“I appreciate you coming down here.”

“I’ll keep you abreast of the situation.”

Derek went to answer, but then his phone rang. He held up his finger, telling Craig to hold on a minute.

“Commander Conners,” he answered.

“Commander, this is General Arkan.”

Derek hadn’t expected the call to be from him.

“General, what can I do for you?”

“I wish I were calling with better news, but I’ve just gotten word that one of your men could be in grave danger.”

Derek sat up straighter and motioned for Craig to sit down.

“I’m listening.”

“Before your men left Othana, they assisted with a medical emergency in a nearby village.”

“Yes, I was briefed on that. It was unfortunate that the woman didn’t survive.”

“Yes, it was.” Arkan cleared his throat. “As you probably heard, the woman’s husband did not take her death well. In fact, we haven’t seen or heard from him since that night. That is until now. I just got word from a very trustworthy source that Rakin, the husband, has gained access to some personal information relating to your man, Garrison Reid, and has traveled to the United States to seek revenge.”

“What do you mean to seek revenge, and what type of information did he receive,” Derek asked, becoming more alarmed with each word Arkan said.

“He has in his possession your man’s home address, medical information, phone number, and other details. Commander, Rakin is planning to kill your guy. He is traveling under the name of Hassan Lazaar.”

Goddammit!

“Thank you, General. I’m sure our government will want to speak with you regarding this.”

“I expected that, and know that myself and our government will be fully cooperative.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll be in touch.”

Derek slammed the phone down and took a deep breath.

“What’s going on?” Craig asked, looking concerned.

“That was General Arkan with the Othana military. I think I know why my team’s files were hacked.”

Derek explained everything to Craig, and now Craig was concerned.

“I need to make some calls.”

“I need to talk with the team, especially Duke,” Derek told him. “I think Hannah could be the one the guy is actually after. She’s been targeted twice now.”

“Twice?” Craig asked, looking confused.

“Yeah. The shooting two weeks ago and the night of Alex’s gala, someone almost ran her over in the parking lot.

“Oh, shit! Do you think this guy is looking to take a vengeful retribution, like an—”

“Eye for an eye,” Derek finished. “This guy thinks Duke killed his wife, so he’s going after Hannah.”

“I’m going to head back to D.C., but I’ll start making some calls to see if we can track this guy and get his whereabouts. I’ll also alert the President on the situation.” Craig told him.

“Thanks. I’m calling the team in now. Keep me updated. I will also alert the local PD since they were called to Duke’s house for the shooting.”

After Craig left, Derek sent out a team text telling them to report to his office ASAP.



Duke was pacing Derek’s office as Derek explained what he had learned from the SECNAV and General Arkan.

“So, you’re saying that this guy is here and that he is targeting Duke?” Bear asked, seeming pissed off just like the rest of the team.

Derek ran his hand through his hair.

“Yes. But we are also concerned that he could seek revenge by going after Hannah.”

Duke stopped pacing and looked at Derek. “Do we know for sure that this guy is here in Virginia Beach?”

“The SECNAV is working with Homeland Security and the Feds to confirm that. However, knowing that he has your information and there have been two attempts on Hannah’s life, I’m going with my gut and saying that yes, he is here.”

“So, he’s been probably watching our every move.” Duke looked at

Joker. "Hannah and Clover left two days ago."

"Shit," Joker muttered.

"What do you mean Hannah and Clover left? Where are they?" Derek asked.

Duke then remembered that Derek wasn't at Bayside for the game and didn't hear what had happened with the berry fields. He told Derek what happened.

"Could it be possible that this guy knows that Hannah left and followed her to Jackson Hole?" Jay Bird asked.

"I wouldn't put anything past him," Derek stated, looking at Duke and Joker. "Can you try calling Hannah and Clover? I'm going to call the SECNAV and fill him in."

Duke felt vulnerable. He didn't like having Hannah away from him with a lunatic on the loose, wanting to harm her.

"Commander, with your permission, I'd like to fly to Jackson Hole tonight."

Derek nodded, then looked at Joker. "I'm assuming you'll also want to go since Clover's there."

Joker nodded. "If that's okay with you."

Derek blew out a frustrated sigh. "Permission granted for both of you. I'll call Tink and see if his plane is available."

"Thank you," both Duke and Joker said simultaneously.

Duke pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. "I'm going to call Hannah." It went straight to voicemail, and he swore.

"What's wrong?" Derek asked as he dialed Tink.

"She must have her phone off because it went straight to voicemail." Duke left her a message telling her to call him as soon as she got his message.

Joker shook his head as he slipped his phone back into his pocket. "So did Clover's."

Duke then remembered his call with Hannah this morning. "Shit. Hannah mentioned this morning that she and Clover were going to go to the movies and then grab a bite to eat in town."

Duke looked at his watch. "It's eighteen hundred here, so it would make it sixteen hundred in Jackson Hole."

Derek hung up the phone. "Tink said he can have his plane ready within the hour."

"A direct flight from here to Jackson Hole is a little over four hours. If

we can leave at nineteen hundred, that would put us in Jackson Hole around twenty-one-thirty, local time.”

Duke looked at Joker. “How soon can you be ready?”

“I just need to run home and grab a few things.”

“Same.”

“Alright, let’s meet at the hangar within the hour.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll keep you two up-to-date on the situation from here and what I hear from the SECNAV. I’m also going to put in a call to the local Sheriff’s office in Jackson Hole. Depending on what we find out, we may meet you two out there,” Derek said, gesturing to the rest of the team.

Duke nodded in understanding, but he hoped that wasn’t the case and that Rakin was still in town and the Feds and local authorities could locate him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was a little later than they expected when the plane touched down in Jackson Hole. That was due to a ground issue at the small airport in Virginia Beach. It was just minutes before ten. As Duke and Joker exited the plane, a Sheriff's truck pulled up, and an older gray-haired man with a mustache and goatee got out. He was dressed in his uniform.

"Good evening, gentlemen," the guy greeted them. "I'm Sheriff Watt. Your commanding officer called and explained everything. I told him I'd swing by and pick you both up and take you to where the ladies are."

Duke stepped forward and shook his hand. "Thank you, Sir. I'm Duke, and this is Joker." Joker shook the Sheriff's hand next.

The Sheriff motioned toward the truck. "Hop on in. It's only about a fifteen-minute ride from here."

Duke sat up front, and Joker sat in the back.

"So, you're the guy who Hannah has taken a special interest in?" The Sheriff asked, and the question caught Duke off guard. He looked at the Sheriff, who chuckled. "It's a small town, son. And Hannah is a staple in this community, whether she realizes it or not, just like her grandmother was."

Duke smirked. "She's a great woman," Duke told him, and the Sheriff nodded. "That she is. You must be a pretty good man for her to want to leave here and be with you, especially the way she told me that y'all met."

Duke grinned. "Yeah, it's been surprising, but I wouldn't change a thing." Well, if he could, he'd eliminate the part where Katie had shown up and put a wrench in things.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable talking about his and Hannah's relationship, Duke changed the subject, "Are there any leads on who messed with the water lines at the berry fields?"

The Sheriff blew out a frustrated sigh. "No, nothing yet. And honestly, I don't know if we ever will. The fields are busy this time of the year, and if someone did it during business hours while they pretended to pick berries, we'd never know, especially since there aren't cameras."

Duke nodded. He had already planned to talk to Hannah about installing a few cameras from various spots on the property.

"We don't see much vandalism here, but when we do, most of the time, it's teenagers."

“Sounds like they need a swift kick in the ass,” Joker said from the backseat, making the Sheriff chuckle.

“Believe me. If they get caught, they get more than just a swift kick in the ass.”

“Where exactly are Hannah and Clover? Hannah told me earlier that they were going to the movies and then out to eat afterward.”

The Sheriff laughed again. “They’re at Jack’s. And according to two of my deputies who are at Jack’s keeping an eye on them, the two ladies are having a grand old time. Apparently, they enjoy line dancing.”

Both Duke and Joker groaned, making Sheriff Watt laugh.



“Have you heard back from Duke?” Clover asked Hannah as the two took their seats at the table near the dance floor.

Hannah shook her head. “No. His phone went straight to voicemail.”

“How about you? Anything from Joker?”

“No. Same, his phone went to voicemail, too.”

“Do you think they were called out?” Hannah asked, having mixed feelings about that because if Duke had to leave and she missed his call, she would feel really bad for not being able to say bye to him.

“No. I don’t think so because they would’ve said so in their message.”

Hearing Clover say that put Hannah a little more at ease, and she felt herself relaxing more. But that could also be due to the three white Russians she had.

Jack’s was a local town favorite place to hang out. It also attracted a lot of tourists, especially during the weekends. But even during the week, it tended to draw a large crowd. It had been quite some time since she last drank and danced at Jack’s. She was having a good time, though.

“Here you ladies go,” Henry, the owner of Jack’s said, placing two White Russians on the table. “These are on the house, ladies.”

Hannah smiled. “Thanks, Henry.”

The older man winked. “It’s good to see you out, Hannah. We’ve missed you the past few weeks.”

Hannah gave him a small smile but felt a slight tug in her heart. Jackson Hole had been her home—hell, her life was here. And knowing she would be leaving it made her a little sad. But on the flip side, she had a bright future she was looking forward to—spending the rest of her life with the man she so



easily fell in love with. Plus, she'd still have the ranch to come back to and visit.

"Hey, are you okay?" Clover asked.

Hannah offered a weak smile, looking at her best friend. "Yeah, just thinking about all the changes that have happened in just a short amount of time."

"I can imagine. Love makes you do the unexpected sometimes."

"Clover, do you think I'm crazy for moving so fast with Duke?"

"What do you mean?"

"He and I only met like a month ago, and here I am, getting ready to pack my stuff up from the only place I've ever lived and move halfway across the country to be with him."

Clover gave Hannah a knowing smile and placed her hand on top of Hannah's. "Do you love Duke?"

"Of course, I love him. He's come to mean so much to me in just a short amount of time." She paused for a few seconds and then continued. "I think that is what scares me and makes me feel overwhelmed."

"It's okay to have those feelings. It's a big step. Believe me, I've been there. Though, I had more of a push to move to be with Joker."

"You did?"

Clover nodded. "Yeah. Remember when we were all at Alex's house, and she mentioned that we all had our own stories about how we ladies all met our guys?"

"I do remember that."

"Well, Joker and I had met a few years before we found each other again. At that time, we both thought that the night we spent together didn't mean anything. I had been devastated, but I moved on with my career, as did he. But years later, because of a life-or-death situation I was in, it brought us back together. It was then that we both realized it was all just a miscommunication." By Clover's glistening eyes, Hannah could tell that the ordeal had been bad. "I almost lost my chance at being with the man I love with all my heart. Because of my injury, the military deemed me a risk at what I loved doing, which was flying. They offered me a desk job instead. I turned it down. I resigned my commission and moved from San Diego to Virginia Beach."

"Wow! Do you think you would've made the same decision if the military said you could continue flying?"

Clover smiled. “Absolutely. I can fly anywhere. But my heart couldn’t be just anywhere. My heart belonged in Virginia Beach, where the man I love is.” Clover wiped away a tear. “So, the answer to your question is no. I don’t think that you’re crazy at all for wanting to follow your heart.”

Hannah lifted her drink in the air. “May our hearts lead us on a wonderful journey filled with lots of love and friendships.”

Clover smiled, raised her glass, and clinked it against Hannah’s. “To love and friendships,” she said, and they both downed their drink.

“Okay, how about one more dance, and then we call for a ride,” Hannah suggested.

Clover grinned. “Sounds like a plan, and I know just the song for us to end the night with.”



As Duke and Joker were walking up to the entrance of Jack’s, Copperhead Road started blasting through the speakers, and they both just looked at each other, knowing where they’d find their women once they got inside.

Duke walked through the door, letting his eyes adjust to the lighting inside. His first thought was that there were a shit ton of people, and maybe finding the ladies would be a challenge. But then he spotted the two deputies near the bar, and he and Joker walked over to join them. Sheriff Watt made the introductions.

“Is it always this packed?” Duke asked, and the deputies nodded.

“Yep. Jack’s is the place to be in Jackson Hole.”

“Your ladies are quite entertaining,” the deputy laughingly said, then pointed toward the dance floor.

When Duke’s eyes landed on the strawberry blonde shaking her butt while she and Clover led the crowd dancing, he breathed a little easier. He also couldn’t hold back his laugh. Joker joined him in laughing, especially when the girls bumped into each other and nearly tumbled to the floor.

“Did they drive here?” Duke asked the Sheriff.

“No. And even if they had, one of us would’ve taken them home.”

“Do they even know that you guys were here keeping an eye on things?”

“Not to my knowledge. They’ve been laughing and having a good time. And there’s been no trouble, so we’ve let them be.”

When the song ended, Duke and Joker made their way through the

crowd over to Hannah and Clover's table. As the ladies returned to the table, Duke was grinning as he watched them keep each other up on their feet. He wondered how much they had to drink.

Clover was the first to realize they were standing there, and she nudged Hannah's arm and then pointed in his direction before she bounced over to Joker and climbed him like a monkey.

Hannah appeared frozen to the spot as she stared at him. He, on the other hand, hadn't even realized that his feet were moving until he found himself standing in front of Hannah, whose mouth was open like a fish. He wanted to laugh at her shocked expression at seeing him.

A smile then spread across her luscious lips.

"Duke!" She exclaimed as she launched herself at him, wrapping her legs and arms around his body. Thankfully, he had braced himself and caught her, hugging her close.

"I missed you, darlin'," he told her as he nuzzled her neck, breathing in the scent of her light perfume.

She pulled back and placed her hands on his cheeks. Her eyes were twinkling as she looked into his eyes. "I missed you, too. I can't believe you're here." She hiccupped, then giggled. "I think I've had a little too much to drink."

"You think you have?" He teased, then kissed her nose.

"Did you come here to take us home?" She asked, and Duke chuckled.

"I came here because I missed you. Technically, the Sheriff is going to drive us home."

She grinned and laid her head on his shoulder. "I like sharing a home with you," she told him, and Duke felt like his heart would burst.

"I like sharing everything with you. Now, let's get you out of here."

"Lead the way, my Beast," she sighed in his ear and then started kissing his neck.

He groaned, feeling his growing member press against the zipper of his jeans. Damn, woman. She knew what calling him Beast would do.

He looked over at Joker, who didn't look like he was faring to well with Clover either. They gave each other a knowing look. There was no way they would be having the conversation about the turn of events with Hannah or Clover until the following day when both of them were sober and could think clearly.

Duke grabbed Hannah's purse and carried her out of the bar. They got

into the back of the Sheriff's truck, and Joker and Clover got into one of the deputies' cars.

They hadn't even been on the road for five minutes when Duke heard the soft snores coming from Hannah. Even the Sheriff chuckled.

When the Sheriff pulled off the main road and onto a long paved driveway, he asked, "Is this Hannah's ranch?"

"Sure is. It's a beautiful piece of land she has."

Duke couldn't see too much because it was dark, but when the two-story, mountain contemporary house came into view, Duke was in awe. The area surrounding the main house was lit with decorative lighting and beautiful landscaping. The home's exterior held a modern yet rustic feel with a mixture of copper, limestone, and barn wood.

Duke was getting ready to wake Hannah up so they could get into the house, but the Sheriff stopped him.

"You don't have to wake her. I have a key and know the alarm code."

Duke must've given the Sheriff an odd look because the Sheriff smiled.

"I've been checking on the house while she's been gone. She gave me a key and the access code."

Duke nodded. "Right. Sorry about that. I'm just a little paranoid right now with everything going on."

"That's understandable. She's lucky to have someone like you who cares for her."

"Thank you. She means the world to me."

"Let me let you guys inside. And just so you know, I have two deputies stationed here at the house. One is at the entrance to the ranch, and the other will be parked here at the house. This is just until we know more."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Duke lifted Hannah into his arms, cradling her close to his chest. He saw Joker get out of the Deputy's car carrying a passed-out Clover. They both laughed when they saw each other.

"Looks like our party girls out did themselves," Joker said as he followed Duke up the steps to the front porch.

They waited until the Sheriff went inside and disarmed the alarm. He waved them in once he was finished and turned on the lights.

Duke had a quick glance around the open floor plan and was just as impressed with the inside of the house as he was with the outside.

"I could get used to this," Joker stated, letting out a low whistle as he

looked around.

“The bedrooms are upstairs,” The Sheriff told them. He looked at Duke. “When you get to the top of the stairs, Hannah’s room is to the right. It’s the only room on that side.” He then turned to Joker. “Clover’s room is to the left, the second door on the right. Why don’t you gentlemen get the ladies tucked in, then come back down here, and I’ll show you the alarm, then you can see me out.”

Duke carried Hannah upstairs and down the hall to her bedroom. He used his foot to open the door and his shoulder to flip the light switch on. The spacious room was tastefully decorated in earthy tones, with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over her land, offering unobstructed views of the mountains in the distance. He couldn’t wait to see it in the daylight.

He carried Hannah over to the king-size bed and gently laid her down. He checked the bathroom and found her pajamas hanging on the back of the door. Once he got her changed and tucked in, he returned downstairs.

Joker was already down there talking with the Sheriff.

“Hey. Sorry about that.”

The Sheriff waved him off. “Doesn’t bother me any.” He then handed Duke a piece of paper and a business card. “Here is the alarm code and my direct cell phone number. Call me anytime if you need anything.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve already done.”

He gave Duke a small smile. “Don’t mention it. Well, now that you guys are somewhat settled, I will see myself out.”

Duke walked him over to the door and shook his hand again as he thanked him. Once the door was shut, he engaged the alarm.

He turned around and looked at Joker. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to ensure everything is secure, then head upstairs. Did you get Derek’s text?”

“Yeah, he texted me saying he’s going to call around o-nine-hundred.”

“Yeah, that’s what I got.”

“Do you need any help locking up?”

“Nah, but thank you. Go ahead on up.”

“Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Duke said goodnight, then walked all through the house, checking the windows and doors, making sure they were all secure. He noticed a few boxes of pictures and some other items sitting in the living room, and he assumed Hannah was packing some stuff to take with her back to Virginia

Beach. The thought of her moving some of her things into his home made his chest swell with happiness.

Once he was finished up downstairs, he made his way back up to the bedroom. He jumped in a quick shower and then climbed into the bed, snuggling up behind Hannah. As he went to drape his arm over her hip, she rolled over and buried her face in his chest. He thought she might wake up, but then her breathing evened back out, and her warm puffs of air, as she exhaled, felt amazing against his skin.

He wrapped his arms snugly around her and gently kissed her forehead.

This was how he wanted to fall asleep every single night for the rest of his life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Duke rolled over in bed and was hit in the face by the sun's morning rays shining through the window. Wanting to get in a little morning snuggle time with Hannah, he blindly reached and felt the spot beside him, but his hand was met with cold sheets.

His eyes flew open, and he quickly sat up. He looked at the clock on the table next to the bed and saw it was eight-thirty. He ran his hands down his face. Damn, he must've been really tired not to feel Hannah slip out of bed.

Knowing that Derek would be calling in about thirty minutes, he slid out of bed, got dressed, and went through his morning routine, minus a round of pushups and sit-ups. He'd get those in later.

After making the bed, he stepped out of the room, and when he reached the stairs, he smiled, smelling the fresh aroma of coffee. He bounded down the stairs and met Joker in the kitchen.

"Morning!" Joker said from the large island where he was sitting reading the newspaper.

"Morning." He searched the cabinets for the coffee mugs, and he grinned, seeing how organized Hannah was. She had a bunch of little containers that were labeled.

He found a mug and poured himself a cup of coffee. He took a few sips, letting the caffeine work its way through him. It was quiet in the house, and he wondered where Hannah was.

"Have you seen Hannah?"

Joker smiled. "Yeah. She's out back."

Now that it was daylight out, Duke got a good look at the inside of the house. It was very open, with many entry points for the natural light to illuminate the space. Again, it was decorated with earthy tones and had a massive stone fireplace.

"Where's Clover?"

"She's still sleeping. I still don't understand how that woman survived being in the military when she's not a morning person."

Duke laughed. "Well, I bet being behind the controls of a helicopter was an incentive for her to wake up."

"True."

"When does she start working for Tink?"

“In two weeks. She’s excited. She’s been itching to get back up in the air.”

“I bet she has. It’s had to be pretty hard for her.”

“Yeah, it has.”

Duke’s phone rang, interrupting their conversation. He looked at the call ID and then looked at Joker.

“It’s Derek.”

He answered, putting the phone on speaker, then laying it on the island.

“Commander. You’ve got me and Joker.”

“Morning.” Derek clipped, sounding irritated. “I have some updates for you both.”

Duke glanced at Joker, and it seemed Joker picked up on Derek’s frustration.

“Alright, what can you tell us.”

“Homeland Security and the FBI can confirm that Rakin entered the United States about a month ago through the Port of Baltimore. He is traveling under the alias of Hassan Lazaar. He has changed his appearance, and I’ll send you both a photo of him taken when he was processed through Customs in Baltimore. The agencies were able to track his movements from Baltimore to Virginia Beach. He did make a stop in Maryland at a storage unit, where it is believed he was able to access weapons supplied to him.”

The more Duke heard, the angrier he was getting.

“Do they know where he is now?” Joker asked.

“We all believe that he is either on his way to Jackson Hole or he’s already there.”

Duke sat up straighter, and concern for Hannah’s safety flooded him. He got up, walked over to the back door, and looked out to ensure Hannah was still there.

“How do they know this?” Duke asked.

Derek sighed again, and Duke could hear the frustration in the sound.

“He’s been under our noses the whole time.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was staying at a hotel on the Boardwalk, and they were able to track some of his movements. He was at Bayside several times the same time you and Hannah were there. He was watching everyone the whole time. But the last time he was there was the day when Hannah got the call about the incident at the berry fields. He was hiding in the alcove by the heads,



listening to everything you and her were discussing. We have him on video coming out and leaving through the side door right after you and Hannah went back to watching the game.”

“Shit!”

“So, what do we do?”

“The local FBI field office has been notified, and they are en route. We’ve notified the Sheriff’s office and the State Police. Believe me, when I say that everyone is looking for this guy. I spoke with the SECNAV this morning, and the rest of the team and I will be heading your way tomorrow. We’re due to arrive around mid-morning.”

Derek paused for a second. “Duke, Joker, I don’t need to tell you that this guy is dangerous. Keep the girls close by.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. They won’t be out of our sights.”

“Good. You’ll probably have a visit from the FBI sometime today. Other than that, I’ll be in touch if there are any updates between now and when we arrive tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Sir. We’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“Later.”

Duke disconnected the call and ran his hands through his hair.

“Have you talked with Hannah about any of this?” Joker asked, getting up and putting his mug in the sink.

“No, I haven’t.”

“How do you think she’ll take it?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I mean, she’s strong, independent, but she’s smart.”

Joker chuckled. “Just like two other ladies we know.”

Duke grinned, knowing Joker was referring to Clover and Jocelyn.

“Yeah. We now have the three Amigas,” Duke joked.

“Well, I’m going to go attempt to wake up Clover and let her know what’s going on.”

“Alright. I’ll go talk with Hannah.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Duke picked up his coffee mug, then opened the heavy sliding glass doors and walked out onto the large limestone patio. His movement was halted when his eyes focused on the beautiful display of natural formations before him. Hannah hadn’t been kidding when she said she had a priceless

view of what Jackson Hole had to offer. The sweeping views of the Snake River and empty lands were like looking at a professional photograph. It was absolutely breathtaking. He could sit out on the patio and admire it all day long and never get tired of it.

With his coffee in hand, he closed his eyes and listened to all the sounds nature offered. The sound of birds chirping and melodious calls, the croaks from frogs, and the crackling of leaves from the wild animals trekking through the woods was calming and pleasant.

He walked toward the left and caught movement about one hundred and fifty yards out. It was a person standing on the bank of the river. The long, wavy brown hair blowing in the gentle breeze gave away who it was—Hannah.

Resting his hip against the wood railing, he stood there enjoying his cup of coffee while taking in the sight of the woman who had stolen his heart. His instincts had him wanting to rush out to her, but at the moment, she looked to be deep in thought, so he decided to give her a few minutes to herself. As long as he had eyes on her, he was fine for now.



Hannah was lost in thought as she stood on the edge of her property near the water line of the river that wrapped itself around many acres of the property.

She had woken up at four-thirty because she had to pee and was thirsty. But instead of climbing back in bed with Duke and snuggling with him, she decided to stay awake and get a head start on the day.

She already had two cups of coffee to help with her hangover. She couldn't believe how much she and Clover drank last night.

After her coffee, she mopped the floors downstairs and dusted the furniture. Then she tackled the one task she had been putting off—going through her granny's belongings and figuring out what she wanted to donate and what she wanted to keep. After a few hours of sorting, she decided she needed a break and a breath of fresh air to help clear her mind, and this was the place to do just that.

The jagged peaks of the Grand Tetons off in the distance were a sight she could never get tired of. They were even more beautiful when the caps were blanketed in snow. She watched the various wildlife come to life as the sun rose higher in the clear sky. She closed her eyes and tilted her face

toward the sky, letting the sun's warm rays caress her skin.

She took in everything around her—the scent of the mountain air, the stunning views, and the sounds of nature. Could she say goodbye to all of this and the town that has been her home for thirty-two years? She gave her head a slight shake. Of course, she could for Duke. It would be sad, but if it meant being with the man she had fallen in love with, then she would make that sacrifice. And it wasn't like she was giving it up forever. They'd still come back and visit and stay for vacations. Plus, she had big plans for the empty land next to the house.

She smiled, looking up at the sun. For the first time in her life, she felt a real connection with a man. Duke was genuine. He was not only a friend but a lover. And boy, did she love him.

She heard rustling in the trees across the river and watched as a gang of elk emerged from the forest, heading toward the point bar on the other side of the river. Suddenly, a large fish jumped out of the water, startling the elk and sending them dashing back into the lush green forest.

“What a beautiful sight.”

She swung her head around when she heard Duke's deep southern voice.

“Duke. I didn't hear you,” she told him as she turned to face him. She wiped a few tears that had escaped her eye from her cheek.

He smirked, and that damn adorable dimple made an appearance. But as his eyes saw her tears, he frowned.

“Are you okay? What's wrong?” He began scanning the area as if something had upset her.

She shook her head. “I'm okay. I was out there thinking about some things.”

Tilting her chin up, he peered down into her eyes.

“Are you sure everything is okay?”

She smiled. “Positive, especially now that you're here. I'm sorry about last night. Clover and I kind of got carried away.”

Duke laughed. “It's all good, especially if you were having fun.”

He looked so handsome standing there, and she stepped closer.

“I need something from you.”

Cocking his head to the side and looking perplexed, he answered, “Anything you need, I'm right here.”

“Can I have a hug?”

His expression softened, and a small smile played on his lips.

“You never have to ask me for a hug. Come here.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her close. Sliding her arms around his waist she pressed her cheek against his broad chest and breathed in his masculine scent. He smelled so good, and it instantly calmed her.

“I love you, Hannah,” Duke whispered into her hair before kissing the top of her head.

She pulled away, looking up at him.

“I love you, too.”

He smiled and kissed her lips. When he pulled away she sensed something was wrong. Even though he was being sweet and attentive, he seemed on edge.

“Duke, is something wrong?”

He blew out a breath. “We need to talk.”

She felt her stomach sink, and she immediately thought the worst. Was he breaking up with her?

As if knowing what she was thinking, he pulled her close and ran his hands down her arms.

“Hey, I didn’t mean that kind of talk.”

She stared up into his brown eyes and found her voice.

“So, you aren’t breaking up with me?”

“What?!” he asked, looking a bit insulted.

“I...I just thought...” Oh, Jesus. Now she felt stupid.

He hugged her tightly. “Hell, no, woman. You’re stuck with me.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He moved his hands to her cheeks and tilted her face up towards his. He grinned, and she smiled back.

“Let’s go sit on the patio, and I can explain everything to you.”

“Okay.”

She took his hand and led him up to the large patio that offered amazing views of her oasis. It was peaceful. It was serenity.

They sat down on one of the loveseats, their hands still entwined.

“As you know, I had already planned to come out here to see you. But there is also another reason.” He took a deep breath, and Hannah could tell that whatever the reason was, it was really bothering Duke.

“Duke, I can tell whatever it is has you upset. What’s going on?”

“You’re in danger, Hannah.” She could tell he was biting the inside of his cheek. “And the reason you’re in danger is because of me.”

She swallowed hard and squeezed his hand.

“What kind of danger? And how is it your fault?”

Duke took a deep breath and then proceeded to explain the chain of events starting in Othana. He told her about Ghalia, the baby, and then Rakin. He also went over everything that Derek had told him today.

She could tell he was getting upset the more he told her. She climbed into his lap and looped her arms around his neck.

“Duke, look at me,” she told him.

When he turned his head, she saw the emotion in his eyes. And if she wasn’t mistaken, there were a few unshed tears in there.

“First, this isn’t your fault. None of it is.”

“But because of me, you’re in danger. This guy wants to kill you because somewhere in his deranged mind, he thinks I killed his wife.”

“I won’t lie. This scares me. But have faith in the authorities. I do. They’ve been able to track him, and I’m confident they’ll catch him.”

“We’ve got Sheriff Watt and his deputies patrolling. The FBI is coming, and your team will be here tomorrow.” She leaned in and kissed his lips. “Plus, I’ve got the best protector I could ever have. I have you.”

He smiled softly and caressed her cheek.

“I will always protect you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She pulled back a bit and then narrowed her eyes.

“Did that asshole really want you to kill that innocent baby?”

Duke nodded, and she became furious.

“Un-fucking-believable.”

“She was adorable—a little miracle. She had the blackest hair, just like her mom.” Duke told her.

“She sounds adorable. And it sounds like you got a little attached to her.”

“Holding her made me feel things. When Rakin said he wanted nothing to do with her, I wanted to pack her in my bag and bring her home. I wanted to protect her.”

A sudden vision of Duke holding a tiny newborn in his big, muscular arms made her smile.

“You know we’ve never talked about kids.”

He looked at her. “No, we haven’t.”

“Do you want kids?” She asked him.

“I love to have kids someday, though I’m not getting any younger.”

“You know, my dad was in his forties when my mom had me.”

“Really?”

“Yep. You figure Granny was pregnant with him when Grandpa Joe was killed. Back then, nobody batted an eye at having kids at an early age.”

“Hmm...How about you? Do you want kids?”

She smiled and leaned close to his lips. “With you, I do.”

He scooped her into his arms and stood up. His abrupt movement caused her to squeal.

“What are you doing?” She asked.

“You want kids, and I want kids. No better time than to start now.”

She playfully slapped his chest.

“Garrison Reid! We aren’t even married,” she scolded, and he laughed.

“Okay, we can practice then—a lot,” he teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

“You’re something else,” she said, shaking her head as he carried her inside and up their bedroom.

As they were heading inside, she thought about the baby that Duke delivered.

“Do you know where the baby is now?”

“What?” he asked, seeming confused.

“The baby you delivered in Othana. Do you know where she is?”

“Last I heard, she was still with Naima, Ghalia’s best friend. Why?”

“I was just wondering,” she told him. But an idea brewing in her mind, and once the threat against her and Duke was eliminated, she would talk to Duke about it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hannah was pouring two cups of coffee when she heard Duke hit the bottom step that creaked, giving away his position. It made her smile because he had a habit of sneaking up on her.

Picking up the mugs, she turned to place them on the island just as Duke came around the corner. She took one look at him and nearly spilled both cups of coffee.

If he ever gave up being a SEAL, he could definitely fit the role of a cowboy. The way his navy and white plaid flannel shirt sleeves were rolled up, exposing his strong forearms, while his blue jeans were snug in all the right places, made him drool-worthy. But what really caught her eye was his bare feet. Call her weird, but she found a man walking around the house in his bare feet sexy. She loved how comfortable he looked at home.

“You keep staring at me like that, and I’m going to pass on going to breakfast and take you back upstairs and have you instead.”

*Would that really be a bad thing?* She thought to herself, then shook her head as a smile pulled the corners of her lips upward. She took a seat on the stool at the island and slid his mug over in front of the seat next to her. He kissed the top of her head before sitting down and taking a sip of coffee.

“I just spoke with Joker, and he said the guys should arrive in the next two to three hours. I told him to call when they’re loaded up so they’ll know to meet us in town or at the house.”

She nodded her head. “Sounds good. Did he and Clover drive over to that sporting goods store I told them about last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. This morning, I made up the spare rooms and put fresh sheets and blankets on the beds. I also cleaned the bathrooms and set out fresh towels. Are you sure some of them won’t mind sharing a room or sleeping on the couch?”

Duke reached over and clasped her hand.

“Hannah, I swear, the guys won’t care where they sleep. They’ll be happy just to have a roof over their head.”

She took a deep breath.

“I know, but they are coming here because of me. So, the least I can do is offer them a decent place to sleep.”

Duke grinned. “And each one of them will appreciate that kind gesture.”

“If you say so.”

“I know so,” he told her, then kissed her temple.

She smirked at him, which made him laugh.

“Are you sure we are okay to go into town?”

“Yeah. I spoke with Sheriff Watt. Plus, remember we’ll have the FBI agent following us.”

“Okay. Are you ready to go now?” She asked.

“Yeah, let me just get my boots on, and we can leave.”



Hannah pulled into a parking spot in front of a few storefronts in the town square. Duke looked at the place directly in front of them and knew this was where they were going—*Dominae’s Bakery and Sweets*. Hannah had been raving about it all day yesterday.

As they went to enter, Hannah stopped.

“Oh, good lord.”

“What?” Duke asked.

“The town’s gossip club is inside.”

“And?” He quirked his eyebrow.

“And that means that as soon as we walk through that door, you and I will be the headline of today’s town gossip.”

A small smirk slowly made an appearance on his face.

“Well then, let’s give them something to talk about.”

Before she could ask what he meant, he opened the door and placed his hand on the small of her back, urging her inside.

The small bell above the door to *Dominae’s* chimed as Duke and Hannah walked in. A sweet aroma of deliciousness immediately overcame his sense of smell. His mouth started to water, and his stomach rumbled.

“Smells good, huh?” Hannah asked, looking up at him and giving him her radiant smile.

He smirked. “Yeah, it does.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the cases filled with almost any type of baked goods one could imagine. But his eyes were set on the extra-large cinnamon roll covered in cream cheese frosting.

“Hi, Hannah!” A cheery, plump woman greeted them from behind the counter.



Hannah smiled. "Hi, Dominae! How are you?"

"I'm doing good. Thanks for asking." The lady looked at Duke and smiled. "And who is this handsome fellow?"

Hannah grinned and looped her arm through Duke's. "This is Duke, my boyfriend. Duke, meet Dominae, the owner of this amazing place."

Duke reached over the counter and shook the woman's hand.

"It's nice to meet you Duke."

"It's nice to meet you as well, ma'am."

Dominae winked at Hannah. "Now I know why you haven't been home. And I can't say I blame you."

Duke chuckled, seeing Hannah's cheeks turn pink.

"How's your sister Ven doing?" Hannah asked.

"Oh, you mean Tumblina?" Dominae said laughingly.

Hannah chuckled. "I still laugh when I think of that night. Thankfully, she wasn't hurt too bad."

Duke looked at Hannah, wondering what they were talking about.

"Me, Dominae, and her sister Ven went out to eat a few months ago, and Ven tripped on the curb and fell. But that wasn't what was funny. It was how she hit the ground and rolled, then popped back up on her feet like nothing happened."

Dominae chuckled, looking at Duke. "You really had to be there. Anyway, what can I get you two?"

"I'll take the coffee cake and a black coffee, please," Hannah ordered, then looked at Duke.

"That cinnamon roll caught my eye as soon as I walked in. I'll take one of those and black coffee, too, please."

"Good choice. That cinnamon roll is the bomb," Dom stated as she reached into the case, pulled their pastries out, and placed them on a plate. Once they got their coffees and Duke paid, they looked around for a table.

Hannah looked at him and grinned. "I suppose you'd like to sit in that booth in the back by the door?"

He smirked. "You learn quickly, darlin'."

"Well, it's also far from the gossip squad."

Duke glanced at the table full of women, and they were all staring at him and Hannah. He thought about pulling her in for a big kiss but decided not to, as he didn't want to embarrass Hannah.

Once they took their seats, Duke took a bite of his cinnamon roll and

thought he had gone to heaven.



Hannah was about halfway done with her coffee cake when she heard Justin, Thomas' best friend, voice in the next booth over her. He had a very distinctive voice. He was an asshole, just like Thomas was.

Even though she could only hear one side of the conversation, she knew what he was talking about, and what she heard made her blood boil.

"Well, Thomas, it looks like congratulations are in order. I have to say I had my doubts about your little plan to sabotage the water lines on Hannah's property. At least you kept your hands clean by paying those kids to do it."

Hannah looked across the table, and the furious expression crossing Duke's face told her that he had also overheard Justin's conversation. She could tell that Duke was ready to get up and probably cause major harm to Justin. She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. She could feel how tense he was. She was just as pissed off, but she had other plans. She just shook her head, telling Duke to let it go for now.

They both had lost their appetite and sat there, neither one saying a word, waiting for Justin to leave. By the time Justin finally left, Hannah thought Duke would explode.

"I'm going to see the Sheriff," Hannah told Duke, and Duke nodded.

"That's a good idea. Let's go now."



Hannah and Duke walked hand-in-hand into the Sheriff's office. Marlena, Sheriff Watt's assistant, smiled when she saw Hannah.

"Hi, Hannah! I heard you were in town and had a special man on your arm," the woman said, looking at the Hannah's and Duke's hands that were entwined.

Hannah glanced at Duke with a raised eyebrow as if telling him that she was right, that the gossip club had already struck. Marlena was nice, but she was also part of the gossip club.

"Hi, Marlena," Hannah replied, ignoring her comment about Duke. "Is Sheriff Watt around?"

"He is. He has someone in his office right now. But I think they were just finishing up. Hang on a sec, and let me check."

As Marlena walked around the corner, Duke squeezed her hand.

“Do you know everyone in town?” He asked, with a smile on his handsome face.

“It’s not that big of a town.”

Marlena returned and told Hannah and Duke they could go into the Sheriff’s office.

As Hannah entered Sheriff Watt’s office, she noticed another man sitting across from the Sheriff.

“Hi, Hannah,” The Sheriff said, smiling at her.

“Hi.” She looked at the guy again, then back at the Sheriff. “Marlena said it was okay to come in.”

“Of course, it is.” He motioned with his hand toward the gentleman. “This is Brax Montgomery.”

The handsome but rugged man stood up, and Hannah felt like a shrimp next to him. He was huge—broader and taller than Duke. He stuck his hand out.

“It’s nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Hannah smiled. “It’s nice to meet you as well.” She turned toward Duke to introduce him, but when both men looked at each other, they shouted at the same time.

“Reid!” Brax blurted out.

“Brax!” Duke exclaimed.

Both men gave each other a man hug and back slap.

Hannah looked between the two guys. “Do you two know each other?”

Brax grinned. “Sort of. Duke patched me up in the field years ago. I might not be here right now if it wasn’t for him and his team.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Duke said, trying to downplay Brax’s comment.

“Yeah, it was. That wound ended up infected. You not only saved my life, but you saved my leg.”

“I was just doing my job.

“What brings you to Jackson?” Brax asked Duke.

Duke nodded toward Hannah. “Hannah.”

Brax gave Hannah a warm smile. “I see.”

“Do you live around here?” Duke asked.

“No. I’m back in my hometown up in Montana—Silver Edge. The town needed a Sheriff, and I was available.”

“Someone’s gotta do it.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t want to hold you guys up. It was good seeing you, Duke.” He looked at the Sheriff. “I’ll be in touch with what we talked about.” He turned toward Hannah. “It was nice meeting you, Hannah. And if you guys are ever near Silver Edge, stop by.”

She smiled. “We will. Thanks.”

Once Brax was gone, Hannah turned toward the Sheriff, and he smiled.

“So, what can I do for the two of you?”

“I’m sorry just to barge in here, but I know who was behind the tampering with the water lines at the berry fields.”

“You do?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

“Well, have a seat and tell me who I need to arrest.”

Hannah explained to the Sheriff the one-sided conversation she and Duke overheard at Dominae’s. She also told the Sheriff about Thomas pressuring her to sell the land adjacent to her property.

Once she was finished, the Sheriff sat back in his chair and rubbed his hand over his jaw.

“I knew that son of a bitch was up to something.”

Hannah furrowed her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“He’s been spreading around town how he’s getting ready to land this huge deal that will bring a new resort and spa to the area. We were all wondering who he swindled to land something of that magnitude. Resorts and Spas aren’t cheap to build. As you know, the Clearys will screw whoever to get the best deal for the cheapest price.

“But if he bought Hannah’s land under the valued price and then sold it to the developer, that’s how he’d make his money,” Duke stated.

The Sheriff nodded, then looked at Hannah. “Did Thomas ever give you a price?”

“No. He just said I’d make enough money never to have to work again.”

“You haven’t signed anything with him, right?”

Hannah appeared taken back. “Of course not. I know better. And like I told Duke, I plan to keep that property in my family’s name.”

“Well, that’s great to hear,” the Sheriff said and smiled. “So, how do you want to do this? I can bring him in for questioning. Although, we both know he’s going to deny every single word, and he’ll probably bring his father, who is a bigger pain in the ass. His dad also has a lot of contacts and pull in the judicial system and will most likely make a deal with one of his

cohorts to keep Thomas' record clean."

Hannah sighed and looked at Duke. "He's right. Thomas' dad will do anything to keep his son out of trouble." She looked at the Sheriff and grinned. "Actually, I think I have a better idea for his punishment."

"What do you have in mind?"

"When's the next town hall meeting?"

"We just had one, so it won't be until next month."

"Well, we'll just have to wait until next month. I'll make sure I'm there for it, and we'll reveal to the town the truth of what Thomas did and was planning to do."

The Sheriff chuckled. "I like that plan. Three-quarters of the town already can't stand that family. With your statement, I'm sure the other quarter who are on the fence will surely side with the other three quarters. He'll be so embarrassed he won't want to show his face around town for a long time, especially the way some of the town folks here like to hold grudges."

Hannah grinned. She couldn't wait to bring the fucker down and hit him where it hurt the most—his reputation.

The Sheriff changed the topic and directed his comment toward Duke. "I spoke with your commander; he was going to stop by when he arrived."

Duke nodded. "Yes, Sir. He told me that he would meet with you and one of the Sr. Agents from the FBI."

"I take it, neither of you have had any problems?"

Both Hannah and Duke shook their heads.

"Good. My gut is telling me that if this guy followed Hannah here, he isn't going to hole up in town. I know the FBI is already looking into some of the nearby towns."

"I'd agree with you," Duke said. "If he is here and is watching, he has to see the increased presence of law enforcement."

The Sheriff nodded and looked at Hannah. "We'll get him, honey."

She tried to smile, but something in her gut told her it was easier said than done.

After they spoke with the Sheriff a little longer, they left.

As they walked down the sidewalk heading back to where they parked the car, Duke got a text on his phone. After he looked at it, he slipped the phone back into his pocket.

"Everything okay?" She asked, looking up at him.

He grinned. “Yeah. That was Joker. They just got into town. I told them where we were. They should be here any minute.”

“Great. We can keep walking and meet them, and they can follow us back to the house.”

She took Duke’s hand and linked her fingers with his. He smiled and leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. She smiled as he pulled away and then wrapped her arms around her waist. She rested her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes. She was so happy. Duke was everything she needed in a partner.

“Hannah?” She heard the familiar arrogant voice, and that happy vibe she had going on instantly faded. Slowly, she turned and locked gazes with Thomas. His snooty parents were right behind him, looking all high and mighty.

“I thought that was you, sweetheart. When did you get back?” Thomas asked, walking toward her. He went to hug her, but she took a step back and hit Duke’s hard chest. Duke put his hands on her hips.

“Really? That’s how you want to play this?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, pretending he had no clue what she was insinuating.

“You want to stand here and act like you don’t know.” She shook her head in disgust. “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing up here, Thomas.”

He let out a sarcastic laugh. “I don’t know what you’re talking—”

Hannah couldn’t take any more of his bullshit and lies. Before he could finish his sentence, she cocked her arm back and let it fly, hitting him square in the nose.

*Welp...there went the idea of ambushing him at the town hall meeting.*

Grabbing his nose, Thomas cried out. “What the fuck, Hannah?!”

She pointed in his face. “That’s for being an asshole. And this is for destroying the water lines at the berry fields.”

She went to lunge at him again, but Duke caught her around the waist, lifting her into the air, and moved her out of striking distance.

“Easy, there, Tiger. I think you got your point across to him,” Duke stated, looking directly at Thomas, who was still whining about his broken nose.

Thomas's mom was screaming as if Hannah had just murdered her son.

*He was such a pussy, Hannah thought to herself.*

“Goddamn, she’s got an awesome right hook!” Nails exclaimed. “That

was hot as fuck!”

Duke glared at Nails and shook his head.

Clover ran over along with Duke’s team in tow.

“Hannah, what happened?” Clover asked.

Hannah was so pissed off that she felt like crying. “He’s responsible for cutting the water lines at the berry fields.”

Everyone started to talk at once while giving Thomas the death stare.

Suddenly, Sheriff Watt appeared with two of his deputies.

“What in God’s name is going on here,” he demanded, using his firm and serious tone.

Thomas’ dad pointed at Hannah. “That woman just punched my son for no reason.”

“Pfft…” Hannah said. “Your son had that coming for all the damage he’s caused.”

The Sheriff whipped his head around in Hannah’s direction. His eyes were wide, but she didn’t miss the slight twitch of his lips. “You did that?”

She nodded. “I did.”

“See, even she admits it,” Thomas’ dad continued. “Do what you were elected to do and arrest her and charge her with assault.”

The Sheriff winked at Hannah before turning his attention back toward Asshole number one.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cleary, but I will do no such thing.”

Mr. Cleary’s jaw dropped. “Why the hell not? She punched him for no reason.”

Sheriff Watt cocked his head and rested his hand on the butt of his gun.

“No reason, you say? Mr. Cleary, are you aware that your son paid a few teenagers to vandalize Ms. O’Quinn’s property?”

Thomas’ eyes widened as he held his nose.

“What’s wrong, Thomas? Did you think that I wouldn’t find out?”

Mr. Cleary took a step back and looked at his son. “Thomas, what are they talking about?”

“Just drop it, Dad,” Thomas snapped at his father, and his father narrowed his eyes.

Hannah reigned in her smile, witnessing Mr. Cleary’s shocked expression at how his son spoke to him.

The Sheriff looked at Mr. Cleary. “I would suggest you listen to your son and just walk away from this.”

It was apparent that Mr. Cleary didn't want to back down, but the pleading look that Thomas gave him must've worked. "Let's get out of here," he told Thomas and his wife, and they walked in the opposite direction.

"I think we should move this discussion indoors," The Sheriff stated.

When Hannah looked around, she was surprised to see the large crowd that had gathered to watch.

*Shit! Just what I needed—more gossip.*

She felt the ache in her hand, and when she looked down, she saw her knuckles were red and already bruising. Duke took her hand and looked at it. She could tell he was holding on by a thread. But she was glad he didn't involve himself because he probably would've killed Thomas.

"We need to ice your hand," he told her.

"Can we just go home?" She asked, feeling the tears starting to build in her eyes. When she got angry, she was known to cry. But on top of being angry, she was also embarrassed for letting her emotions get the better of her. And she did it in public. She had never punched someone before.

Duke looked at the Sheriff. "Do you need us to stick around?"

Sheriff Watt shook his head. He walked over to Hannah. "Not that I condone fighting," he nodded toward Nails, "but I must agree. You've got one hell of a right hook. That son of a bitch deserved what he got."

She nibbled her lip. "You don't think he'll try to press charges?"

"No, especially not after I have a discussion with his father and tell him what his son did."

"Thank you."

He smiled and chuckled. "Thank you for doing what many people around this town have wanted to do for years."

"We'll be at the house if you need anything," Duke told the Sheriff.



When they returned to the house, Duke made Hannah sit on the couch while he went and got the first aid kit out of the bathroom.

She looked down at her bruised and bloody knuckles, and it made her angry all over again. She hated violence, but the Sheriff was right. That manipulative piece of shit deserved what he got.

Duke returned and sat down next to her. "Are you okay?" he whispered as he rubbed a bit of disinfectant ointment on her knuckles.

"I will be. I'm just so angry right now that I could hit him again. It's



sore, and I'm sure it will be worse tomorrow, but damn, it felt good."

Duke snorted, and the other guys chuckled.

"So, what exactly happened?" Clover asked as she took the empty seat beside Hannah.

Hannah took a deep breath, sat back, and explained everything to the group. When she was finished, everyone looked pissed off.

"Will you still attend the town hall meeting next month?" Bear asked her.

"I plan to," she said, looking up at Duke.

"I like the idea of making a mockery out of the asshole."

"Yeah, but do you think he'll show up?" Aussie asked.

"There is always a possibility that he'd skip it. But his family thinks they own this town. My gut tells me that he'll be there. After all, he won't be expecting me to be there."

Duke cleared his throat and looked at Bear. "Have there been any updates since Joker and I spoke with Derek yesterday?"

"Uhm...not really," Bear stated, but Hannah didn't miss the look that Bear and Duke exchanged. Something happened that Bear obviously didn't want to say in front of her.

"Just say it," she blurted out, and Bear looked at her as if surprised she called him out.

"What?"

"Obviously, there is something, but you don't want to say it in front of me."

"Why would you think that?"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "Really? Do you think that I can't see you and Duke giving each other secretive SEAL looks like you two can read each other's minds?"

She heard a few snickers, and even Clover was trying to cover her laugh. Bear glanced over at Duke, who had a shit-eating grin, but he nodded as if telling Bear just to say whatever he had to say.

Bear cleared his throat.

"There is no update on Rakin's whereabouts, but the authorities did discover evidence that confirms he was the one who tried to hit Hannah in the parking lot the night of Alex's gala." He took a deep breath. "And he was also the person who shot out the window and almost hit you that night at the house. He took pictures of both of you while he was watching you. He even

has pictures of you at Duke's house."

Hannah felt sick. Hearing that someone could be after her was one thing, and put her on edge. But hearing that there was evidence to back up that claim was terrifying.

She was speechless as she looked around the room. Because of her, all the men in the room and Clover were in danger.

"You guys shouldn't be here," she told them. She could hear how shaky her voice was.

"Why shouldn't we?" Bear asked, holding her gaze with his intense and unique gray eyes.

"Because by being here, you all have put yourselves in danger. You should all just go back home where it's safe."

"Hannah—" Duke started to say, but Bear cut him off.

"Hannah, you still don't get it. I know that Jocelyn and Clover have probably told you how close everyone on the team is to one another. You being with Duke means you're one of us now. You are part of our small, unique, and sometimes dysfunctional family. We care for everyone who is important to us, whether it's someone in our immediate family or SEAL family. We're one unit. And we're all here because we want to be. We want to help protect you. And we will."

Hannah sat there stunned. Yes, Jocelyn and Clover had told her about how protective the guys could be. But hearing Bear, their team leader, admit that she was part of their family made her chest hurt—not in a bad way, but a good way because her heart felt full.

All of a sudden, she was overcome with many emotions. She needed a moment alone.

"Can you guys excuse me for a minute?"

Duke tried to stop her, but she gave him a teary-eyed look and shook her head.

She walked down the hallway toward the bathroom but somehow ended up in the laundry room. She needed to gather her emotions before completely losing it and making a fool of herself.

Since she was twelve, it had always been her and her Granny. They were there for each other and supported one another. Having Duke and his team, whom she had known for about a month, tell her that she was a part of their family and that they had her back was a whole new experience for her.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear Duke walk in. He

slid his arms around her waist from behind, pressing his front snugly against her back. Holding her close, he whispered against her hair.

“I know this is a lot for you. If I could make it all go away, I would in a heartbeat.”

She slowly turned in his arms, placing her hands on his chest. She smiled, feeling the beat of his heart beneath her palm.

“Believe it or not, the scary guy isn’t what’s bothering me at the moment.” Duke wrinkled his forehead as a confused look crossed his face, and she quickly explained. “I’m mean, yes, the scary guy is serious, and I know it is dangerous. But I’m having a hard time processing the actions of your friends and teammates.”

“How so?”

“I’m not accustomed to having people help me. If I got into a bind, Granny would sometimes try to help. But usually, I would handle it on my own.”

Duke gave her his warm, compassionate smile that melted her heart.

“Things are different now,” he told her as he gently wiped the tears from her face. You now have two families who care about you and would do anything for you.”

She scrunched her nose up. “Two?”

He smiled as he glided his thumb across her bottom lip.

“My family in Savannah, and my SEAL team family. You never have to feel like you have to deal with issues alone. There are more people that you realize who’ve got your back.”

She leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed him softly on the lips.

“I love you.”

He smiled against her lips.

“I love you, too.”

Duke took her hand and started leading her back toward the living room.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I told the guys they could use the grill to make some burgers. They were starving.”

“Of course, I don’t mind, especially when it’s family,” she told him and winked.

Duke chuckled. “Family.”

When they returned to the living room, Bear had his phone out and was reading a text. When he was finished, he looked up.

“That was Derek. He just finished up with the Feds and the Sheriff. He said he should be here in about thirty minutes.”

“Okay, how about we fix the burgers, and when Derek gets here, we can talk while we eat.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Duke looked at Hannah and squeezed her hand. “You okay with that?”

She smiled. “Sure.” She looked at the guys. “Please make yourselves at home. I don’t have much in the refrigerator because we haven’t been to the store yet.”

Bear smiled at Hannah before he walked over and gave her a friendly hug. “Thank you. And I meant what I said, your family now.”

She smiled and nodded her head. “Thank you, Bear.”

“Joker and I stopped by the store before we picked up the guys,” Clover said with a smile.

“You did?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah. Duke sent us a list.”

Hannah looked up at Duke. “Thank you.”

He hugged her. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“Well, how about you guys get the grill fired up, and Hannah and I will pull together some sides. By the time everything gets finished, Derek should be here.” Clover suggested, and everyone agreed.

Even with Bear’s promise that she would always be protected, Hannah couldn’t shake the underlying fear that something bad would happen.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hannah felt her phone vibrate and knew it was Thomas without even looking at it. The man had been calling and texting her since five o'clock in the morning, trying to apologize for what he did. She wasn't stupid and knew he was only thinking about himself and his reputation. He could give two shits about her feelings.

She knew if it were up to Duke, Thomas would've already been booked and fingerprinted. But the Sheriff was right. Between Thomas and his dad, they had enough connections to get the charges either dropped completely or dropped to a lesser charge. Outing him in front of the town would be the ultimate punishment. After all, he would have to live and work in a town where everyone knew what he did.

Shaking her head, she took an uneasy breath. She already had enough shit to deal with. She didn't need to deal with Thomas' arrogance and stupidity.

When it started to ring again, and Thomas' name flashed on the screen, she was ready to throw the thing across the room, but before she could pick it up, Jay Bird snatched it off the counter.

"What are you doing?" She asked as he answered the call and walked out the back door.

She went to follow him to hear what was going on, but Duke snagged her around the waist and pulled her onto his thigh, holding her in place.

"Let Jay Bird handle it," Duke told her in a low voice.

She turned her head slightly to meet his eyes.

"Your team is already involved in enough things. They don't need to worry about Thomas and his lack of brain cells. I don't want to get them into any trouble."

She knew that Thomas would try to manipulate the situation to make it look like he was the victim.

"What did we talk about yesterday?" He asked her, and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and stared into his deep brown eyes.

"That family takes care of family."

"And..." His eyebrow quirked up cutely.

"And...that I'm part of the family now."

He grinned, leaning in, and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. She felt a

little brazen, and before he could pull away, she looped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. He squeezed her body against his, running his hand over her ass, causing a rush of desire to hit her core.

Someone cleared their throat, reminding her they were not alone.

She ended the kiss and pulled back slightly. When she looked at Duke, he winked and grinned, showing his dimple.

“We’ll finish that later,” he whispered in her ear, then kissed her cheek.

Blushing, she looked up and saw Jay Bird standing there. He handed the phone back to her.

“I don’t think you’ll be hearing from him. At least not anytime soon. Oh, and expect a check from him to cover the costs for the water line repairs.” he told her.

“Uh...” She looked at Duke, not sure what to say.

“Say, thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

She looked back at Jay Bird and smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate you handling that.” Saying that sounded so foreign to her, but she couldn’t deny that she was grateful because, over time, she knew that Thomas would wear her down, and she’d find herself right back in the same situation. Plus, those repairs were going to cost thousands of dollars.

Jay Bird winked. “No thanks needed.”

Her phone started ringing again, and she started to grumble, thinking it was Thomas. Even Duke was looking at the phone, his expression clearly telling her he was thinking the same. But then she recognized the number and knew it was the call she had been waiting for.

“I need to take this,” she told Duke, kissing him before going to her office where she’d have some privacy.



Duke was grinning as he watched Hannah walk toward her office. He was lucky to have found such an amazing woman who completed him.

“It’s nice to see you happy, man,” Jay Bird said, walking over and sitting down on the chair across from Duke.

Duke nodded. “It’s nice to feel happy. But I’ll be even happier once we find Rakin and eliminate the threat against Hannah.

“We will. He can’t hide forever,” Jay Bird stated confidently.

“I know that, but the suspense of the waiting is driving me crazy.”

“Just think of it as a mission.”

Duke shook his head. "I can't. Our missions aren't supposed to be personal. And this is personal. I think differently when it comes to Hannah's safety. And I definitely won't play by the rules of engagement if Hannah is in danger."

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't either if I were in your shoes."

Playboy walked into the kitchen. "Hey, Clover told me to tell you guys that lunch is ready out on the patio."

"Thanks, we'll be out in just a minute."

Playboy looked around. "Where's Hannah?"

"She's in her office on the phone."

"Oh. Are you guys coming?"

Duke chuckled. "We're right behind you."



Hannah opened the door to her office and started walking toward the kitchen. She was starving. Her call had lasted a lot longer than she expected it to. But it was a successful call, and she couldn't wait to tell Duke.

She saw most of the guys and Clover down by the river. She then eyed the covered plate sitting on the table out on the patio. She assumed Clover had saved some of the food and made her up a plate. She was starving.

She took a seat at the table and unwrapped the plate. Her stomach growled as her eyes took in all the food. There was a huge grilled chicken breast, pasta salad, steamed carrots, and a chocolate chip cookie.

She picked up her fork and started to dig in. It was all delicious, especially the chicken. Whoever cooked it, she needed to ask them what they used to marinate it with.

She had taken the last bite when she heard the sliding glass door open.

"There you are," Duke said, walking out of the house.

"Here I am," she replied, grinning at him.

"I was beginning to think you fell asleep on your call."

She laughed. "No. It just lasted longer than I expected it to."

He walked over and lifted her up, then sat down where she was sitting and settled her on his lap.

"You look happy," he told her.

"I am. That phone call turned into some very good news."

"It did?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It did."

“Care to share?”

“Actually, you’re the first person I wanted to talk to about it. There is something that I’ve been working on for a few weeks.” Duke squinted his eyes at her. “It’s nothing bad. I just didn’t want to say anything to anybody until I had all my ducks in a row and, most importantly, to ensure I had the backing to do it.”

“Okay. Now, you’ve piqued my interest.”

God, she hoped they all thought this was as good as an idea that she thought it was.

“It’s about my land here and what I want to do with it.”

Duke pulled his eyebrows inward. “I thought you wanted to keep the land.”

“I do. And it would still be in my family’s name. But after talking with Alex and learning what her foundation does for individuals and families, it gave me an idea.

“Alex?”

“Yeah. But before I present the idea to her, I wanted to get your opinion to make sure it’s something I’m not wasting my time on.”

“Alright. What are you thinking?”

“I’m imagining a retreat of some sort, where service members, veterans, and even first responders who are dealing with the stress of the job or life in general can come to and decompress. There is even enough land to make a family section to welcome families here. The person I was on the phone with was actually the developer who Thomas was working with. But after I told him what Thomas had done and explained my idea, the guy was all for it. He said his company supports and even employs many veterans. And he is willing to cover the majority of the cost for the buildout should I decide to move forward.”

Duke was silent as he stared at her, and she started to doubt herself.

“If it’s a bad idea, you can tell me. I just thought because I have all this land, I could do something good with it and pay it forward to those protecting us here at home and in our communities.”

“Hannah...”

When she opened her eyes, she was confused by the smile on his face.

“Darlin’, I think it’s a wonderful idea. Not to mention a very, very generous offer.”

“You do?”



He leaned in and softly kissed her lips.

“Yeah, I do. And I think Alex will love the idea. She’s been throwing out ideas about offering something that you’re suggesting. And I can tell you, it’ll be amazing, and the men and women who will benefit from it will also appreciate it.”

She stared at him, still doubting.

“If you don’t believe me, you can ask Derek.”

“Ask me what?” Derek said as he stepped out onto the deck with a cup of coffee in his hand.

Duke looked at Hannah and smiled.

“Hannah has an amazing idea and offer for Alex. Maybe you can convince her that it’s needed and worth it.”

Derek took a seat in the chair across from them. He stretched his legs out and got comfortable.

“I’m all ears.”

Hannah looked at Duke, and he nodded encouragingly and smiled.

When Hannah was finished explaining her idea to Derek, Duke was impressed. When she said that she had been working on it for a few weeks, she hadn’t been kidding. She had put a lot of thought into this project. And not only did she come up with the idea, but she had secured a major piece to make it happen—the funding.

When the place opened, it would offer various activities like fishing, kayaking, horseback riding, and many other adventures. She also mentioned having counselors on site for those wanting or needing to speak with someone.

“When you present that to Alex, I can tell you now that the first words out of her mouth after she says yes will be when can you get it operational. Not only is your offer very generous, but it is needed more than you know.”

Derek grinned at Duke. “She’s a keeper.”

Duke pulled Hannah close and down into her brown eyes.

“Yeah, she is.”

Derek’s phone rang, and he excused himself to take it.

Once they were alone, Duke pulled Hannah close.

“I’m so proud of you,” he told her, and she smiled.

“Granny and I used to sit around and try to think of ways we could use the property. Even though we came up with a few ideas, none of them would use the land to its full potential.

“Your granny would be so proud of you right now.”

“She would’ve loved being a part of it.” She cupped his cheek. “She would’ve definitely loved you. I don’t think I’ve said this yet, but thank you, Duke.”

“Thank me for what?”

“For being you. I love everything about you and what you represent.”

He ran the back of his hand down her cheek.

“I’m never letting you go.”

“You aren’t?” She teased.

“Mark my words, Hannah O’Quinn. One day soon, I’m going to have a ring on this finger of yours,” He told her, playing with her ring finger.

“Pretty presumptuous there, Mr. Reid.”

“Are you saying you don’t want that?”

She moved around so that she was straddling his lap.

“I’d marry you tomorrow if I could.”

“You would?”

“Of course, I would.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Someone cleared their throat, and both Hannah and Duke looked toward the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Derek told them. “That was Agent Davis. They have a lock on Rakin.”

“Seriously?” Duke asked.

“Yeah. They’ve got a positive ID at a hotel just outside of town. The Sheriff and State Police have been notified and are en route to a designated meet-up location. They’ve asked us to join them.”

Duke looked at Hannah, then back at Derek.

“I want to see this through, but I don’t want to leave her alone.”

“Agent Davis is sending another agent here.”

Hannah could tell that Duke was still cautious about leaving her. She knew he felt more comfortable having his eyes on her.

Hannah squeezed his hand. “Duke, look at me.”

She pressed her hand against his cheek and turned his head so he had to look at her. He had his eyes closed.

“Duke?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled before slowly opening his eyes.

“Clover and I will be fine.”

“Fine. But I want you both locked inside until we return or unless one of us calls and tells you that Rakin has been caught.”

“I have the two guys that Angie recommended coming to interview for the two jobs I’m hiring for. The first one is in an hour. Plus, he’s Angie’s cousin. But the second one I could reschedule.”

“Okay.”

Duke pressed his forehead against hers.

“I love you.”

She smiled and pecked his lips. “I love you, too. Be safe.” She pulled back and looked at Derek. “All of you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Hannah was sitting at her desk in her office reviewing the resumes for the last two job candidates she was set to interview shortly. They both had the experience she was looking for and were highly recommended by their previous employers and Angie.

At least she had something to keep her mind occupied with until she could hear from the guys. Then, hopefully, this whole thing would be behind them, and they wouldn't have to keep looking over their shoulders, wondering if someone was still out there looking to kill them.

There was a knock on the door, and when she looked up, she smiled at Clover. She looked exhausted, and Hannah felt guilty because she knew Clover had been staying up late, assisting the team.

"Girl, you look like you could sleep for a few days."

Clover stepped into the room and covered her mouth as she yawned, which made Hannah giggle.

"I feel like I could sleep for days."

"Why don't you go upstairs and take a nap?"

"Actually, I was coming to see if you would mind if I laid down for a bit."

Hannah offered her a warm smile. "Of course, I don't mind." She held up the two resumes. "I still have these guys to interview anyway."

"If I'm not up in two hours, wake me so I can help you with dinner."

"I will. Now go get some rest."

Forty minutes later, Hannah was pleased and finally felt like she accomplished something. The guy whom she just wrapped up the interview with for the lawn maintenance job nailed the interview. She offered him the job on the spot, and he accepted it.

Now, she just had to get through the handyman interview. It would be nice if that interview had the same outcome.

She looked at her watch and saw she still had about fifteen minutes until the man was due to arrive.

She walked out to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. While waiting for it to brew, Hannah looked out the French doors toward the many acres of rolling hills and land that would soon be the home of the new Horseshoe Hills Retreat Center—a haven for those who have served and protected.

She had already spoken with Alex, and Alex was fully on board with the project and loved the name that Hannah had come up with. She couldn't wait to tell Duke.

She wondered when they would be back and if they found the guy.

Just as she was about to pour a cup, the doorbell rang.

She walked toward the door and opened it. The last thing she was expecting was to have the barrel of a gun shoved into her face.

"You scream or try to run, and I'll blow your fucking head off right here. Then after I'm done with you, I'll kill the little blonde bitch sleeping upstairs."

Rakin! But how when Duke and the team were over at his motel? Then it dawned on her that he had tricked them, luring them out so he could strike. She saw a body lying on the porch. She recognized him as one of the agents. Her thoughts then moved to Clover. How did he know that Clover was upstairs asleep?

He pushed his way inside, pressing the gun firmly against her chest while making her walk backward. She nearly tripped but caught herself on the end table. But in the process of saving herself, she knocked a glass vase off the table, and it shattered. She hoped the noise would alert Clover that something was wrong.

"Is anybody else here?"

She shook her head, afraid to even speak.

"Give me your hands," he ordered, and she didn't hesitate holding them out in front of her. He pulled zip ties from his pocket and secured her hands together.

"You know the guys should be back any minute," she told him, finally finding her voice.

He struck her with the butt of the gun across the face, and she fell to the floor holding her jaw. "

"Shut the fuck up! Your guys won't be coming back so soon. Not after the mess I left them to sort through. By the time they return here, all they'll find left of you are pieces of your scattered body."

Hatred filled her body, and she wanted to kill this son of a bitch.

He grabbed her upper arm and yanked her to her feet.

"Get up! I don't have time to waste. The sooner I get rid of your ass, the faster I can be on my way."

As they walked toward the back door, she tried to think of ways to get

herself out of the jam she was in. She could try to outrun him. But he had a gun and could shoot her. Maybe talking to him would make him lower his guard. And when he did, she could try to go for the gun.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she told him as they walked down the back porch steps and toward the path that led to the hiking trails.

“Oh! So he told you how he killed my wife?” He asked, aiming the gun at her head.

She was shaking so badly, but she knew she had to try and keep calm.

“He did. But what does that have to do with me?”

“You and the SEAL are together. So, the way I see it, he killed my wife. So, I kill you.”

“What about your baby girl?”

“What about her?” He sneered, looking like he was disgusted just talking about her. He walked closer, with the gun still pointed at her.

“Don’t you want to see her again? If you go through with this, you’re signing your death warrant. You’ll never see her again.”

“What makes you think that I’ll be caught? As soon as I kill you, my purpose here is done. I’ll be long gone before they find you.”

She swallowed hard and hoped Duke already knew she was missing and they were searching for her.

“They won’t stop looking for you until they find you. And believe me, they will find you. And when that happens, you’ll never see your daughter again.”

“I don’t care about her. She is nothing but a piece of trash. An Omen.”

Tears formed in Hannah’s eyes. How could someone, a parent to a baby, be such a monster? His anger toward the child made Hannah wonder if he had killed the baby.

Another surprised strike to her face made her cry out. She could feel her face was already swollen, along with her lip.

“Enough talking—walk!” He pushed her along the trail.

Hannah knew this guy wasn’t going to negotiate. The only outcome of his game plan was to kill her. But if playing into his corrupted sick game bought her a little time, then she would do it.



Clover was enjoying the dream of her and Joker lying on a white sand beach somewhere in the South Pacific when suddenly she was awakened by

the sound of glass breaking.

Her eyes popped open, and she lay there for a few seconds, gathering her bearings and listening for any other sounds.

She slowly pushed the covers away and slid out of bed. She grabbed her cell phone and reached for her small Glock 26 on the nightstand.

Slowly, she made her way out into the hall and moved toward the stairs. From the top of the stairs, she could see the front door was wide open, and one of the security guys sprawled out on the porch, not moving.

Her heart began to race. She was a bit cautious and apprehensive, considering the last time an odd sound awakened her, she ended up being taken hostage by the former Vice President and nearly killed when she was shot.

Keeping her footsteps light, she swiftly moved down the stairs with her gun raised and ready to fire. At the bottom of the stairs, she saw the broken vase. Her eyes moved beyond the trail of glass to the wide open back door.

When she got to the doorway, she caught a glimpse of Hannah being led by Rakin down by the woods along the river. But then they disappeared into the trees.

She ran to the closet where she knew the guys had stored some of their weapons. When she opened the first long black bag, she found an M4A1 carbine rifle and ammunition. She grabbed both and headed back toward the back porch.

She hit Joker's number on her phone as she stepped onto the back porch and began her hunt.



Duke was standing outside Rakin's hotel room speaking with the team when Joker received a call from Clover.

"Hey, babe. What? Shit! Hang on, I'm gonna put you on speaker so everyone can hear."

Joker set the phone down on the hood of the Sheriff's truck.

"Go ahead."

"Rakin is here, and he took Hannah."

"Are you sure?" Duke asked, stepping up and taking charge of the conversation. His heart was pounding in his chest.

"Positive."

She told them how she heard the glass break, and when she got

downstairs, she saw the busted vase and unconscious agent. Then she found the back door, and that was when she saw Rakin leading Hannah into the woods.

“So, you think they’re headed toward the river?”

“No, they are headed west toward that old bridge.”

“How do you know for sure.”

“Because I’m following their trail.”

“Goddammit, Clover!” Joker shouted.

“Don’t be like that Joker. I wasn’t going to just sit on my ass and do nothing when my friend is in danger. Now instead of scolding me, how about you all get your asses in the car and head towards the bridge.”

If the situation was so dire and Hannah’s life wasn’t in danger, Duke would have laughed his ass off hearing Joker get his ass handed to him by his woman. But Clover had a point. They were wasting time.

Everyone piled into their vehicles. Joker kept Clover on the line and went with Duke in Sheriff Watt’s truck. That way, the Sheriff could relay information to everyone over the radio.

“The State Police are getting their chopper in the air. Having eyes in the sky will be a huge help, especially if he gets into the woods,” the Sheriff informed Duke.

They were approximately ten minutes out when they received word that the chopper had spotted Hannah and Rakin crossing the old bridge.

“Hang in there, baby, we’re coming,” Duke said.



Hannah and Rakin were crossing the old bridge when Hannah spotted a helicopter overhead. Rakin also noticed but blew it off like it wasn’t a threat. But Hannah recognized the State Police emblem on the side as the aircraft circled. She wondered if they had seen them. God, she hoped so.

At one point, she thought about jumping into the river from the bridge. But the odds of her surviving the fast-flowing water as it pushed its way down the river were slim, especially with her hands bound together.

When they made it across the rickety bridge and started heading toward a trail leading into the woods, Rakin slipped on a grouping of wet, loose rocks, causing him to lose his balance and release his hold on Hannah. The moment she saw him struggling to maintain his balance, she took off running down the hill toward the river and tree line. A bullet zipped by her, nearly



hitting her, and she dove to the ground. The momentum from the fall made her roll down the embankment, stopping just short of going over the riverbank's edge and becoming a victim of the river's unforgiving waters.

She was soaked and covered in mud. Getting to her feet was difficult because of the slick muck. Once she was back on her feet, her flight mode kicked again, but before she could flee, Rakin was on her.

His eyes looked wild and crazy as he swung the gun in her direction. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She didn't want to die. She may not be physically strong, but she wasn't one to be underestimated either.

She kicked the hand holding the gun, causing him to drop the weapon. She turned to run but was yanked backward. He started beating on her wherever his hands could reach. She fought back, kicking and hitting him. She managed to get in a good kick that landed between his legs, and he grabbed himself and fell to his knees.

She turned to run toward the water when the sound of gunshots went off. She screamed and stumbled over her own feet. She fell forward, hitting the ground once again.

She could hear sirens in the distance and knew Duke and everyone was coming. But would they reach her in time?

This wasn't how it was supposed to end. She had found the man of her dreams. She still had so much she wanted to experience in life.

She braced herself for another shot as the fight inside her dwindled.

Suddenly, the sound of a ferocious roar, followed by Rakin's piercing scream, shattered the stillness of the wilderness surrounding them.

Turning her head to see what was happening, she watched in horror as a large grizzly bear charged out of the tree line and launched itself at Rakin, sinking its razor-sharp claws into his chest. The wild animal continued to maul Rakin, taking his neck between its powerful jaws, biting down, and shaking him like a rag doll. Blood spilled from his body, painting the ground red.

She tried to scream, but nothing came out. She couldn't move. Her body felt numb and cold. Just when she thought she would become the bear's next prey, another shot was fired, and the bear released Rakin's mutilated body and scurried back into the woods.

She closed her eyes and rested her head on the ground. The sirens grew louder, and when she blinked her eyes open, she saw a convoy of flashing lights crossing the bridge. A sudden wave of relief washed over her, knowing

the terror had ended—Rakin was dead, and he could never come after them again.

She heard the vehicles approach, followed by doors slamming and men shouting. But the only voice she focused on was Duke's calling her name.

"Hannah!"

Moments later, she felt a set of hands on her, and she tightened up.

"Easy, baby. It's just me." Duke whispered.

"Duke..." she said his name, her voice hoarse and quivering from yelling and crying.

"I'm here, Hannah," he told her, brushing a few strands of hair from her face, and she slowly opened her eyes.

Seeing her favorite dark brown eyes looking at her made her heart skip a beat, causing a spark in her body, giving her just enough energy to seek protection in his arms.

She moaned as she tried to lift herself up, and Duke was there to help support her. Joker appeared and cut the zip ties off her wrists. And the moment they were removed, she launched herself at Duke, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face in his chest as she cried.

"You're safe, baby," he told her. "I've got you. You're okay."

But she wasn't okay. She felt numb, and her body began to shake as a coldness settled in her bones.

"Get her up to the ambulance. She may be going into shock," someone said, and then felt someone cover her with a blanket.

As they made it up the embankment, Hannah eased back a smidge to look at Duke.

"You all saved me. I was so afraid that the bear was going to come after me next."

"Bear?" Duke and the guys all said in unison.

"Yes. A big ass mamma grizzly bear," Clover said as she walked toward the group with her rifle in hand.

"Clover, why do you have Jay Bird's rifle?" Joker asked, his eyebrow arched.

"I told you I wasn't going to let my friend get hurt," she looked at Hannah and winked.

"It was you," Hannah said, a small smile tugging the corners of her lips. "You scared the bear off."

Clover grinned. "Yep. Once I knew Rakin was dead, I fired a shot,

making sure it would land close enough to the bear to scare it off.”

“You let the bear kill Rakin?” Joker asked, looking at Clover like she was crazy.

“You bet your ass I did. That bear did us all a favor.”

Hannah looked at Clover. “Thank you.”

Clover smiled. “Of course, us girls always have each other’s backs.”

Hannah heard some of the guys groan while others laughed.

Duke gently laid Hannah on the stretcher the paramedics brought over, and she grabbed his shirt.

“Please don’t leave,” she begged him, and he smiled before leaning over her and kissing her softly, avoiding the area where Rakin had hit her.

“Never, Hannah.”

## EPILOGUE

### **Two Months Later**

Hannah walked into the living room of her and Duke's house and absorbed the scene. The laughter and smiles from their family and friends filled the open and airy room with warmth and love.

After the incident with Rakin, she and Duke stayed in Wyoming for a few weeks to get things in order. They had agreed that Virginia Beach would be their full-time residence, and they would keep her ranch in Wyoming as a vacation home.

Also, with Alex's help, Hannah filed the permits for the new Horseshoe Hills Retreat Center that will span the entire forty-six acres of land west of Hannah's ranch.

It was nice having things back to normal and spending time with friends and family. Without those friends, they wouldn't be gathered at the house today to celebrate an important milestone in Duke and Hannah's journey.

Hannah's eyes immediately fell upon the man that she loved and would continue to love for the rest of her life. He stood in the center of the room, talking with his dad and Bear. But as if sensing her presence, he looked up and they locked gazes. He threw her that smile of his that put his dimple on display.

She started to think about everything that had taken place in the last three months—from the loss of her granny, to meeting the man of her dreams. She was so happy, and her life felt complete.

Lost in her silent thoughts, she didn't hear Duke sneak up behind her until she felt his arm wrap around her waist.

"Care to share what has you beaming like a bright ray of sunshine?" He whispered in her ear.

She didn't even realize she had been smiling. She looked up at him. "Why wouldn't I be smiling today? It's so wonderful to spend an important day with our closest family and friends.

Because of their awesome and well-connected friends, along with the cooperation of the Othana government, Duke and Hannah welcomed home their four-month-old baby girl, Isadora Ghalia Reid.

Hannah looked at the little princess who was fast asleep in her daddy's

arms. She had a busy day meeting her new family.

She placed her arm around Duke's waist and rested her head against his shoulder as they both watched their little girl sleep.

She took a chance, opened her heart, and found love. She looked around the room and felt her smile grow. She had come a long way in just a short amount of time. But she was the happiest she'd ever been. And it was all because of the man her angel in the sky led her to.

She looked up at Duke. "I don't see Playboy. Did he say if he was coming?"

"I don't think so. He called and told me he was at the hospital."

"Because of Gabby?"

Duke nodded. "The doctors think she might wake up soon, and Playboy said he wanted to be there when she does."

"He cares for her a lot."

"Yeah, he does. I just hope it all works out. She's got a tough road ahead of her."

"Me too. I hope they get their happily ever after like we did."

Duke smiled and glanced down at the pink bundle in his arms.

"Nothing makes me happier than having my soon-to-be wife and our beautiful daughter by my side. I love you both so much."

Hannah looked down at the diamond on her ring finger, then stood on her tiptoes, careful to avoid disturbing Isadora, and kissed him softly.

"And we love you too."

Playboy and Gabby's story is coming in December 2023!

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# Book List

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[ACE](#)  
[POTTER](#)  
[FROST](#)  
[IRISH](#)  
[STITCH](#)  
[DINO](#)  
[SKITTLES](#)  
[DIEGO](#)  
[A TRIDENT WEDDING](#)

## **The Trident Series II** **BRAVO Team**

[JOKER](#)  
[BEAR](#)  
DUKE  
[PLAYBOY](#) (2023)  
[AUSSIE](#) (2024)  
[NAILS](#) (2024)  
SNOW (2024)  
JAY BIRD (2024)

## About the Author

Jaime Lewis, a *USA TODAY* bestselling author, entered the indie author world in June 2020 with *ACE*, the first book in the Trident Series.

Coming from a military family, she describes as very patriotic; it's no surprise that her books are known for their accurate portrayal of life in the service.

Passionate in her support of the military, veterans, and first responders, Jaime volunteers with the Daytona Division of the US Naval Sea Cadet Corps, a non-profit youth leadership development program sponsored by the U.S. Navy. Together with her sons, she also manages a charity organization that supports military personnel and their families, along with veterans and first responders.

Born and raised in Edgewater, Maryland, Jaime now resides in Ormond Beach, Florida with her husband and two very active boys.

Between writing and her boys, she doesn't have a heap of spare time. But if she does, you'll find her somewhere outdoors. Jaime is also an avid sports fan.

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