



FINAL SHOT

CRIMSON POINT PROTECTORS

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAYLEA
CROSS

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Crimson Point Protectors

Kaylea Cross

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Neither of them were looking for love.

After suffering devastating loss, physiotherapist Everleigh Manning is rebuilding her life in the picturesque seaside town of Crimson Point. She's even made a list of new things she wants to try—and it doesn't include men. But when unexpected sparks fly between her and a friend, her life is turned upside down all over again. Grady is taking a new job in another state soon, and her instinct is to guard her heart—but she decides to take a risk on him anyway. She knows better than anyone how short life is and would rather risk more pain than miss out on the chance for something real. Then evil strikes without warning, shattering her newfound happiness and plunging them both into a desperate fight for survival.

It finds them anyway.

For the past few years paramedic Grady Mendoza has focused on his career in the military and set everything else aside, including relationships. Until Everleigh. She's been off limits until recently but when mutual attraction flares hot between them, it's game on. Now he can't stay away, and soon she's making him question everything he thought he wanted out of life. Because time is running out for them, and the thought of walking away from her is tearing him up inside. And when they're suddenly thrust into the middle of a deadly maelstrom, Grady is prepared to give up everything to save her—including his life.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

CONTENT WARNING:

I have never included a content warning in a book before, but this time I feel it's necessary. I want to state right up front that this story contains gun violence in the form of a mass shooting.

I have several readers who are survivors of the Las Vegas shootings. At least one of them lost a loved one that night.

I dedicate this book to them, to the survivors and those who were lost, and to everyone affected by this kind of horrific violence that sadly exists in our society today.

Kaylea

Prologue

Nine months ago

Breathe. Just breathe...

Eyes closed, Everleigh drew in a shuddering breath and gripped the thin sheet covering the gurney she was lying on, trying to block out everything happening around her in the emergency room. She was afraid to open her eyes. Afraid to see the blood soaking through the thick pad between her legs. Unable to accept what was happening.

Jagged fragments of memory sliced through her mind. Her car cresting the top of the hill. Singing along to a favorite song on the radio. Then the sudden, blinding glare of the truck's headlights as it cut right at her.

She'd swerved, but not in time. The terrible crunch of metal. The unforgiving impact that had severed her scream, sending her spinning across the road. Landing upside down in the deep ditch. Trapped by metal and plastic, the suffocating pressure of the airbag slowly releasing as it deflated.

And then the pain. Sharp. Low in her pelvis where the seatbelt had jerked taut across her hips.

She shuddered. Sucked in air as panic rose in a dark tide. Hot tears trickled out of the corners of her eyes, dripping into her hair. She couldn't move her head. The firemen had put her in a C-collar and strapped her to a spine board.

Releasing her grip on the sheet with her right hand, she placed her palm low on her abdomen. *My baby.*

Maybe the bleeding was slowing. Maybe everything would be okay.

Beyond the curtained enclosure of the treatment bay they'd put her in, nurses and doctors rushed around seeing to the other patients while she waited for an obstetrician to come see her, do an ultrasound and either X-rays or a CT scan on her neck.

She shivered, a mix of cold and shock and fear. They'd asked her if they

could call someone to be here with her. But there was no one. Her best friend Marley was away. Her parents lived in Arizona. And her husband was dead.

A ragged sob caught in her throat. She choked it back, fought down the rising tide of panic at the sensation of warmth between her thighs. Will hadn't known about the baby. It was the one piece of him she had left. She couldn't lose it. Not now.

Rapid footsteps approached. She opened her eyes just as the curtain opened. Her friend Grady—a nurse at this hospital—stood there, tall and dark, a concerned expression on his face.

She flung out a hand toward him, more tears blinding her. His warm, strong grip curled around it as he stepped closer. She'd never been so glad to see anyone in her life.

“What happened?” he asked quietly, his gaze sweeping over her.

“I w-was almost h-home,” she whispered, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I came around the corner and a truck was right in front of me. I swerved, but...” She pressed her lips together to stifle a sob, her other hand going to her belly. “The baby...”

He sank to one knee beside her, putting them at eye level, and stroked the hair away from her forehead with his other hand. His amber gaze held hers, steadying her slightly. “How far along are you?”

Her lips quivered, and she clung tight to his hand. “Ten weeks. Someone went to get a Doppler.”

He glanced down the length of the gurney to where the blood had stained the sheet, then looked back into her eyes. He worked in labor and delivery. Would know exactly how bad this was. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

“Just some cramping.” Her cold fingers were already beginning to turn numb under the force of her grip around his hand. A sudden bolt of desperation tore through her. “I can't take this, Grady, this is all I have left of him. Oh, God, please help—”

“I will,” he said, his voice low and calm. Soothing the jagged edge of panic. “Is there someone else I can call to come be with you?”

She sniffled, her voice catching. “N-no.”

He squeezed her hand. “I'll stay with you.” She recognized it for the vow it was.

“Thank you,” she choked out, grateful for his strong, steadying presence in the midst of her worst nightmare.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and make you a bit more comfortable in the meantime, okay?”

She tried to nod, couldn’t move her head with the neck brace on.

He left her to get what he needed and turned back to her as he put on gloves. The thought of him taking care of her so intimately caused only a momentary twinge of embarrassment.

“What’s taking them so long?” she whispered unsteadily, closing her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see what he was doing. The waiting was agony.

“I’ll go check in a minute,” he promised, reaching under the bottom of her gown to gently remove the soaked pad from between her legs.

He put the clean one in place, took her hand and pressed it to the pad to hold it there before covering her back up. She kept her eyes closed, tried to stem the trembling while Grady changed the sheet beneath her and covered her with another blanket. He tucked it around her securely, the care in the gesture bringing more tears to her eyes, then set a hand on her shoulder, making her look up into his face. “I’ll go find out what’s going on and come straight back,” he said, then left.

Everleigh tensed when he stepped back in minutes later with a female nurse she knew named Molly. Seeing the Doppler in his hand, a sharp blade of fear dug into her.

“Hey,” Molly said with a gentle smile, moving to stand beside her and take her hand. Everleigh held on tight. “You warm enough?”

She gave a jerky nod and stared at the ceiling, her pulse thudding out of control. She just needed to know the baby was okay. Then it would be all right. “Please just do it,” she blurted at Grady.

“All right,” he said.

He eased the blanket he’d covered her with down to her hips, then gently drew the bottom of her gown up to expose her abdomen. She flinched at the cold gel on the head of the ultrasound, tried to relax against the pressure low over her abdomen as Grady began moving it around slowly.

Please be okay, little one...

She squeezed her eyes shut. Afraid to breathe in the taut silence as they all listened for any sign of the heartbeat she’d first heard at her last appointment, less than a week ago.

But there was only silence.

Deep, icy fear ripped through her.

The probe kept moving slowly. Searching. “Dr. Anderson’s ordered an ultrasound,” Grady finally said. “We’ll take you down there next and—”

The chill inside her invaded her heart. She grabbed his hand on the probe, stilling it, and looked up at him. Their eyes met. And she saw the confirmation of her worst fear written in his.

“Stop,” she whispered. Shaking. Grief tearing her apart. *My baby’s gone...*

“I’m going to make sure the ultrasound tech’s ready for you,” Molly murmured, squeezing Everleigh’s hand before rushing out.

Grady quickly covered her back up. “Everleigh—”

“No,” she choked out, reaching blindly for his hand. She clenched it tight, tears blinding her. She felt frozen inside. A dead, hollow space. “My baby’s dead. I’ve lost everything, I...”

Grady dropped down to wrap his arms around her. The dam broke.

Grief sliced through her. A terrible, high-pitched sound of agony came from between her clamped lips. She was barely aware of him, could hardly feel the way he was trying to hold her, lost to everything but the searing pain.

She didn’t know how long it was before her sobs finally began to fade. She lay there empty and cold, her entire body wracked with shudders. Grady eased back, got a clean cloth and gently washed her face.

“Thanks,” she murmured in a rough voice. Everything was gone now. She just wanted to sleep. Sleep and sleep, and not wake up. Not have to face what came next. Because this nightmare was far from over. And the thought of them scraping what was left of her baby out—

“Sure,” he said softly.

She swallowed hard. Waited until she had control of her voice again before she asked him for what she needed now. “Will you stay with me until they take me into the OR?” she whispered.

He stroked a hand over her hair, the compassion and tenderness on his face almost making her break down again. “Of course I will.”

Chapter One

A cold, damp wind carrying the scent of the sea rushed through the helo's open bay doors, buffeting the Blackhawk as the crew moved in closer to circle the target below. The large freezer trawler had been caught in a sudden squall, almost capsizing the vessel and damaging the engine. One of the crew had sustained critical injuries while on deck when a rogue wave had hit.

Seated just to the side of the door, Grady reached up and grabbed hold of a strap to steady himself as he scanned the area below, his buddy and fellow PJ Groz crouched behind him, and their team leader, Travis, poised on the other side of the doorway. The vessel was too far out for the Coast Guard, so their Air National Guard unit had received the call.

A layer of thick, heavy gray cloud stretched overhead, disappearing into the horizon. Down below, the water was a roiling mass of white-capped waves pushing the stricken vessel along. It was mid-June, but the weather sure didn't know it. Last night's storm had dropped the temperature and brought fall-like conditions to the Pacific Northwest.

Two crewmen wearing bright orange overalls were out on deck, waving their arms. The engineer and rest of the crew were below deck working to restore power to get them underway again.

Grady shifted his weight as the helo's crew chief moved in behind him, speaking over the intercom in their helmets. "Injured crewman's on a spine board in the wheelhouse. He's conscious, breathing on his own, but he's in a lot of pain. Possible spinal injuries in addition to a fracture of the lower leg. Likely broken ribs, possible internal injuries. The pilots are going to move into a hover and let you guys rope down."

"Roger that," Travis said. "How are we on fuel?"

"You'll have twenty minutes to get the patient on board."

That was tight. In these conditions, really tight, but Travis nodded. "I'll go down first," he said to them. "Grady, you're with me. Groz, you stay here

for now. The patient's a big guy. We're gonna need some extra muscle to get him on board."

"Got it," Groz said, and shifted back out of the way to give them more room while Grady and Trav grabbed their gear. He was a beast, the biggest guy in the unit, with an appetite to match. A bottomless pit when it came to food, and they never passed up an opportunity to give him a hard time about it.

The pilots circled once more and began to descend, moving closer and closer to the deck of the rocking boat, making sure to keep well clear of the nets and other equipment sticking up from the vessel. When they were in place, the crew chief checked the LZ one last time before throwing the nylon fast rope out the helo door and signaling Travis.

Travis got himself into position and slid down to the deck. Just before he touched down, a big wave hit the vessel broadside, tilting it sharply. Travis slipped on the deck but managed to catch himself, then held the end of the rope and signaled for Grady to come down.

Gripping the rope tight with his gloves, Grady slipped out the side of the helo, wound the insteps of his boots around the rope, and let it slide through his gloved hands as he dropped toward the deck. He was six feet from touching down when the boat suddenly dipped into a deep trough.

He squeezed the rope hard to halt his descent and hung there while Travis kept hold of the loose end. Grady glanced up. The rotor wash and wind whipped salt spray into his face, coating his goggles. He looked back down, kept his gaze trained on the deck to time his landing, and as soon as it began to rise, slid down the rest of the way.

An instant before his boots met the deck, another big wave shoved the boat violently upward at an angle.

His left foot slipped sideways on the deck. He gritted his teeth and sucked in a breath as something sharp popped in his knee under the sudden, abrupt force of the rising deck.

Pain shot through it, buckling his leg. He caught himself with his hands just before he crashed to the deck, clenched his jaw and forced himself upright, keeping most of his weight off his left knee that still felt like someone had just driven an icepick through the side of it.

Not good. Not fucking good at all.

He'd had knee injuries before. It was impossible to do this job, do the

kind of training and missions they did, without incurring wear and tear on your body and joints.

This was different. The pain was sharper and more intense, and his knee was already stiffening up.

He concealed his limp as best he could as he followed Travis through the spray from the waves across the wet, shifting deck to where the crewmembers were ushering them toward the wheelhouse. With every step pain stabbed through his knee, making his leg unstable. Trying to keep his balance on the pitching deck made it even worse.

“Mendoza,” Travis said from the wheelhouse doorway, waving him over.

Grady hustled across the slippery, rocking deck, fighting to ignore the pain. It didn’t matter if he was injured. The patient waiting inside that room was way worse off. They had to get him stabilized and get him on board that helo ASAP.

That Others May Live. It wasn’t just a motto. It was a solemn vow, one that he and every other PJ lived and breathed.

The two crewmen stepped aside to flank the wheelhouse door as Grady entered. The captain and medical officer were kneeling on the steel floor beside the patient. Both men looked up at him and Travis with grim expressions.

“His name’s Dave,” the captain said, looking at them anxiously.

Travis knelt on one side of Dave while Grady slowly went to his good knee on the man’s other side and shrugged out of his med ruck. Their patient was conscious but not alert, obviously in shock. “Hi, Dave. Can you hear me?” Travis said, leaning over him.

Dave’s bleary, heavy-lidded eyes focused on them but he didn’t respond, his breathing raspy under the oxygen mask the crew had put on him, his chest and large abdomen exposed by his open shirt. Dave was a big boy all right. Leaving Groz on board to load him had been a good move.

“The rogue wave slammed him into the railing,” the captain said. “He started screaming that he’d broken his back, then the boat rolled and he hit the starboard wall and busted his leg.”

Grady completed his visual sweep while the captain spoke. The crew had done a decent job of immobilizing Dave with a spine board and tried to splint his leg to keep it steady. But from the angle of Dave’s foot, both his tibia and

fibula were fractured halfway down. They'd cut away the leg of his waterproof overalls. The fracture was closed, at least.

Travis immediately began doing his own assessment, pulling out a penlight to check Dave's pupils. "How old is he?"

"Thirty-seven."

Travis got on the radio to Groz and the pilots while Grady quickly pulled out a stethoscope and blood pressure cuff to take Dave's BP. "Thirty-seven-year-old male, conscious and somewhat alert. GCS twelve. BP..." Travis glanced at Grady.

"Eighty-five over fifty," he answered, undoing the Velcro cuff from around Dave's upper arm. Low. Definitely a sign of shock, but there could be internal injuries as well.

Travis repeated the info and kept going, palpating Dave's neck, spine, chest and abdomen. Dave grimaced and let out a strangled cry when Travis palpated the region around his left kidney. Could be one of his ribs had fractured and hit it.

"Start a line," Travis said to Grady.

Grady immediately prepped a vein in Dave's forearm and started an IV, his knee pulsing with its own heartbeat the entire time. If there was internal bleeding they needed to keep Dave's blood volume up on the flight back.

Together, he and Travis assessed the lower leg fracture, stabilized the limb better and secured Dave to the spine board along with a cervical collar while Travis stayed in contact with the helo the whole time, alerting the others that they were ready to transport.

Grady administered some ketamine to keep Dave's pain level at a dull roar, packed his gear and grasped the foot of the spine board, mentally bracing for the coming pain.

Travis laid his hand on Dave's shoulder and the man's eyes rolled up to look at him blankly. "We're gonna get you on board the helo now and fly you to a trauma center in Portland. A Coast Guard cutter is on the way to evacuate the rest of your crew. Ready?"

Dave's eyes squeezed shut, his body tensing as if he knew this was gonna hurt.

Travis looked across him at Grady. "On three. One, two, three."

Grady pushed upright. Pain seared through his left knee. He stifled a yell and staggered a step, trying to balance most of his weight on his other foot.

Ignoring the look Travis shot him, he clamped his jaw shut as the two of them made their way out of the wheelhouse, carrying Dave between them.

Every step was like a knife jabbing into his knee. Waves continued to batter the boat as they crossed the undulating deck. The helo lowered into position above them, the fast rope lashing under the force of the rotor wash. Grady almost groaned in relief when they set Dave down and Travis waved at Groz and the crew chief.

They lowered the basket. Travis settled it on the deck while the pilots fought to keep a bit of slack in the cable and keep the basket still under the deck's movements.

Balanced on his good knee, Grady helped Travis hoist Dave onto the litter and secure him, then Travis signaled the helo. The basket slowly lifted off the deck, swung back and forth a bit before stabilizing as it rose toward the open helo door.

Groz was waiting there with the crew chief to muscle their patient inside. Once Dave was secure they lowered the empty cable back down. Travis nodded at Grady to hook on.

He was conscious of the pounding pulse in his knee as the winch hauled him up through the gusting wind. At the doorway, he clenched his back teeth together and climbed inside, more pain slicing through his knee every time it hit the deck of the helo.

Groz was already working on Dave toward the back. Grady immediately crawled over to them while the crew chief sent the cable back down for Travis.

Their team leader came through the doorway a minute later. "Good to go," Travis said as he unhooked from the cable and shut the door behind him.

The pilots banked in a tight turn and then pulled them skyward to begin the flight back to shore. Pushing his physical discomfort aside, Grady focused on his job, working smoothly and easily with his fellow PJs to stabilize and treat the patient, the exact same as he would with his ICU staff.

But his knee was stiffening by the minute. Within fifteen of leaving the boat, he couldn't bend or straighten it more than partway. But there was no time to dwell on it. Dave was in rough shape and his core temp was low. Travis got on the radio to the trauma team in Portland, updating them on Dave's condition. They were already prepping the OR in anticipation of his arrival, and a neurosurgeon was standing by.

Once they reached the trauma center to hand Dave off to the team there, Grady's adrenaline had dropped. Without a patient to focus on, his pain level shot up and he found himself wishing he could have a hit of ketamine to take the edge off.

They spent the short flight to base cleaning up the back of the helo. Grady stayed seated as much as possible, didn't utter a word about what was going on. The patient and the mission were paramount. His injury was what it was, and there would be plenty of time to examine it more closely later.

When they climbed out onto the tarmac in front of the hangar with the Pararescue angel painted on the front, however, there was no way to hide he was hurt. His knee was too swollen and unstable to allow him to do better than limp along beside Groz and Travis.

Travis cut him a sharp look. "You good?" Groz stopped and glanced at him too.

"Yeah." Damn, how bad was it? His heart rate kicked up, concern building.

He got his answer after the mission debriefing when he stripped off to shower. His knee was swollen and stiff, and tender to palpation along the medial joint line. Combined with the inability to bear weight, straighten it completely or bend it more than thirty degrees...

He knew what it was. And that he was fucked.

He wiped a hand over his clammy face, telling himself to calm down. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he feared. Maybe it would resolve with some rest, ice and anti-inflammatories. He would wrap it tight, wear a brace if need be to provide extra support. Whatever it took to get back in the game.

Travis walked in and saw him sitting there in his underwear, his gaze immediately zeroing in on Grady's knee. "How bad?"

Medial collateral ligament damage for sure. From the popping sensation he'd felt, probably meniscus as well. Hopefully not the ACL.

Please not the ACL. That would sideline him for at least nine months to a year—after the wait for major reconstructive surgery. He couldn't afford that if he wanted to make SOST this year.

"Dunno." He prayed it wasn't so bad that he would be sidelined for more than a few weeks. Because if he wasn't healed up by early September...

He shook the thought away, refusing to allow it to take root in his mind. He'd worked toward this tryout for five years. Busted his ass putting in extra

hours on base and at the hospital, in addition to all the courses he'd taken to earn his certification. Being sidelined by a serious injury now, being unable to go through selection after everything he'd done to prepare, would gut him.

Travis met his gaze, blue eyes assessing. "Bill Reinhart isn't working tonight. Want me to call him? I can drive you to see him, get you answers tonight."

Reinhart was former Army and one of the most respected orthopedic surgeons in the region. Grady and Travis both knew him from working at the hospital. "Thanks, but not yet. I want to talk to someone else first." Someone he trusted and hadn't seen in a while.

Someone who had the skill and experience to assess the extent of his injury and give him advice on what steps to take next. Someone with white-blond hair and piercing smoky-blue eyes, who he'd been thinking about so much for the past nine months.

Most importantly, she had no connection to the military. Because if this turned out to be not as bad as he feared, he didn't want command benching him due to some military official refusing to give him clearance.

Travis nodded, unable to hide the empathy in his eyes. "Okay. Then how about I go find you some crutches."

Grady expelled a breath. Yeah. Walking out of here without assistance wasn't happening, no matter how much he wished it were otherwise. "Thanks, brother."

"No worries. Whatever you need, and any way I can help. That was good work today. We need you back ASAP." He clapped a hand on Grady's back on the way out the door.

Alone in the empty locker room, Grady closed his eyes and started making decisions, the pain in his knee pulsing in time with his heartbeat. First thing tomorrow, he was going to be waiting at Everleigh's physio clinic before the doors opened in the morning.

Chapter Two

Who is Everleigh Manning?

It was a good question. One she'd been thinking about over the past ten days since her last session with her therapist. And the honest answer was, she just wasn't sure anymore.

At some point she had lost herself and not even realized it. Long before Will had died, if she was being completely truthful, although his sudden, unexpected death had aggravated everything.

Her patient shifted on the table, snapping her out of her thoughts. "Uncomfortable?" Everleigh asked, holding the IMS needle in the belly of the woman's right piriformis muscle. Betty was one of her favorite patients. Eighty-nine years old and still doing everything in her power to stay active and live her best life.

There was an important lesson there. Everleigh was determined to start living her best life too.

Betty turned her head to rest her cheek on the face cradle, grimacing. "Ooh, that's tender. Not too bad though, keep going. I'm tougher than I look."

Everleigh smiled. "I believe it. Two knee replacements and one hip replacement over the past eighteen months is not for the faint of heart. You're practically bionic at this point."

"Just one more hip replacement to go and I get the next orthopedic surgery free."

She laughed. "Betty, you're a legend." She waited for the muscle to settle down, then removed the needle and wiped the area down with rubbing alcohol. "All right. Yucky part's done. Now for the spa portion of the treatment."

"Yes. I *adore* this part." Betty turned her face back into the cradle.

"I know you do." She covered Betty's hip and thigh with the sheet, undraped her lower back, then started the massage. Betty was a delicate little

thing, her muscle tissue thin and her bones fragile, so Everleigh was careful not to bruise her.

“Ooh, that’s the spot,” Betty groaned into the face cradle as Everleigh worked over her sacrum. “I’m trying really hard not to drool, but you’re not making it easy.”

Everleigh smirked. “Anything feels better than being poked with a needle though.”

“True. And now seems a good time to mention that I brought you more of those shortbreads you like as a bribe for a few extra minutes of this.”

“Deal.” Betty was one of those patients who made Everleigh love her job. And always spoiling her with homemade treats she couldn’t pass up.

After helping Betty off the table and sending her on her way with more exercises for homework, Everleigh was sanitizing the table and getting the treatment room ready for her next patient when the clinic receptionist came in. “A new patient was asking for you. He’s in treatment room four with Rod right now, but he wanted to see you if you have time before your next appointment.”

“Sure, I’ll pop in. What’s it about?”

“Knee injury.”

“Okay. I’ll go now.” She knocked on the door down the hall and received permission to come in. Her gaze immediately shot past Rod to the patient on the table and her eyes widened. “Grady!”

Seated on the table, he flashed her a grin, showing off his killer dimples that caused a fluttering sensation to kick off deep in her belly. He was ridiculously good-looking, and incredibly fit. Even a recent widow like her couldn’t fail to notice how attractive he was. And he’d always been kind to her when they’d crossed paths at the hospital before she left. He was also a highly skilled rescue medic in the Air National Guard. What wasn’t to like about a man like that?

“Hi. Long time no see,” he said.

“Yes.” Over two months already. As glad as she was to see him again, it was also a bit of a gut punch. He’d been with her the night she lost the baby. Seeing him brought everything rushing back in vivid detail.

“How long have you been here now?”

She forced a smile, buried the lingering grief she fought on a daily basis. There was no point in looking back anymore. The only way for her to go on

with her life was to move forward. “Seven weeks. Needed a change of scenery rather than being at the hospital every day. Too many reminders there. You know what I mean.” Struggling through the dual grieving process was hard enough without a daily reminder of her losses at her workplace.

He nodded, his striking amber eyes locked on her, and she felt another little jump deep inside. He’d let his dark hair grow out a little, long enough in front and on top to style a bit now. The dark gray T-shirt he wore hugged his muscular chest and shoulders to perfection and showed off the half-sleeves of tattoos on both roped forearms. “How’ve you been?”

“Better than you,” she said, nodding at his left knee wrapped up and elevated on the table. “What happened?”

“Landed wrong on a slippery boat deck on a mission yesterday. The good news is, X-rays confirmed no fractures.”

She pointed at his file sitting on the end of the table and glanced from Rod to Grady. “May I?”

“Of course,” Grady said.

Rod handed it over and said goodbye, leaving them alone.

“I got here first thing this morning and tried to get an appointment with you, but you’re booked solid for the next three weeks,” Grady said after the door shut.

“Yeah, sorry about that. A lot of my patients from the hospital clinic came over here when I moved. Why didn’t you just call me? I would have come to your place to do an assessment last night.”

“Nah, I got in late and didn’t want to impose.”

She cocked her head to one side and lifted an eyebrow, not having it. “Really? This from the guy who insisted I call him for help anytime?”

He lifted a shoulder. “But you never did.”

“Because I’m stubborn,” she muttered. She’d been so devastated, so utterly lost and suffocated by grief that she’d shut the rest of the world out. The only people she’d been in contact with during those few weeks had been her parents and in-laws.

She scanned the notes Rod had made in the file. Pain and swelling above the medial joint line. Tenderness and increased ROM on abduction stress test. Reduced AROM and PROM, with locking of knee joint on forced extension, and a springy end feel. Positive McMurray’s test. Lachman test negative though. That was some good news.

“Suspected grade two medial collateral ligament tear with meniscal involvement. Mild ACL sprain,” she read, then looked up at him with a wince. With rest and enough time, for some people it was possible this kind of injury would heal on its own. But given his line of work with the military? No way.

“Yeah. Looks like I’m going to need to have it scoped.”

“Do you have a referral to an orthopedic surgeon?”

“Travis is setting me up with one of the docs at work. Reinhart.”

“Oh, fantastic.” Travis was a great guy—also in Grady’s military unit, and a physician assistant in his civilian job, and Dr. Reinhart was amazing. “Any idea how long a wait you’re looking at?”

“Because of my military role they’re trying to fast track me. I might be able to get in later this week if there’s a cancellation.”

“That’s good.” She closed the file, glanced at his wrapped knee. “How’s it feeling right now?”

“Swollen.”

“I’ll bet.” The treatment notes said Rod had done some light range of motion work, then TENS on Grady’s quads, focusing on the vastus medialis, then effleurage and ice to reduce swelling before wrapping it up with an ice pack. “You’ll be off work at the hospital for a few weeks at least, and another few after the surgery. What about the military?”

“I need to recover as fast as possible. I’ve got something really important coming up, and I can’t miss it.”

She nodded, curious. “What is it?”

“A tryout, basically.” He didn’t volunteer more.

“When?”

“September.”

“That’s doable—if you get the operation soon, stick to your treatment plan, *and* do the proper rehab after surgery.”

A quick grin quirked his lips, making those delicious dimples flash again. He had a relaxed, easygoing manner about him, but there was also an underlying intensity she was curious about. She’d bet that side of him came out in his military job. And maybe elsewhere in his...private life. That was incredibly tantalizing to someone with as limited experience as her.

Really, Ev? You’re gonna go there? Talk about unprofessional, especially since he was sitting here as a patient in the clinic.

“I will,” he said, thankfully yanking her from that train of thought. “Trust me. I want my knee as strong as possible by September.”

She opened her mouth to ask more about the tryout he’d mentioned, but was cut off by the receptionist knocking on the partially open door and peeking in. “Ev. Sorry to interrupt, but your next patient’s here. I’ve put her in treatment room three.”

“Okay.” Mrs. Holland, a fifty-eight-year-old suffering from an acute and incredibly stubborn case of adhesive capsulitis they’d been treating for two months already. “Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Everleigh handed the receptionist the file and turned back to Grady, startled to find him watching her with a hint of that intensity she was so curious about. There was an unmistakable animal magnetism about him, an underlying sense of command she found incredibly attractive. After how numb she’d been for the past year, that was quite a shock. “What?”

“Nothing, you just look really good. Much better than the last time I saw you.”

She huffed out a breath, flushing slightly. “I’ve packed on about fifteen pounds since then.” Mind you, she’d been too thin at that point. Stress and grief had taken their toll on her.

“Looks good on you.” His eyes held an appreciative gleam that made her pulse trip and sent more blood rushing to her face. She was ridiculously fair, so her cheeks were probably bright pink right now.

“Ah, thanks.” She felt downright plump by comparison to where she’d been a year ago. Barely any of her old clothes fit her now, so she’d had to replace over half her wardrobe.

“Are you doing better?”

She met his gaze again, touched by his genuine concern. That was another thing she liked about him. He was sincere and cared about people. “Yes. I’m working on it.”

“That’s all any of us can do when life knocks us down. Get back up and never quit.”

Her smile faltered as he swiveled on the table to grab his crutches and stood, the eyeful of bulging pecs and biceps scattering her thoughts. She shook herself, annoyed. She was at work. She saw fit men all the time in various states of undress, and treated them all professionally. Yet Grady made her blush like a teenage girl. It made her feel off-balance.

Time to go. "I'd better get to my next patient. Keep me posted, and let me know if you need anything." She paused. "I mean it. I want you to get back to a hundred-percent as fast as possible."

He stopped, looked at her with those gorgeous golden eyes rimmed with thick black lashes. "Thanks. Me too."

"Sure. Drive safe and ice that again when you get home." She turned away and stepped out into the hallway.

"Everleigh."

Just the sound of her name in that low, deep voice made her pulse quicken. She paused and glanced back at him. Found him balanced on his crutches only feet away. His scent drifted to her. Woodsy and clean. "Yes?" she heard herself say, struggling not to stare like an idiot.

"What time do you get off tonight?"

I haven't gotten off in a long time.

Her eyes started to flare in horror at the wayward sexual thought before she caught herself and schooled her expression. Where the hell had that come from? Even if it was true. Her libido had never been that high to begin with, and grief had killed what was left of it stone dead. "Um, in about an hour. Why?"

"Feel like grabbing a bite to eat with me after you're done? I'm starving, and I'd love to catch up more."

She stared at him for a moment. A half-dozen reasons to decline jumped to the front of her brain. But caught under the spell of that magnetic gaze, none of them seemed important enough to refuse. "Sure, that sounds good. Text me where you want to go and I'll meet you there when I'm done." She flashed him a smile, hoped she didn't seem flustered as she turned away and rushed for the treatment room down the hall.

It wasn't a date, she told herself, struggling to switch mental gears back to the ensuing battle against frozen shoulder. She and Grady were just casual friends catching up. No pressure involved. And that was just as well, because she was nowhere near ready to consider seeing anyone again.

Even if Grady made a deeply buried part of her wish otherwise.

Chapter Three

Grady pushed up from his chair, bracing his hands on the table when Everleigh walked into the restaurant, and signaled her with a raised arm. Part of him was still surprised she'd accepted his invitation. Surprised but glad. He'd meant it as a friendly gesture, but if he was honest, there was a lot more underlying it.

He'd been into her for a long time. If she'd given him any indication at all that she was interested in him and ready to start seeing someone, he would be *all* over that chance. But she hadn't and wasn't, and he'd rather be her friend than nothing at all.

She rushed straight over, the evening sun streaming through the windows lighting up her long, pale blond hair. God, she was stunning. Every time he saw her, he got a hitch in his chest.

"Don't get up!" she admonished. "Sit, sit." She rushed around behind him and helped get him settled back in his chair, amusing him.

"I'm not helpless, you know." He'd take the attention from her though.

"No, but you need to be resting your knee, not—" She gave him an adorably sheepish grin, as if just realizing he was also a medical professional. "Sorry. I can't help myself." She put her purse down on the empty chair beside him at the four-seat table. "Want to prop your foot up on this?"

"No, I'm good." He loved that she cared. "And seeing you again makes it hurt less anyway."

She laughed softly and sat across from him, propping her chin in her hands, giving him her full attention with those stunning slate-blue eyes. Looking like an angel here on Earth. "So. What's new? I'm totally out of the loop and have no idea what you've been up to, aside from getting yourself injured while saving others."

He grinned. It was great to see her coming back to life, so to speak. Watching her suffer and retreat into herself, retreat from life after her husband died had been tough, and it had been even worse for her after the

miscarriage. “I’ve finally finished all my courses. For now, anyway. And I’ve got a few thousand hours in the ICU already.”

“That’s awesome, good for you. So you’re not doing much L&D anymore?”

“No, hardly ever now.”

“You miss it?”

“Sometimes.” But working L&D wasn’t going to get him where he wanted to be.

“What made you want to switch?”

“There’s a specialized military unit I want to join. Selection starts in late September.”

“Ah. So that’s why the hard deadline with your rehab.”

“Yes.” He had to be ready by then. Couldn’t even think about the alternative after everything he’d done and sacrificed to get to this point.

“What is it, exactly? And what would you do there?”

He wouldn’t answer that for most civilians, but he trusted Everleigh. “Special Operations Surgical Team, or SOST. It’s an elite unit. Lightweight, mobile surgical team with advanced medical and tactical training. They perform trauma care and surgery anytime, anyplace, in any conditions. Each team has six specialists. Emerg physician, general surgeon, nurse anesthetist, surgical technician, respiratory therapist, and a critical care nurse. Which I applied for.”

She stared at him, eyes wide. “That’s incredible.”

Yeah, and he wanted it bad. “I’m super stoked about it. Been working hard to make it happen for a long time now.”

“Your pararescue experience will give you a huge edge during selection, won’t it?”

“Not as much as you might think. Everyone trying out is just as or more qualified than me.”

“Oh.” She sat back, eyeing him. “Would you have to move?”

“Yes. The unit is run out of a special ops wing at Hurlburt in Florida, but it’s a full-time position and members do their clinical work at a Level-1 trauma center either in Vegas or Birmingham.” As opposed to his part-time schedule right now with the Air National Guard. “On top of that, the teams support special operations missions anywhere in the world and have to be ready to deploy at any time.”

She blinked at him. “That sounds so intense.”

“It is, but it’s something I’ve wanted for a few years now. In September, I finally get my shot.” It was going to be a lot of hard work with a punishing optempo waiting on the other end if he made it. He was ready to make that commitment. “So yeah, that’s what I’ve been up to. What about you? It seems like you’re in a much better place now overall.” She still wore her wedding and engagement rings, he noticed.

“I am,” she answered, pushing her hair over one shoulder. “Mostly. I mean, it’s a process, and not neat and tidy. Let’s just say some days are better than others. But yeah, overall I’m doing a lot better.”

“Really glad to hear that.” A wanted killer fleeing from an attempted kidnapping had slammed into her car on a feeder route to the coastal highway, sending her careening into the ditch. The fire crew had been forced to cut her out of her vehicle. She was lucky she hadn’t been killed or severely injured, but losing her baby was a loss too cruel on the heels of becoming a widow only a few months before.

He’d been working an L&D shift that night. When he’d heard that she was in the ER, he’d rushed straight down there to see if there was anything he could do. But there wasn’t. Even worse, the obstetrician was busy with two deliveries upstairs on the mat ward, and the ER staff had been run off their feet with all their other patients, so he’d been the one to confirm the absence of a fetal heartbeat with the Doppler.

Those few hours with her were seared into his memory. Everleigh lying so broken and still on the backboard, face streaked with tears, the fear in her eyes tearing at him. Then the moment of realization that the baby had died, the total devastation in her eyes that still twisted him up inside when he thought about it.

There hadn’t been a damn thing he could do to help her at that point, but he’d stayed with her to offer what support and comfort he could, right up until they took her into the OR for the D&C. He wished to hell he could have done something to spare her that pain.

“Is getting back into a routine helping?” He wanted that for her, desperately. Everleigh was a good person who’d been dealt two gut-wrenching losses back-to-back. And at least the twisted asshole who had hit her was dead—shot during a hostage taking a few days later. Hopefully that gave her some measure of justice.

“I think so. The first couple months after the miscarriage were really tough. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to return to work when I did, but it’s actually been the best thing for me.”

He nodded. “That’s good. You’ve got a solid support system?”

“My parents and my therapist have been great. And my best friend, Marley. She basically runs the seniors care home she works at, and she’s one of those true ride-or-die people who rarely come along in life. I seriously love her to death. She’s pulled me out of the darkness plenty of times since we met.”

“She sounds great. Love to meet her sometime.”

“Sure. You guys would get along great, she’s former military.”

The server came and took their drink orders. They spent a few minutes looking at the menu and he waited until she set hers down before continuing the conversation. “Are you still living up on Cedar Ridge?”

“No, I sold the house not long after Will died. Rented a condo for a bit, then bought a townhouse in the new development that was redone to look like heritage-style homes. Beckett Hollister’s company. Do you know him?”

“Yeah, we’ve met a few times. Good guy.” Former SF, best friends with the sheriff of Crimson Point, and his company made a point of hiring veterans whenever possible. He didn’t just talk the talk, he took action to try and make a difference. Grady respected that. “You like your place?”

“Love it. Much better for me mentally to be in a new place without the daily reminders of Will and the baby. It’s a fresh start and I’m glad I did it. I think it’s helped me move forward.”

The server brought their drinks and took their orders. When she walked away, Grady held up his glass. “To fresh starts.”

A poignant smile touched Everleigh’s lips, but he could still see the shadows lurking in the depths of her eyes. “I’ll drink to that.” She tapped her glass to his and they both took a sip.

Dinner went by way too fast. They chatted while they ate. He tried to keep his questions to a minimum, but he was so curious about her and the new life she was building. He’d hoped his growing feelings for her would lessen over time, but now that he had seen her again, they were only getting stronger. “What kinds of things do you like to do in your downtime?” he asked when the server took their empty plates away.

“I’m currently in the process of trying to figure that out.” When he

frowned, she grimaced and went on. “Yeah. Turns out, I don’t really know who I am yet. I mean, I do at my core. I know what my morals and values and beliefs are, and what kind of person I am. But in terms of personal things, wants and hobbies and dreams, I pretty much molded myself to fit with Will while we were together. He wasn’t controlling or anything,” she added quickly. “It happened slowly over time and I never noticed.”

“What do you mean?” Maybe he didn’t get it because he’d never been with anyone long enough for that to happen.

“We were really young when we got together. Senior year in high school.”

“Seriously? You guys were together since then?”

“Yes. It still happens on occasion, apparently,” she said with a wry smile. Then her expression turned wistful. “He was quiet. Steady. Kind. I guess I changed my personality to match him more. He was an introvert, so we didn’t go out a lot, and he didn’t like to socialize outside of family or our core group of friends often. So over time, I became more that way too.” She shrugged. “I didn’t even think about it or realize it at the time, but yeah, I sort of...lost myself in some ways over the years we were together.”

At least her husband sounded like a good guy. Grady would have hated knowing she’d been married to a controlling asshole. “But you’re figuring it out now?”

“I think so. Made up a bucket list and everything.”

Now that sounded interesting. “Yeah? What’s on it?” he asked, intrigued. “Anything you can share?”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “Just a list of things I want to try out that I’ve thought of in the past and put off. It’s been really good for me, making plans and having something to look forward to again. Switching my mindset from being ‘stuck’ and alone to being curious and using this time to build something new has really helped.”

“That’s fantastic. Let me know if I can help you cross out any items on the list.”

She laughed lightly. “Might have to wait until you’re recovered.”

“I’m game whenever you are.”

She gave him a deadpan look. “You don’t even know what’s on it. What if it’s knitting or something?”

“I’m down to learn knitting. And I’m already pretty good with sutures,

so...

"Of course you are," she said, shaking her head at him with a gleam of admiration in her eyes that made him feel a foot taller. "What *can't* you do?"

"Land on a pitching deck without hurting myself, apparently."

She grinned. "Well, no one's perfect."

He grabbed the bill but she insisted they split the check, and he relented only because he didn't want her to feel uncomfortable or as if he expected anything of her for picking up the tab. She walked next to him on the way to the door, amusing him again with the hawk-like way she watched him maneuver the crutches, as if ready to jump in and catch him if he stumbled.

Would be worth it to have her arms around him.

"You're going home to elevate and ice your knee now, right?" she said outside on the sidewalk. Streaks of sunlight filtering through the thick, dark green leaves of the trees overhead made her hair glow like moonbeams.

"Promise."

She gave him a satisfied nod and a little smile. "I'll see you when you come into the clinic, but good luck with the surgery and please call if I can do anything."

"I will."

She held out her arms, surprising him. "Bye."

No way he was passing up an opportunity for a hug from her.

He balanced on his right foot and tucked both crutches under his left armpit so he could wrap his right arm around her. The moment she slid hers around him and pressed to his chest, protectiveness and desire ripped through him. He squeezed her gently, drew in a breath to inhale her light tropical scent and withheld a groan. She felt goddamn perfect in his arms, every soft curve molding to him.

All too soon she pulled away, gave him a friendly smile that reminded him to get himself together. They'd just spent the better part of the past hour talking about how she was trying to put her life back together. She wasn't interested in getting romantic. And even if she had been, he was leaving in three months. "Drive safely."

"You too." He crutched down the sidewalk to his truck, still feeling the imprint of her along the front of his body. And keenly aware of the deep yearning she stirred in him that could never be fulfilled.

Chapter Four

Everleigh drove straight from the restaurant to the grocery store nearest her house, trying and failing to keep her mind off Grady. The fluttery feeling he'd caused inside her was new. She didn't hate it. It was nice to feel something again, but it was way too soon for her to be attracted to anyone, let alone Grady, who she considered a friend.

It also made her feel a tiny bit disloyal. As if she'd desecrated Will's memory somehow by being attracted to someone else.

That's ridiculous, she chided herself. You didn't do anything wrong.

The parking lot of the strip mall the grocery store was located in was busier than normal. It was such a gorgeous summer evening, maybe people had decided to take advantage of the warm weather to barbecue or take a picnic to the beach.

The thought hit her with a wistful pang. Would she ever heal enough to meet another man and have a romantic picnic on the beach again?

An image of Grady formed in her mind before she could stop it. The two of them sitting on a quilt on the sand while they ate together, talked and laughed. Savoring each other's company, the heavy beat of anticipation as he reached out to cup the side of her face in his hand and leaned in to kiss her...

"What are you doing," she muttered to herself, and fished out her cell phone. Apparently she was feeling lonely even though she'd just visited with Grady for almost two hours. She dialed her bestie, determined to get him out of her head.

"Hey, you. What's shakin'?" Marley answered.

"I've had an...interesting day. Wondered if you felt like having a sunset wine picnic at the beach in a bit. I already ate but I'm at the store right now so I thought I'd grab us some snacks, and some of that black raspberry wine you like." A local company made it, but only during the summer and it always sold out fast whenever it got stocked.

"I'd love that! Can't wait to hear all about your interesting day. What

time?”

“Say an hour or so? I’ll pick you up.”

“Perfect. See you soon.”

Already feeling a boost in her mood, Everleigh hit the grocery store first, picking out some favorite nibbles for them, including the caramel popcorn clusters with semisweet chocolate chunks and toasted pecans. With the bag secure in the crook of one arm, she walked down the sidewalk to the liquor store.

There were only a handful of bottles of the raspberry wine left. She grabbed three and headed to the checkout counter, then saw Warren standing there and immediately did an about face, hoping to avoid him.

“Everleigh.”

Damn. She spun to face him, putting on a polite smile. “Hi, Warren.” He’d been her neighbor when she’d been renting the condo in the same building as Marley, before buying her new townhouse. “How are you?”

He lifted a shoulder. He was a few years younger than her, early twenties, with sandy brown hair and brown eyes. Nice looking, a bit socially awkward, but that’s not what made her uncomfortable. He was a solid seven out of ten on the creepy scale. Maybe even a seven-point-five. “Not bad. Haven’t seen you around lately. Where are you living now?”

No way she was giving him her location. From the moment she’d temporarily moved into the condo building, he’d taken on the self-appointed role of acting as her “protector.” Checking in on her, watching her comings and goings under the guise of “looking out for her,” and even escorting her to and from her car if he caught her at the right time.

While he genuinely seemed to want to be helpful, it was way over the top and she’d learned early on not to be too friendly or encourage him in any way in case it might give him the wrong message. Not that it seemed to matter, since that message didn’t seem to register with him.

“I bought a townhouse,” she said, keeping it vague. She didn’t want to be rude to him.

“In Crimson Point?”

“No.” She was actually on the outskirts, and there were enough townhouse complexes in the area that he wouldn’t be able to narrow down which one she lived in.

He eyed the wine in her hands. “Looks like you could use a hand.

Meeting up with someone?”

“Yes, but I’m okay.” She shifted the bottles to get a more comfortable hold, trying to figure out a way to cut this interaction short. “Well, I’d better get going.”

“Here, let me help you with those.”

“Oh, no, that’s—” She bit back a sigh as he took them from her anyway and started for the checkout.

“It’s great to see you. It’s not the same in our building with you gone.”

He always seemed so lonely. She forced another smile, feeling bad for him. “I’m sure there are lots of great people in it.”

“Not really.” He carried the wine to the checkout and placed them carefully on the conveyor.

She stood next to him awkwardly, waiting to pay as the cashier rang in her purchase. Warren showed no sign of leaving. In fact, it seemed like he planned to stand guard or whatever it was he thought he’d been doing for her in the past.

She paid, tucked her credit card away and reached for the paper bag at the end of the counter. “Well, I’d better—”

“I’ve got this.” He scooped up the bag and strode for the door, pausing to hold it open for her and giving her a smile that was actually pretty endearing. She murmured a thank you on the way out because it was only polite, and she was concerned that being rude to a guy like him could have repercussions she wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“Where are you parked?” he asked, scanning the lot.

“Over there.” She pointed toward the other side and started across the lanes marked in front of the store, anxious to get in her car and leave. Warren seemed like a nice enough guy underneath the awkwardness, but her gut said to keep her boundaries firmly in place with him.

“I see you.” He didn’t say anything else on the way to her car, then stood waiting by the back while she popped the hatch, and he loaded the bag inside.

“Well, thanks very much. Good to see you again, and I’m sure I’ll see you around town,” she said as she hit the button on her keychain to close the hatch.

“You wanna get a coffee together sometime?” he asked, his eager puppy-dog expression giving her pause.

Oh, hell. It confirmed what she’d suspected for a while now, but he’d

never asked her out before. She hesitated before answering, not wanting to hurt his feelings or make him mad. Rejection always stung, and she was a terrible liar. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m not ready to see anyone yet.” That much was true.

Another image of Grady popped into her head, contradicting that thought completely and taking her off guard.

Warren nodded slowly. “It doesn’t have to be a date.”

Lord. She searched her mind for a way to let him down easy. “I—” She was saved by her phone bleating from her pocket. She fished it out, a surge of gratitude sweeping through her when she saw Grady’s number. *Thank you.* “It’s a patient.” It wasn’t a complete lie. He just wasn’t *her* patient. “I have to take this.”

Warren frowned in concern. “You give patients your personal cell number?”

Annoyance burst in her at the borderline rude question. She would use a different store from now on. “Only when it’s important. Anyway, thanks so much. Gotta run.”

She got into her seat and shut the door, her car’s hands-free system picking up the call as she started the engine. Warren was finally backing away, but still watching her. Waiting to wave or something. Awkward and creepy.

“Hi,” she said to Grady, aware of the excited little butterflies flitting to life in her middle. “Good timing. You home?”

“Laid up on the couch, RICEing away.”

She smiled at that. “Good for you. You get a gold star.” She lifted a hand to acknowledge Warren as she drove away, who waved on the way to his own vehicle. That guy needed a girlfriend in the worst way.

His low chuckle made the butterflies spiral higher. “See? I’m being good.”

“Yes, you are. Need anything?” Had he called just to tell her this? Or had he been looking for an excuse to talk to her again?

“No, I’m good. Gonna watch a movie then crash.”

“What movie?”

“Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation.”

“Ooh, nice. That’s a great one.”

“You like action movies?”

“Love ’em. Why do you sound surprised?” she said on a laugh.

“I don’t know, to be honest. And what are you up to tonight?”

“I’m picking up Marley and taking her to the beach for some wine.”

“That sounds like trouble.”

She chuckled. “She’s the best kind of trouble. I’m also going to run some things past her about activities I want to try from my list. I plan to drag her along with me.”

“What kinds of activities?”

“A few social things to start. There’s a book club in town that’s supposed to be awesome.”

“The one Jaia runs?”

“Yes! Oh, that’s right, she’s Brandon’s girlfriend?” Another PJ in Grady and Travis’s unit with the reserves. He was a paramedic in his civilian job, so she’d seen him at the hospital.

“Yeah. She’s great. Kerrigan too. Have you met her yet?”

“No, but I’m bound to soon when I start doing more things around town.” It was definitely time. “And there are a few events coming up I want to check out at Whale’s Tale in the near future.” The most popular café in Crimson Point that was also a bookstore and hosted fun bi-weekly events like craft classes or author signings.

“I’m glad you’re going to get involved there. Poppy’s a sweetheart.”

The sheriff’s wife, who owned and operated the café. Though she was only working part time right now because she’d had a baby the same—

A sharp pain lanced her. *The same night I lost mine.*

But the pain quickly mellowed into a deep, yearning ache when she thought of Grady holding Poppy and Noah’s tiny, helpless little newborn baby boy in his big, capable arms. He’d been in the delivery room with them that night. Had helped bring the baby into the world.

And then rushed straight down to Emergency to be with her.

“I’m looking forward to meeting her baby,” she said. “Anyway, I’m almost home. Enjoy your movie, and keep on RICEing.”

“Will do. Have a good night. And thanks for coming to dinner earlier. It was great to see you.”

Was she nuts, or did she detect a deeper meaning in his words? She was so out of practice, she didn’t know. “It was great to see you too. Good night.” She ended the call, that wistful ache he’d caused stronger than ever.

Warren couldn't shake his mood as he rode the condo elevator up to his floor less than ten minutes after he'd seen Everleigh at the liquor store. She'd brushed him off when he'd asked her for coffee, and it embarrassed him. Okay, hurt and humiliated him if he was honest.

He'd had a thing for her ever since she'd moved into their building. Living next door to her, seeing her in the hallway or elevator but never getting closer than a casual acquaintance, had been the sweetest torture. She was quiet about her private life, but he'd known instantly upon meeting her that something awful had happened to her. He'd seen the shadows and sadness in her gorgeous eyes.

People in the building had talked. They felt sorry for her, a young widow all alone, and there'd been a rumor that she'd lost her baby as well.

He'd never asked her about any of it. Didn't want to dredge it up, and he understood all about not wanting to share personal details.

Everybody had secrets.

Up in his condo he went to the fridge, fighting the weight of depression threatening to suck him back into the dark pit he'd fought to pull himself out of six months ago when his girlfriend left him for someone else. Nothing in it looked remotely appealing and neither did the beer at the back. Drinking just made him feel worse.

His phone beeped. He saw the text from his mom, shook his head. He was already down. Talking to her would either piss him off or make him feel so damn shitty, he would wind up getting drunk later.

Hi, son. Please call me and let me know you're all right.

He knew she loved him, but the last thing he needed was to go another nine rounds with her. She thought she had all the answers, but he wasn't a kid anymore. So he silenced the phone and put it on the counter face down.

Feeling restless and unsettled, he headed to his room and opened his laptop, a surge of excitement sweeping his veins, almost but not quite blocking the memory of his mom's voice at the back of his head. The one that had called him a radical and accused him of spending way too much time in an online fantasy world. Claiming that it wasn't healthy. That he needed to shut off his computer and go make real friends before he turned into some brainwashed lunatic.

He booted up the secret social media program he'd been invited to by

another member. Smiled when he saw the message in his inbox. *These* were his real friends. They'd been better friends to him than anyone he'd actually met in person. They understood him. Accepted him and made him feel part of something. Something important with an even more urgent message that the rest of society seemed too brain dead to comprehend.

And they all agreed that the world was going to hell and no one seemed to be doing anything about it. That every government ever formed since the beginning of time was corrupt and fucking useless. This current one more than most, pushing the country to the brink with its infighting and criminal policies designed to fill their own pockets with hard-earned tax money from hardworking American taxpayers.

It had to stop. People needed to wake up. They needed to *rise* up and take the power back from the assholes supposedly running the country. "Running the country into the ground, more like it," he muttered, then read the message from one of the group founders.

Hey buddy. Bunch of us are getting together at a range next week. You game?

A flush warmed his cheeks and a smile spread across his face. Most of the guys he'd met online through this group were at least a decade older than him. But they'd never once made him feel like a kid. They had accepted him right away and taken him under their collective wing.

Yeah, I'm in. Send me the details.

He sent it and then began looking through the day's posts that he'd missed. Found himself nodding along with most of what was said as a sense of frustration and purpose built. These guys got it, understood that things needed to change radically. Why didn't everyone else?

Another message popped up. *You alone?*

His smile fell, but he answered. *Yeah.*

No date, as usual. He'd tried a few dating apps and they all sucked. The women he'd met were all fake. Everleigh wasn't fake, but she'd made it clear she wasn't interested, and he didn't buy the flimsy excuse she'd given him tonight about not being ready to see anyone. She'd been trying to let him down easy and not hurt his feelings. It made him feel fucking pathetic.

Wanna help me set up some stuff for the group? Working on something kinda big.

The self-pity faded, curiosity and excitement taking its place. They'd

never asked for his help before. Maybe he'd finally proven himself. Earned their trust enough to be included in some of the behind-the-scenes stuff.

Yeah, sounds good, he answered.

Great. Hang tight. I'll send you some things in a bit.

Warren sat back, rubbing his hands on his thighs as anticipation hummed inside him. What did they want him to do? There had been rumors of something big in the works that only the founders knew about. Something that was coming straight to them from the mysterious top no one ever discussed.

It felt damn good to know he was finally being accepted by the inner circle.

God knew nobody else in this world respected him. Anger bubbled hot and acidic in the pit of his stomach.

If this thing led to where he thought it was going, one day soon, *everyone* would respect him.

Chapter Five

“So, do we ever actually read at these things?” Everleigh asked, helping herself to the delicious spread laid out on Jaia’s dining room table. At least a dozen other women were in the next room, talking and laughing.

Kerrigan laughed. “No, that’s homework. Here we just talk about the book a bit, but mostly have fun and eat.”

“This is seriously the best book club ever.” This month’s book was *Anne of Green Gables*. Everleigh had found it enchanting, especially the gorgeous descriptions that made her want to step through the pages and into Anne’s world.

“Right?”

Everleigh had made a batch of meatballs in marinara sauce in a slow cooker to bring over, but everyone else seemed to have really gotten into the theme of the evening with their food items. Jaia had made a big pitcher of raspberry cordial for the occasion, and Poppy had sent over a cake with a custard sauce and a little card promising that no mice had drowned in it.

“Let’s get back in there.” Kerrigan hooked an arm around her and led her into the adjoining living room where everyone else was gathered.

Several of the ladies were dressed in Edwardian-style outfits. Marley stuck out immediately, over in the corner chatting animatedly with Groz’s girlfriend Mia. She’d plaited her long, gorgeous auburn hair in two thick braids that trailed down her back and found a silly straw hat at a secondhand shop that she’d hot-glued flowers onto.

“I love that Marley came as Anne,” Jaia said.

“She’s adorable as Anne. But that’s Marley for you,” Everleigh said fondly. “She’s up for anything.”

Hearing her name, Marley glanced over and raised her eyebrows. “What am I up for?” she asked in her Kentucky drawl.

“Anything,” Everleigh said.

Marley broke into a grin. “True. Speaking of, I was just telling Mia about

your list.”

“What list?” Kerrigan asked, grabbing another glass of raspberry cordial on the way past the table.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Everleigh said, a little embarrassed. All these women had their lives together, while she was still trying to figure out what to do with the rest of hers. “Just some things I thought it’s time I tried, and see whether I like any of them.”

“Yeah, and what’s near the top of the list?” Marley said, pausing for effect. “Clubbing.”

Mia turned incredulous golden-brown eyes on Everleigh. She was gorgeous and had a sharp, edgy vibe with golden-toned skin, unbelievable cheekbones and a sleek dark brown bob cut to her chin. “You’ve never been clubbing?”

“Um, no.” She was flushing. Could feel the blood flooding to her cheeks, and rushed to explain herself. “I met my husband in high school and we were pretty quiet, homebody types. Neither of us were into that sort of thing.”

Kerrigan and Jaia were both staring at her too. It seemed like all the others in the room had stopped talking as well and were listening to the conversation with interest. Though that could have been Everleigh’s imagination.

“You’ve never *ever* been to a club?” Kerrigan said.

“Like a dance club? No.” She shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. I can’t even dance, really. I just thought maybe I should try it once to see if it’s as fun as people say.”

Mia looked around the circle of women and made an executive decision. “We should go tonight.”

Everleigh’s eyebrows shot up. “Tonight?” She didn’t even know if there was a club out this way.

“Yeah. There’s a great place in Portland that plays a decent mix of music, not all that techno bullshit, and it’s not deafening. If we leave now, in two hours we can be on the dance floor.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not sure. I didn’t plan on—”

“It’s happening,” Mia said, standing. “Ladies? Who else wants in.”

“Me!” Kerrigan and Marley said at the same time.

Jaia looked uncertain. “It’s not really my scene,” she said in her gorgeous British-Indian accent. “But I’ll go for moral support. The guys

should be finishing up at base in a few hours anyway. Maybe they could meet us after?”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Mia said, already busy texting on her phone. “I’m sending Asher a message right now.”

“Should I go home and change first?” Marley asked, frowning. “This isn’t exactly a clubbing outfit.”

“Lose the hat, but definitely keep the braids,” Mia said with a sly smile. “It’ll drive the men wild.”

Marley laughed in delight. “Then the braids stay.” She swallowed the last of her wine and jumped up, aiming a bright smile at Everleigh. “Okay, girl, let’s do this.”

“Right now?” Everleigh said in surprise, still trying to mentally adjust to the new plan. Sometimes it was still hard for her to be less rigid and give into spontaneity.

“Yeah, why not? We’ve got two hours of driving ahead of us, so we need to get moving.” She turned to the others. “I’ve got room in my ride for Ev plus three more.”

“Sounds good,” Mia said. “Jaia, you in?”

Jaia shot Everleigh a somewhat pleading look.

“You don’t have to come.” She was starting to question whether she wanted to do this anymore either, but it was on her list and she would be with people she knew, so it could be fun. “Seriously, you’re the host anyway. Stay here and—”

“Thank you,” Jaia said before she could finish, looking relieved. “It’s not my thing.”

I wonder if it’s mine? She kinda doubted it, but wanted to find out. “I get it. And I really enjoyed being here, so thank you for inviting me. Can I come again next month?”

Jaia’s face lit up. “Of course you can! I’ll send you an email about the next book. I pull a title out of the box over there.” She pointed to the cardboard box on the table, decoupage with various book covers, titles and characters. “If you have a book you want to nominate, just write it on a piece of paper, fold it and pop it in there before you go. I’ll be choosing the next one in a few days, then there’s a group vote and we go from there.”

“Sounds good. Do we read steamy romances here too? Because I’ve got some good recommendations in mind.” Skye Jordan, Pamela Clare, Katie

Reus, to name a few.

“Yes, we *love* steamy romances,” Jaia said. “Bring it on.”

Marley started ushering Everleigh toward the door. “Thanks again for letting me tag along. Nice to meet y’all,” she said to the others on the way by.

Marley steered her outside, tugged off her straw hat and gave her braids a toss over her shoulders, grinning like a fool. “This is gonna be so much fun.”

They got into Marley’s vehicle while Kerrigan and Mia slid into the back. Marley headed up the hill out of town toward the freeway, singing along with the others to the nineties’ music blasting from the speakers.

Everleigh found herself smiling. She was so grateful that she had met Marley the day she’d moved into the apartment building. Marley had immediately made her feel welcome, not to mention less alone and broken. She had taken Everleigh under her wing, so to speak, and brought so much fun and joy back to her life.

After a while they stopped singing, turned down the music and talked instead.

“I’m really curious about this list you’ve made,” Kerrigan said. “What’s the story there?”

Everleigh explained the basic premise without going into too much detail. “I want to focus on moving forward, you know? I think it’s really helping to push me toward the future instead of staying stuck in the past.”

“That’s a really great way to look at it,” Mia murmured from the back. “Smart.”

Since Mia was a clinical psychologist, Everleigh found that reassuring. “I think so too.”

“I totally get it,” Kerrigan said. “After my divorce, I thought I’d never get my life back together, let alone be happy again. I spent a lot of time trying to find myself. It’s why I started running.”

“Did you ever,” Mia said. “She started doing races. Half-marathons, then full marathons. And at some point thought, ‘You know what? Marathons are for wimps. Ultra-marathons are where it’s at.’”

Kerrigan groaned. “I wanted to prove to myself that I was tough enough to finish one. But it, uh, didn’t go well.”

“No?” Everleigh asked, turning to glance back at her.

A shadow passed over her face. “No. I almost died.”

Everleigh's eyes bulged. "What?" she and Marley demanded at the same time.

"Yeah. Pushed off a cliff in the middle of the night. So that was a bummer. Broken leg and ribs, collapsed lung and...it was bad. I would have died up there if Travis and my brother Brandon hadn't been sent in to get me."

"They saved her," Mia said, nodding.

"Yes, they did," Kerrigan agreed. "But it wasn't nearly as romantic as it sounds," she added wryly. "But yeah, I get why you're doing this. And you know what? I can already tell without a doubt that you *will* find yourself, and that you *will* be happy again. Just wait and see."

Everleigh smiled at her, touched. She'd never dreamed she had something so personal in common with Kerrigan. Kerrigan seemed so strong and put together. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"Sure." Kerrigan smiled back. "And Mia and I are both happy to help with any other list items you come up with. Right?"

"One hundred percent," Mia said.

By the time they reached Portland, Everleigh felt like she'd created a bond with the other two women and was glad they were doing this. They might not understand exactly what she had gone through, but they knew what it was like to struggle through hard times and supported her journey.

"You guys are like kindred spirits, as Anne Shirley would say," Everleigh told them as they reached Portland, and everyone laughed.

Marley followed Mia's directions to the club. It was Friday night, so Everleigh wasn't surprised to find it busy with a lineup of people snaking down the sidewalk and around the corner of the building. But Mia apparently knew the bouncers, because she sauntered—and that's really the only way to describe Mia's confident, almost sinuous gait—up to them, said something, then turned and waved her and the others right inside.

The loud music crashed over Everleigh in a barrage of sound, surprising her. Mia didn't think this was deafening? How loud was it in other clubs?

Mia strode straight for the bar and ordered them all shots. Everleigh took one to be a good sport. "To your first club experience," Mia shouted over the music.

Everyone clinked glasses and downed their shots. Everleigh struggled not to cough, but didn't manage not to make a face as the tequila burned

down her throat. Marley laughed and nudged her. “Look at you, letting loose for once.”

Everleigh smiled, rather proud of herself. This was good for her. Getting outside of her comfort zone in a safe way. Pushing her boundaries a little, seeing what fit and felt right. Life was too short not to live it to the fullest. “Why not, right?”

“Right.” She leaned back against the bar to survey the crowded room, then grabbed Everleigh’s hand. “Come on, girl. Let’s dance.”

Marley dragged her out onto the floor. Mia jumped in and Kerrigan followed. Everleigh felt awkward at first, but quickly lost her self-consciousness because of the fun she was having with the others.

She stayed out on the floor for two dances, then things took a turn when guys began to move in, coming up behind her to butt into their dance, and flat-out hitting on her. Somehow they picked her out of the group, like they sensed she was single and vulnerable. Mia and Marley intervened and sent most of them away, but after a while it made her feel like a piece of raw meat being dangled in front of a pack of starving wolves.

She declined three more invitations on the way back to the bar. The men were way more aggressive than she’d expected. She was still wearing her wedding rings, for God’s sake—naively thinking it would keep men at bay, but also because she couldn’t quite bring herself to take them off yet.

Marley joined her a minute later, leaving the others still out on the floor. “You’re hating this, aren’t you?” she said with a wry smile.

“Hate’s a strong word.” She’d been having fun until the men had started circling her like sharks. At least now she knew that clubbing definitely wasn’t for her.

Her friend flashed a grin. “Mia was right though. These braids are definitely working.” She aimed a look at something or someone across the club.

Everleigh turned around in time to see a tall, good-looking guy weave through a knot of people to reach Marley and lean in to talk to her. Her friend’s body language made it clear she was interested in the guy.

Everleigh slid over a bit to give them some space, curious. Marley was her best friend, and yet there was still so much Everleigh didn’t know about her. For whatever reason Marley was tight-lipped about some of her past, and frustratingly secretive about her personal life. All Everleigh knew was that

she had three brothers back home in Kentucky, and some British guy had broken her heart not long after Everleigh had been widowed. Since then, Marley had dated plenty but had never really let a man in again.

Everleigh was dying for details. Thus far, however, no amount of wine or pleading had made Marley give up anything juicy. But their shared experience of heartbreak had definitely forged a strong bond between them.

Studiously ignoring her friend, Everleigh switched her attention to the dance floor and watched Mia and Kerrigan dancing away. It struck her how happy they looked. How carefree.

She was starting to wonder if she would ever feel that way again. Or whether she'd *ever* truly felt that way before.

A few minutes later she noticed two tall, well-built guys moving toward Mia and Kerrigan through the crowd. Mia turned, her face lighting up when the biggest one got close, and threw her arms around him.

So that was the infamous Groz. And now Kerrigan recognized Travis in the pulsing lighting as well.

“Hey, is this spot taken?”

She glanced left, a smile breaking over her face when she found Grady standing next to her. God, he looked good in his jeans and a dark button-down that hugged his powerful chest and shoulders, the lights glinting off his black hair. She was so glad to see him. “Hi! What are you doing here?”

“Groz. I overheard him say you would be here with the others and thought I'd come by for a bit. Is it true you've never been clubbing before?”

She was thankful it was fairly dark in here, because her cheeks warmed. “It's true.”

He leaned one roped forearm on the bar, his big body close. Not crowding her, but rather making her feel protected somehow. She relaxed a bit. With him here, she doubted anyone else would hit on her again. “So how come you're standing over here all by yourself?”

“Oh, I'm not alone. This is my friend Marley—”

Arm hooked through the guy's she'd been talking to, Marley darted in front of her and smiled up at Grady, holding out a hand. “I'm Marley. Nice to meet you.”

He shook with her. “Grady. Likewise.”

She aimed a knowing grin at Everleigh. “Looks like you're in good hands, so I'm gonna hit the dance floor.”

“Have fun,” Everleigh said, watching her friend and the guy disappear into the crowd of moving bodies.

“So that’s her, huh?” Grady said.

“That’s her. She’s the best.” Belatedly remembering his knee and that he wasn’t using crutches at the moment, she turned to face him fully, scanning him. She’d seen him three times this week when he’d come into the clinic for his appointments, but they hadn’t had a chance to do more than say hi, though she’d gotten a few updates via text. “How’s your knee doing?”

“Great. I didn’t overdo it on base, promise. Mostly sat around with my foot up doing paperwork while the guys gave me a hard time.”

“Are you wearing a brace? Because you shouldn’t be walking on it if—”

“Yes, I’m wearing a brace,” he said, amusement twinkling in his eyes. “You want something to drink?”

“No, I’m okay thanks.”

“How about a dance then?”

“You shouldn’t be—”

“One dance, to commemorate your first time to a club. Come on.” He grasped her hand, his long fingers curling around hers in a warm, firm grip that sent a ripple of heat through her.

Well, that and his confident, take-charge demeanor. It was sexy rather than overbearing, and she liked it. She had to admit that part of her was sick of having to constantly be in charge of every single aspect of her life.

She trailed after him, a bit flustered by the sudden pull of attraction to him. “But you—”

“I’ll barely move. Promise.”

As if he’d personally requested it, the current song ended and a slower one began. She followed him through the crowd, studying his limp. It was less pronounced than she’d thought it would be at this stage. Hopefully the brace was stabilizing everything.

A little nervous when he stopped in the middle of the dance floor and turned to face her, it felt like she stopped breathing for a second. Her heart gave a hard thud, then went into double time as he took her hands and brought them to his broad shoulders.

When he settled his hands around her waist, something flipped in her abdomen. Her fingers flexed on his shoulders, flutters bursting to life in her stomach at the feel of the solid muscle beneath the smooth fabric of his shirt.

“See? Barely moving,” he said with a teasing smile as he swayed them back and forth to the slower beat.

She smiled back, a bit more at ease now. But damn, it was hard to concentrate with him so close, the heat of his hands sinking into her skin. Big, skilled hands that sent streamers of sensation skating over her skin whenever his fingers flexed. She couldn’t help but imagine them sliding under the hem of her top and stroking the small of her back—

Whoa. *Stop.*

She broke eye contact, startled. What was going on with her? She had felt dead inside for so long, and now she couldn’t stop fantasizing about Grady even though they were just friends. Acquaintances, really.

“Okay?”

She let out a breath and looked up at him, hit with an unmistakable zing of desire when their gazes met. Her heartbeat sped up, heat spreading through her belly.

Oh, hell. This was...not like her. At all. And she’d certainly never felt this wild, spontaneous kind of heat before.

Her conscience pricked her sharply at the disloyal thought. Poor Will.

“You’re doing great,” Grady said, giving her a smile that secretly made the butterflies flutter harder.

“Yeah? Because I feel awkward as hell.”

“Nope. You’re a natural.” His hands moved to the small of her back, pulling her closer.

Her mouth went dry. They were surrounded by people but all she could focus on was him and the heat of those hands imprinted on her lower back, his nearness. How big he was. All those powerful muscles she secretly longed to trace with her fingers...and tongue.

She must have tensed up, because he peered closer at her, and one dimple appeared as though he was smothering a grin. “Are you blushing?”

“No,” she blurted, cursing her fair complexion. “It’s just hot in here.” Because of him. *He* was too hot. It was messing with her head.

Mercifully the song finally ended. She immediately removed her hands from his shoulders, ignoring the stab of longing. “Thanks for the dance. Your knee okay?”

He grinned at her like she was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. “It’s completely fine.”

“Good.” The awkward feeling intensified as she searched for something else to say.

He leaned in closer as the next song started, filling her nose with his delicious scent. She caught herself swaying toward him slightly. “You don’t look like you’re having a good time,” he murmured close to her ear.

She cleared her throat, suppressing a ridiculous shiver of longing. His voice was as sexy as the rest of him. “I don’t think this is really my thing.”

He chuckled and caught her hand again, making her pulse leap. “Then come with me. Rescuing people in distress is what I do.”

She moved back toward the bar with him, caught off guard by the passing thought that she would willingly follow him anywhere.

Chapter Six

Yeah, Everleigh was definitely not enjoying this. Grady could read her discomfort in the tense set of her shoulders and the way her gaze kept darting around the club.

Time to get her out of here.

He escorted her back to the bar where Marley was chatting up the guy she'd been dancing with. Her face brightened when she saw them, and she reached out for Everleigh's hand. "Hey. You having fun yet?"

"Well..."

Marley laughed. "I thought Grady might turn things around for you. Give me two more dances, and if you still wanna leave, we'll go. Cool?"

"I'll drive her back home," Grady said.

Marley met his gaze, held it for a second before checking with Everleigh. "You okay with that?"

Everleigh angled her head to look up at him with those big blue eyes he could drown in. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He would make sure she got home safely, and having her all to himself for the two-hour drive was a bonus.

"Okay then." She smiled to Marley. "Have fun. Drive safe and text me to let me know you're okay. Tell the others I said bye."

"Will do. Have a good night." Marley winked. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Ha, no worries there," Everleigh answered as she swung around to face him. "Shall we?"

"Yep." He set a hand on her lower back to guide her through the crowd and out the door, liking being able to touch her, wishing he had the right to do it all the time.

His knee was sore and throbbing like a toothache after the long day he'd put in, but that three-minute dance with her made every second of discomfort worthwhile. Being able to hold her even in that innocent way was something

he'd wanted to do for the past year. He'd be lying if he didn't admit he wanted more.

Outside, the late June air was warm and muggy. Everleigh walked a step in front of him. A light breeze stirred her pale blond waves, making them shimmer in the moonlight. She looked almost ethereal. An angel trying to find her wings again.

He wished he could take all her sadness away. Help her heal and learn to fly again.

But she wasn't his, so he didn't have that right. The timing sucked. She'd given no indication that she was interested or even ready for another relationship, and he was leaving Crimson Point for good in September. Though if she made it clear she *was* interested, he wouldn't give a shit about the timing because he was so into her.

"Scale of one to ten, how sore's your knee?" she asked him as they walked to his truck.

"About a four." More like a seven-point-five at the moment.

She shot him a little smile. "Liar."

He grinned and opened her door for her, then slid behind the wheel and got them on the road. "So the club wasn't what you were hoping it would be?"

"Not really. I like hanging out with the girls, that part was fun. But then guys kept coming on to me and spoiled it. Thanks for doing this, by the way."

He didn't blame them for trying, and yet other guys hitting on her made something territorial flare to life in his gut. "It's my pleasure. I needed to get going anyhow." He glanced over at her. "Gotta get home and RICE."

"Yes, you do," she said with a grin, tucking a thick wave behind her ear. Her wedding rings glinted in the moonlight, a visual reminder that she was still out of reach and likely to remain that way. "I'm glad Marley could stay. She looked like she was really having fun with that guy. And I'm not at all worried about her because she's a former Marine."

"Is she?"

"Yep, so she can handle herself." She looked over at him. "Did you always want to be a PJ?"

"Ever since I found out it existed."

"Which was?"

"Late teens. I grew up in New Mexico and my dad used to take me to

Kirtland Air Force Base for airshows when I was in high school. I saw a PJ demo and knew I wanted to join the Air Force and try out for pararescue after graduation. After I did a little investigating, I saw that the Air National Guard was flexible enough to allow me to do my nursing degree too, so I joined it instead of the regular force.”

“That’s amazing. Why labor and delivery, by the way? It’s not at all what I would expect a macho special ops guy to go into.”

He smiled. “Yeah, I get that a lot.” He shifted his grip on the steering wheel, his smile fading. He didn’t talk about his past much, but he didn’t mind telling her. She’d been through tragedy, so she would understand better than most. “It’s because of my mom. She got pregnant when I was five. I was actually pretty excited about being an older brother. But things went sideways when she went into labor. We lived about twenty miles from the nearest hospital. Her uterus ruptured on the way there.”

“That’s terrible. Were you there?”

“I was in the backseat with her.” Snapshots from that night were still so vivid in his mind. His father barking panicked questions and orders at him from the front seat while racing them through the desert. His mother clinging to his hand. Blood everywhere. “Trying to stop the bleeding.”

“Oh God,” she said softly. “What happened?”

“The doctors did everything they could to save her when we got to the hospital, but…” He pushed out a breath. “I made up my mind then and there to stop that from happening to someone else. And I thought my mom would want me to.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said softly, lifting a hand to his shoulder. “I had no idea.”

“That’s okay. I love what I do. Both jobs. I like helping people, and when I get to save lives it’s the best feeling ever.”

“I can imagine.” She withdrew her hand. “So it’s just you and your dad, then?”

He nodded. “He’s still in Albuquerque. I tried to convince him to move up here with me, but he’s so damn stubborn.”

“Do you see him much?”

“Not as much as I’d like, but we talk every week and try to get together for holidays when my schedule allows. Anyway, enough about me. I know your parents are in Arizona, but do you have any siblings?”

“No, but I’m close with my parents. We talk a lot too. They come up here every couple months, or I try and go down there for long weekends. They’re great.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Yes, I don’t know what I would do without them. After Will and the miscarriage...” She cleared her throat. “Well, they were godsend. I would have been completely overwhelmed and lost if they hadn’t been there to help me.”

“And Marley?”

“I didn’t meet her until later, when I moved into an apartment after I sold my house. We clicked right away, it was amazing. She lived on the same floor as me and we met getting into the elevator the day I moved in. But on the other side was this young guy, Warren. He’s a little...off. Nice enough, bent over backwards to help me bring everything up from the moving van, but he started to make me uncomfortable, and Marley warned me about him right away. She still lives down the hall from him. She says he doesn’t bother her anymore, but I bumped into him at the store after I saw you at the clinic last week.”

He glanced at her, frowning. “He followed you?”

“No,” she said quickly, then paused. “At least, I don’t think so. It seemed random enough. He kind of asked me out after. You called right after that, giving me an excuse to stop talking to him and leave. So thank you. You can add that rescue to your tally.”

“Happy to help.” He didn’t like hearing that a guy she’d described as being “off” still seemed to be hung up on her though. “But if he bothers you again, let me know.”

“I doubt he will, but okay.”

A change of subject was in order. “By the way, I’ve been wondering about this list of yours ever since you first told me about it. Clubbing was apparently near the top. What else?”

She let out a soft groan. “It wasn’t near the top. Mia made an executive decision tonight. And this is gonna sound really lame considering what you do in the military, but I made a list of things I’d never done while I was married and always wanted to try.”

Her husband had unexpectedly suffered a massive stroke at the age of twenty-eight and died the next day. Grady remembered hearing it from Molly

at the hospital. He'd never met Will, but it was fucking unfair that a nice guy had died that young. "Makes sense. What made you decide to do it?"

"I'd been with Will since I was eighteen and had never been alone before. I moved straight from my parents' place into our first apartment together and we became a unit. We had the same friends, spent time with our parents on the weekends or on trips. I never really did anything on my own. And I never realized that wasn't necessarily healthy. Not that I regret our life together," she added hastily, glancing at him. "I don't. But when he died it forced me to see exactly how dependent I'd been on him. It shook me, because I hadn't realized."

"But he was good to you?"

"Oh, yes. Everyone liked Will. He was kind and gentle. Steady, dependable."

It didn't sound like Will had been very exciting, but who was Grady to judge. It also sounded like Everleigh had wanted stability, and he was glad she'd found it. "So what else is on this list? I'm dying to know."

She snickered. "Nothing you'd find very exciting, I'm sure."

"Try me."

She paused a moment. "Hobbies and events like the ones I told you about before. Then other stuff like visiting certain places I'd like to see. And simpler things, activities like whale watching. I mean, I live on the damn Oregon Coast, and I've never been whale watching. Or dune bugging. How is that possible? And I want to try paddle boarding too. And camping."

He whipped his head around to stare at her. "You've never been camping? Like, ever in your whole life?"

She laughed. "No. I know it sounds weird, but we weren't campers. So I want to book a campsite and sleep in a tent for a night or two to try it out." She shrugged. "Just silly things like that. But I don't think I'll be going back to a club anytime soon," she added wryly.

Now he was more intrigued than ever. Sounded like she'd lived a pretty narrow, sheltered life until Will died. "We can knock off a couple of those things this weekend if you want."

She glanced at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I'm off duty this weekend. My surgery's scheduled for Monday morning—"

"Oh my God, I'm such a selfish loser, I didn't even ask you about it."

“No, don’t worry about it,” he said on a laugh. “Anyway, I’ll be laid up for a few days after that—”

“Days? Uh, try weeks.”

He chuckled at the reprimand. “Okay, I’ll be taking it easy for a while after that. The weather’s supposed to be great for the next few days, so this weekend would be perfect for some whale watching and paddle boarding if you want to go together. I’m game if you are.”

The soft, startled smile she gave him made an invisible fist squeeze his heart. “You really want to go with me?”

She sounded so surprised by that. “I’d love to.” More than she knew.

“You shouldn’t be paddle boarding on your knee though.”

He hid a smile. “I’m getting it operated on Monday morning. So even if I make it worse before then, it won’t matter.”

She narrowed her eyes at him playfully. “True.” Then she grinned. “Okay, you’re on. Whale watching and paddle boarding this weekend. Tomorrow work? I’ll book it.”

He’d make any day work. “Sounds perfect.” Spending the day alone with her, hanging out, getting to know her on a deeper level and watching her experience new things she was interested in for the first time?

Yeah, that sounded about as damn perfect a weekend as he could imagine.

Chapter Seven

Everleigh had asked for this, and yet nerves still fizzed in the pit of her stomach as she drove to meet Grady on Saturday afternoon. The summer tourist season was in full swing, the beaches and parks packed, not a single parking spot to be had along bustling Front Street.

She finally found a spot two blocks up the hill close to the Crimson Point Security building and walked down to Whale's Tale to grab some goodies for the paddle boarding excursion. When she arrived, there was a lineup out the door for half a block down the sidewalk. A little girl walked out with her dad, holding a giant chocolate cookie in one hand and a new book in the other. Someone was going to have a great afternoon.

Everleigh waited in line for twenty minutes. Once she reached the counter, she chose some peanut butter brownies to go with two turkey and cranberry croissant sandwiches and to-go cups of the lemon ginger iced tea made fresh in house that she'd been eyeing.

Just as she was paying, Poppy bustled out of the back holding a tray of cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven, golden-blond hair pulled back in a bun. Her face lit up when she saw Everleigh. "Hello! I hear you guys had fun at the club last night. Where are you off to today?"

She liked Poppy, but it was impossible to see her and not remember she was a new mother. And that if the accident hadn't happened, Everleigh would have been a new mother now as well.

She swept all that aside and put on a smile. No sense looking back. She had to keep looking forward, focus on the future and finding purpose and happiness again. There was a lot in her life to be grateful for. "I'm going to try paddle boarding. Thought I'd get some snacks for afterward." Whale watching was unfortunately going to have to wait for another time. All three local companies she'd contacted were booked solid for the entire weekend.

"Good idea. Hope you have fun." Poppy set the tray on the counter, spared her a wink and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Everleigh carried her goodies back to her car and headed east up the hill toward the highway. A road construction crew had set up a detour partway up, taking her off her preferred route. She turned north because there was no other option, insides tightening as she realized the detour would take her right past the site of her accident.

Drawing a breath, she straightened in her seat and kept going. It was time she faced this too. Avoiding the past would only keep her stuck there.

But when she reached the familiar curve in the road and came over the crest of the hill, a sharp twinge hit her in the center of her chest. The skid marks leading toward the ditch from that night were long gone. There was nothing to mark the place where she had wound up trapped in the mangled wreck of her last vehicle. Yet she knew exactly the spot where it had happened.

She allowed herself to slow and look at it for a few moments, allowed the memories to flood back. Terror. Pain. Loss. Grief.

But there was also Grady.

More and more when she thought back to that night, she thought of him. Of how he'd dropped everything and come straight downstairs to find her in the ER. Of his steady and comforting presence during some of the worst moments of her life, when she'd never felt so alone.

He'd been there. He'd stayed. Supported her in every way he could.

Everything about that night had been awful. But without him, she didn't know how she would have borne it. She was so thankful he'd been there for her.

Forcing her eyes from the spot, she continued past the accident site, the heavy weight in her chest finally easing as she merged onto the highway and left that curving section of road behind. She was stronger now. Much stronger than she'd been back then.

At one time she hadn't thought it would ever be possible, but she was definitely healing. The pain would never go away completely, but it was no longer so fresh and sharp that it pierced her soul and left her unable to function. She carried Will and their baby in her heart. Even though they were gone, they would always be part of her.

She hoped they had found each other somehow in heaven. The thought comforted her.

As the coastal highway took her north, she took time to appreciate the

view to her left. The sea stretched out from the land in an endless canvas of blue dotted by the white crests of the waves as they rolled onto the shore. Sunlight streamed down on the glittering surface from in between puffy white clouds. To the northwest, the coastline rose dramatically in rugged cliffs that towered over the waves that crashed into the rocky crags below, exploding into bursts of white sea foam.

Turning off the highway, she drove west back down the hill toward the water, to the sheltered little cove at Blowhole Bay. The tingle of nerves returned, but this time it was mixed with anticipation.

A few dozen vehicles were parked in the lot when she got there. She spotted Grady's truck straight off and her pulse kicked up a notch. A handful of people were already out on paddle boards or in kayaks, and groups were gathered along the beach enjoying picnic lunches.

She paused, her gaze catching on her left hand gripping the steering wheel. The afternoon sunlight caught her engagement ring and wedding band, making them sparkle. Lifting her hand, she stared at it another few seconds, then came to a decision. This wasn't a date, but it didn't matter.

Without giving herself any more time to overthink it and change her mind, she twisted them off and moved them to her right hand. She didn't want to take them off completely and keep them in a drawer. Not yet, anyway. The rings were a symbol of her past. She could still honor Will and their baby while moving toward her future.

She had to.

As she got out of her car, her heart gave a hard thud when Grady stepped out from behind an SUV. He was dressed in board shorts and a snug T-shirt that hugged his muscular chest and shoulders to mouthwatering perfection, wearing a camouflage ball cap and dark shades over his eyes, a black brace on his left knee.

"Hi," he said, his smile a bright flash against his deep golden skin.

"Hi. You still up for this?"

"I'm absolutely up for this." He cocked a dark eyebrow, looking ridiculously sexy standing there with his roped, tattooed forearms on display. She'd never been into tattoos before, but Grady had changed her mind. "You nervous?"

Don't stare. "A little." She'd opted for long shorts and a rash guard shirt rather than a bathing suit.

“Don’t be. This is gonna be fun. Come on, I’ve already got everything ready at the water.”

“Okay. I grabbed us some lunch for later on my way through town.”

She tugged on her floppy-brimmed hat, stuck on her sunglasses and followed him to the beach where he had two paddle boards waiting at the water’s edge. The sheltered cove stretched around the bay in a deep horseshoe shape, sheltered from the prevailing winds. The sea was calm here, deep blue-green farther out and fading to a pale, clear turquoise near the sandy shore.

Grady was still limping, but his injury didn’t seem to be slowing him down much. He paused at the boards to look at her. “You can swim, right?”

“Yes, not bad.” Probably not as good as him though. She’d bet he was practically a fish in the water.

“Not afraid of being in the water?”

“No. At least, not this close to shore.”

“Awesome. I think we’ll start off just sitting on the boards in the water, so you get the feel of it,” he said, pushing them into the water in between the gentle waves coming to shore. “And we don’t need to worry about leashes since it’s so calm and flat here.”

“Sounds good.” Everleigh watched him as he waded thigh deep into the water and straddled one board, paddle in hand, and reached out to grab the edge of hers to steady it for her. She followed and climbed on hers carefully, finding her balance in the center while gripping her paddle, and sat up to grin at him. “Okay, I didn’t fall on my face. I’m off to a great start.”

He chuckled and tugged her closer to him, using his paddle to pull them into slightly deeper water a dozen or so yards farther away from the beach, then stopped. She felt perfectly safe out here, knowing he could—and would—make sure nothing happened to her. “Ready to try balancing on your knees?”

“Sure.”

He held the edge of her board steady while she planted her hands in the middle and gingerly maneuvered into position. The board wobbled precariously a few times, but she managed to not tip over as she settled into a kneeling position in the center and gripped her paddle. “Okay. So far so good.”

“Yep, you’re doing great.” He let go, stayed straddling his board while

he showed her how to paddle.

She was rocky at first, but got the hang of it within a few minutes. “This is gonna be a way better core workout than I thought,” she said with a laugh, her abs already feeling it.

“Way more fun than planks or crunches though.”

“No kidding. Planks are evil.” She adjusted her sunglasses. “So, where are we paddling to?”

“Let’s head for that bright red umbrella on the other side of the cove,” he suggested, pointing, and she picked it out on the shore, a couple of toddlers beneath it building sandcastles. “But I’m gonna have to stand up rather than kneel.”

“By all means.” She watched in admiration as he deftly and smoothly balanced his weight forward before hopping to the balls of his feet in the center of his board. He winced a bit, paused a second, then slowly straightened and gripped his paddle in both hands. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

It was fun. More fun than she’d expected, actually. The weather was gorgeous, not too hot and not too cold, with a cool breeze skimming off the top of the water that kept her from sweating.

They chatted about various things as they paddled. Her work, her new place in Crimson Point, and how much she loved the town. His upcoming surgery. His PJ teammates. She laughed at some of the stories he told her. She wanted to meet his buddies.

Again and again, she found her gaze being drawn back to him. Taking in the ease with which he handled the paddle board. The beautiful grace and power he displayed as he pulled the paddle through the water, the muscles in his torso flexing beneath the taut fabric of his shirt. He made it look effortless, his balance and coordination confirming he was a natural athlete. He was also damn gorgeous.

Okay, she was starting to feel warm now, and it wasn’t the sun or the exercise. She was definitely attracted to him. She braced for another pang of guilt, and mentally blocked it before it could happen. There was nothing wrong in admiring the view, and to be honest, after all the grief she’d battled through it was a huge relief to know she could still be attracted to someone. Another sign she was healing.

They paddled around the cove for another hour or so before her abs and

shoulders were burning enough to warn her that she was going to pay over the next day or two. Grady followed back to the eastern side of the cove and patiently held her board while she got off, knee deep in the cool water.

They dragged the boards onto the sand and carried them to his truck. “You doing okay?” she asked, a bit concerned he’d overdone it but would never admit it.

“Doing great,” he said, busy securing the boards in the bed of the pickup. “You?”

“Yeah, that was fun. You hungry yet? We could eat on the beach.”

He slid his shades to the top of his head, hitting her with the full force of that direct golden gaze and a slow smile that heated her insides. “Love to.”

Holy.

A little flustered, she grabbed the food and a blanket from her trunk. He took them, ignoring her protests, and they walked back to the beach. He picked out a spot in the shade against the cliff on the south side and stretched out on the blanket, their backs resting against the cool rock wall behind them.

“Turkey croissants, peanut butter brownies and lemon ginger iced tea,” she said, unpacking the bag.

“My mouth’s watering already.”

She was certain he didn’t mean that in a sexy way, but it made her fingers fumble with the sandwich wrapper anyway. They were sitting so close to each other, their shoulders and legs only inches apart. Close enough for her to feel the heat of his body against her side and smell the sweet sunscreen blending with his crisp evergreen scent.

He had her all stirred up inside without even trying. The arousal was there, her interest building every minute she spent with him. It got her thinking about things she hadn’t thought about in a long time. Things that made her pulse trip and her insides curl in longing.

Grady’s lips on hers. His strong, skilled hands on her. Moving over her body. Skimming over her bare skin. His hard, muscular weight pinning her to the wall as he kissed her until her knees gave out.

That gorgeous, sculpted body lowering on top of her. Holding her down while he rocked his hips against the ache between her spread thighs.

The insanely vivid, erotic images and thoughts shocked her so much she went still, her brownie poised partway to her mouth.

She’d never been ruled by her libido before. But Grady brought a part of

her to life that had lay buried inside her until now. The part of her that had been so disappointed with sex and wondered so many times *is this all there is?* during her marriage.

She winced a little inside at the disloyal thought. But yeah, she'd always wondered about that, wondered if there was more. A lot more. And Grady had her questioning everything she thought she'd known about her sexual side.

"No good?" he asked, glancing at the brownie.

She almost choked on the bite she'd just taken. "No, it's great." She had to swallow twice to get it down her dry throat, and washed it down with a mouthful of tangy, spicy and cold tea. "You like it?"

He took his first bite and made a low rumbling sound of pleasure that shot straight between her legs like a caress. She ripped her gaze off him and stared out at the water, not seeing anything but the look of pleasure on his face just now. And wondering if he would look exactly like that right after he climaxed.

Trying to ignore the flush of arousal sweeping through her, she glanced at her watch. "Oh, jeez, it's almost four already."

"Need to get going?"

"Yes," she lied and got to her feet, brushing the crumbs off her lap before crumpling up the garbage to put in the bag.

Grady started to get up. She thrust out a hand to help him. He looked at it a moment, a little smile curving his mouth, then grasped it. The instant his long fingers curled around her hand, sensation streaked from her palm all the way up to her shoulder. Her nipples tightened, heat pooling low in her abdomen.

He stood slowly and paused, keeping hold of her hand. She looked up into his eyes.

Big mistake.

Her heart stuttered. She might be out of practice and not have a ton of experience with the opposite sex, but there was no mistaking the heat and male interest in his gorgeous eyes. She licked her lips, her belly somersaulting when his gaze dropped to her mouth and held for long enough to assure her he was thinking about kissing her.

She wanted it. Wanted him to take the decision out of her hands, close the small distance between them and cover her lips with his. Wanted his

hands on her. Wanted to flatten herself against that warm wall of muscle and just absorb him through her skin.

Startled, she released his hand and stepped back, softening the rejection with a quick smile as she reached down to grab the blanket. “Ready to go?”

He nodded, sliding his sunglasses back onto his nose, hiding his eyes and making it impossible to read his expression or guess what he was thinking now. She spun around and started across the beach, stepping out of the shadows and into the bright late afternoon sunlight, the sand suddenly hot under her bare feet. With every step, she was conscious of Grady right behind her, her entire body focused on him.

Her heart was still thudding when they reached her car. She turned toward him to say goodbye, keys in hand, and froze.

He was right in front of her. Inches away, his big body crowding her against the door.

She stared up at him, suddenly paralyzed.

One hand rose to slide his sunglasses up onto the brim of his hat, and then his golden stare was locked on her in a way that made her mouth dry and her heart pound. Then he reached out to tug her hat off, setting it on the roof of her car before brushing her hair away from her flushed cheek. His thumb slid across her skin, his gaze once again dropping to her mouth.

The breath backed up in her lungs. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Could only stare up at him, frozen by anticipation and the most powerful surge of desire she’d ever felt.

His big hand slid down to curve around the back of her neck, his thumb skimming over her thudding pulse as he searched her eyes, sending sparks scattering across her skin. His intent was clear, as was the pause that stretched out until she was dying inside. He was giving her time to decide. To stop him if this wasn’t what she wanted.

But she did want this. Oh, God, she *did*...

He bent his head, bringing his mouth closer. Closer.

Her hands flew to his shoulders, fingers settling on the powerful muscles concealed by the thin layer of cotton, her eyes drifting closed. Then his mouth was on hers.

Her brain short-circuited. Completely shut off as a heady thrill shot through her veins. She sucked in a sharp breath, a soft, almost helpless sound coming from her at the rush of sensation and desire.

The hand at her nape slid up to cup the back of her head, long fingers rubbing over her scalp while his other settled on her waist, his lips settling more firmly on hers.

Everleigh leaned into the kiss, feeling like she was melting from the inside out. She was floating, having an out-of-body experience while Grady slowly kissed and nibbled at first her top, then her bottom lip, touched his tongue to it in a way that had her bare toes curling into the sand.

He kissed the tip of her nose. Worked his way across her cheeks, then dipped down to her chin, kissing there before going back to her mouth, as if she was precious to him and he'd been dying to kiss her for so long and didn't want to stop.

Her belly flipped and her heart squeezed. The way he kissed her made her feel so cherished. She had no defense against it.

When he finally lifted his head, she blinked up at him, stunned by what he'd made her feel with just a few innocent kisses, her body suddenly humming all over and hungry for more. The molten heat in his eyes made her pulse trip, and the slow, tender smile he gave her turned her on even more.

"I've wanted to do that for months," he murmured, his fingers moving along her scalp in a way that had her eyelids drooping.

"You have?" she whispered, stunned. She hadn't known. Had she just been in so much of a fog she hadn't noticed before?

He nodded. Leaned in to run his nose along hers, the motion sensual, almost leonine. "It was worth the wait."

Before she could move, he brushed another soft kiss across her mouth and straightened. Realizing she was still clinging to his shoulders, she let go before she did something crazy like drag him back down and make out with him right here in the middle of the busy parking lot.

His long, warm fingers squeezed her nape gently before his hand pulled away. "Drive safely. I'll call you later."

"Okay," she managed, her voice sounding all breathy and weak, and somehow got into the car.

Releasing a shuddering breath, her gaze followed him to his truck. "Oh, holy hell," she moaned, watching him in the rearview mirror. That tall, powerful, sexy hunk of a man had just kissed her and made the whole world fall away.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, a giddy smile spreading across her

face that she was powerless to stop. This was unexpected, but amazing. She was the one who had made this list to try new things.

She was definitely adding Grady to her list.

Chapter Eight

Warren finished emptying the magazine into the paper target a hundred feet away in the desert scrub brush and lowered his Glock, straightening from his shooting stance. He pulled off his earmuffs but left his shades on. The hot sun was at their backs but everyone else kept theirs on and besides, it looked way cooler.

“Not bad,” Tony said behind him with a chuckle. “Not bad at *all*.”

He’d done well. Most of the grouping was clustered around center mass. Only a handful of shots had strayed toward the edges of the target.

A hand slapped him on the back. “Still got it, brother.” Rob folded his arms across his chest, grinning. The guy was seriously jacked. Made Warren determined to go sign up for a gym membership when he got back to Crimson Point. Rob had also recently returned from serving as a freedom fighter in Ukraine a few weeks ago. As far as Warren was concerned, he was a hero.

Secretly thrilled by the praise from someone he admired and respected, he shrugged. “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

“You know it.” Tony tipped his head at Rob, then to Warren added, “Go secure your weapon and give Rob and me a minute, will you?”

Warren walked back to his Toyota Tacoma and secured his weapon in the center console. With society going to hell everywhere, he liked having it within easy reach at all times. Never knew when you were going to be put in a situation where you had to defend your life.

When he finished and looked back, a handful of the other guys who had come out to the range were still shooting. Tony was still talking to Rob. Warren was dying to know what about. Obviously something to do with him. But what? Couldn’t be bad, or they wouldn’t have invited him out today.

Rob looked over at him, jerked his head to the side to beckon him over. Warren strode toward them with a sense of building excitement. “What’s up?” he asked.

“I’ve been checking around,” Rob said. “Talking to a few people about you. You’ve got a good rep. And I hear you were one of the best shots in your rifle platoon.”

“Yessir.”

Rob stared at him for another moment, then nodded at Tony. “Go ahead. Show him.”

Show me what? His heart rate picked up.

“Come with me,” Tony said.

Warren followed him past all the others still on the firing line, fifty yards behind them to where Tony and Rob had parked their vehicles and stopped at the back of Tony’s brand-new Bronco. Tony paused with his hand on the back latch. “Don’t tell anyone where you got this,” he said quietly.

“No, of course.”

Tony swung the tailgate open, reached in and drew a heavy-duty utility blanket off something. A big black gun case.

Warren stepped closer, unable to stop the smile curling his lips. And by the time Tony opened the case and lifted the lid to expose what was inside, he was grinning outright.

Tony pushed his shades up on his head and turned serious brown eyes on him. “Think you can handle this?”

“Oh, *hell* yes.”

Tony’s low chuckle rumbled beneath the sharp pops of the others still firing pistols at their targets. “Thought you’d like it.” He closed the case, pulled it out and handed it to Warren, but held on until Warren met his gaze again. “There’s potentially something big coming up. We wanna see what you can do with this bad boy first.”

He knew better than to ask specifics, but he was dying to know the details. And now he was more pumped than he’d been since serving in the Corps. “I’ll show you right now.”

Tony nodded in approval. “Figured you might say that.” He gestured ahead of them at the range. “There’s a target set up on the far left. Five hundred yards to start.”

Piece of cake.

He set up on his belly facing the target, butt of the rifle snugged into his shoulder and his cheek pressed tight to the stock, then paused to get his adrenaline under control. Aware of Rob and Tony both standing behind him,

watching his every move. And that the range had gone quiet now, all the others eyeing him as well. The newcomer. Still trying to earn his stripes within the group.

Twenty minutes later, after hitting target after increasingly distant target, he'd earned them, and a shit ton of respect from the guys. More importantly, he'd impressed Tony and Rob.

"Not bad," Tony said, which seemed to be his standard response to anything that impressed him. "That's enough for today. As a reward, you get to take your new toy home with you."

Warren's eyebrows lifted. "It's mine?"

"Yeah, brother." Rob clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You earned it."

He was still floating four hours later when he turned the Tacoma off the coastal highway and made his final descent into Crimson Point. The sun was still up over the ocean, its deep gold rays blazing a trail across the water and the white-capped waves cutting toward shore.

Everything seemed more vivid. Better. Even the traffic backups caused by the plague of tourists in town didn't dampen his mood. That's what feeling appreciated and respected did for someone.

He parked in his spot in the underground lot beneath his building and waited until no one else was around before hauling out the case and securing it in his storage locker, hiding it way in the back behind his other stuff. On his way to the elevator, he checked his phone. Ignoring a missed call from his mom, he remembered what Rob had said to him just before leaving the range.

Good work today. Stay sharp. We'll talk soon.

Smiling to himself, he deleted a text from his mom, and the two spam messages he'd received. The elevator door opened just before he reached the glass door off the parking garage, and his smile faded when Marley stepped out in tight jeans and a crop top that showed off her flat stomach, her long red hair down in waves around her shoulders.

Her dark brown eyes landed on him, then flitted away a split second later. "Hey," she muttered on her way past.

"Hey." He stared after her, a little dumbstruck. She always had that effect on him, and it bugged him. "I haven't seen Everleigh around here lately. She okay?"

She stopped, aimed an annoyed look at him. "Yeah, why?"

He stemmed the urge to fidget or shift his stance. She had this way of

making him feel inferior and awkward. “Is she...seeing anyone?”

She snorted and turned away. “None of your damn business.”

He flushed as she gave him her back and strode for her car, leaving him standing there feeling stupid and embarrassed.

Stuck-up bitch. She was everything Everleigh wasn't. Too bold. Street smart. Cutting. Whereas Everleigh was soft. Sweet.

She made a man want to protect her. Wrap her up in his arms, keep her close and never let anything or anyone hurt her again.

He punched the button to the elevator, cast a resentful glare at Marley's sleek little red sports car as it pulled up the ramp and out of view. She wouldn't treat him like that if she knew what he'd just hidden in his storage locker. Then she would watch her damn mouth around him.

He rode up to his floor, his anger turning to steely resolve. He was sick of people treating him like shit. It was time to do something about it.

Everleigh finished up her last patient file, grabbed her stuff from the staff room and rushed out the clinic door dialing Marley's number. She needed best friend advice in the worst way, and Marley had been in Portland the past few days with that guy she'd hooked up with from the bar.

“Hey, I'm just on my way home. You back yet?” she said when Marley answered.

“Few hours ago. You okay?”

“Yes, but I really need to see you. How'd it go with the hot bar guy, by the way?”

“It's over. Was fun while it lasted, but it was never gonna turn into anything serious so I made a clean break before I left. I don't think it's right to leave someone dangling,” Marley said.

“No. That was good of you.” Marley was so much more experienced with men than her it wasn't even funny.

“What's up? Need me to come over?”

“Yes. When can you come?”

“I'll be there in ten minutes. That quick enough?”

“I guess.”

Marley chuckled. “Race you.”

Everleigh grinned. “Nope. No racing. I—” She stopped, her gaze riveted to the hood of her car parked along the curb out front.

“What’s wrong?” Marley demanded sharply.

“Nothing.” She picked up the bouquet of flowers tucked under the windshield wiper and took out the card tucked inside.

Can’t stop thinking about you. G

Her heart fluttered, a ridiculous, sappy smile curving her mouth. “Oh my God, he left me flowers,” she breathed, something hitching in her chest.

“What? Who did? Where?”

“Grady. He left them on my windshield here at the clinic.”

“Hold on—Grady? As in, the *insanely* hot nurse-slash-PJ who showed up at the bar the other night with the others? That Grady?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit. Never mind ten minutes. I’ll be there in six. Move your ass.” She disconnected.

Everleigh put her phone away and buried her nose in the bouquet, inhaling the sweet scent of the roses and lilies. They were gorgeous, in vivid shades of pink and yellow and cream. He couldn’t stop thinking about her? Well, the feeling was mutual. It had been two days since he’d kissed her and made the world fall away. She’d even dreamed about him last night.

She barely remembered the drive home. Marley was sitting on the front doorstep and popped up when she parked out front. “Tell me *everything*,” she demanded, taking Everleigh’s messenger bag and water bottle from her.

“Let me get the door open first,” Everleigh said on a laugh, unlocking the door and disarming the security system.

Marley marched right past her into the kitchen, placing the bag and bottle on the counter before plucking two wineglasses from the cabinet and snagging a half-empty bottle of chilled white wine from the fridge. “Come sit down and start at the beginning. My God, I go off the radar for a few days and the whole world changes.”

“Kind of feels that way, yeah.” She liked that Marley felt so at home here. She flopped on the couch, accepted the wine from Marley and waited until her friend was poised on the edge of her seat across from her.

“Well?” Marley prompted, eyebrows hitched up. “Did he show up randomly to the bar, or was it actually to see you?”

“It...might have been to see me.”

Marley made a humming sound of approval and took a sip of wine. “Yum. And even with a bum knee, that guy can *move*.”

Yeah, he sure could. She'd bet he could move in bed, too.

"So he drove you home. It went well, I take it?"

"Yes, and then when I mentioned I wanted to try paddle boarding he asked me to go with him on the weekend."

Marley blinked at her in clear astonishment. "And did you?"

"Yep, and it was fun. He walked me to my car after. And then he kissed me."

Marley froze, almost choked on a mouthful of wine and swallowed as she hastily set her glass on the table, eyes wide. "You're shitting me."

Everleigh shook her head, fighting a laugh. "Nope. Swear to God."

Marley squealed and leaned forward, her expression almost comically eager. "And? How was it?"

"It was..." She sighed, a smile spreading across her face as warmth flooded her. "It was incredible."

Marley laughed and reached across the table to grip her hands. "This is amazing! And then what?"

"Nothing since. We texted a few times yesterday, and he had knee surgery today. He should be home now. I was going to pick him up something and drop it off, just check on him."

"Mmm. And maybe give him some TLC while you're there?" Marley waggled her eyebrows.

Everleigh put her hands to her cheeks and sat up. "I don't know what I'm going to do. Honestly, I didn't see this coming. And it's not like it can go anywhere, because he's moving out of state in September. Anyway, I thought I'd feel guilty about the kiss, and I did for about five seconds later on, but then I realized I have nothing to feel bad about."

"Absolutely not," Marley said with an emphatic shake of her head. "There's nothing wrong with being attracted to someone and feeling desire again." She narrowed her eyes. "You're feeling desire, right?"

"Oh yeah." She'd never felt anything like it before. "And I don't know what to do with it."

Marley laughed. "Sweetheart, if you really don't know, then I'm gonna need to give you a really frank girls' talk right now that's probably going to embarrass the hell out of you. But I'm ready to do what I gotta do."

She flushed, grinning. "So you think I should go see him tonight? I mean, I don't want to seem desperate or overeager."

“He left you flowers. You’re not going to seem overeager.” Marley stood and made a shooing motion with her hand. “Go. Into the shower with you. Right now, young lady, march. I’ll pick you an outfit, because I fear that left to your own devices you’ll go all girl next door on me, and I want you to make a statement when you go by to do your Florence Nightingale thing tonight.”

Everleigh got up and hurried after Marley to her room, excitement bubbling in her veins. This was happening. She was going over to Grady’s and would see what happened from there.

The sight of Will’s folded flannel shirt sitting on a shelf in her closet as Marley rummaged through it gave Everleigh pause. The initial flood of excitement died away, guilt and indecision pricking at her with sharp claws.

Marley turned, saw her face, and followed her gaze to the shirt sitting on the top shelf. Straightening, she looked Everleigh directly in the eye. “I never met him, but from everything you told me about his character, Will would have wanted you to move on and be happy.”

She nodded. That was true. He would.

“And even if that happiness only lasts a few weeks or a few months, does it matter as long as you know that up front?”

She saw where Marley was going with this. “No,” she said, regaining her confidence.

Will wasn’t coming back. But she was still here. And the losses she’d suffered this past year had taught her that she needed to live her new life to the fullest. No matter how frightening that sometimes was.

“Pick out something sexy—but classy,” she told Marley on the way past her into the en suite. “I’m not giving up the farm on the first date.”

“Second date,” Marley agreed from the closet. “But *hell* yeah, girl. Grady’s not gonna know what hit him.”

Chapter Nine

Grady heard the buzzer for the downstairs door just as he was stepping out of the shower. Shit. He hadn't anticipated how long it would take him to get ready, but he was still a bit woozy and unsteady on his feet from the anesthetic.

"That's her," he called to Whit, out in the living room. He had picked up Grady from the hospital and driven him home—with one important pit stop on the way. "Can you let her up?"

"Sure thing. How long you gonna be?" he called back.

"Two minutes." He rushed through brushing his teeth, getting dressed and doing his hair, all while keeping as much weight as he could off his newly repaired knee, then grabbed his crutches and headed out to the main living area just as her voice reached him from the entry.

"He'll be right out," Whit told Everleigh, stepping aside and holding the door. "Come on in."

"Thanks." She slipped off her shoes, a paper bag in the other hand. She smiled when she saw him emerge from the hallway, and the sight of her hit him like a punch to the chest.

She wore a black dress with pink flowers on it, the top of it hugging her breasts and waist and then flaring out at her hips to swirl around her knees, leaving her calves bare. Her gorgeous pale hair fell in soft waves around her face and spilled over her shoulders to frame the cleavage nestled by the two halves of the dress.

Whit looked over at him, blue eyes dancing. "Okay, so I guess this means my services are no longer required?"

That was a definite negative. "Thanks, man." Whit had stayed to help him out for a while, just until he was settled. Travis had offered to swing by after work at the clinic to hang with him for the evening, but then Everleigh had texted to check on Grady and ask if he was up for company. He loved his teammates like brothers, but all he wanted right now was time alone with

Everleigh.

“No problem.” Whit grabbed his keys from the counter. “Nice to meet you officially, Everleigh.”

“You too. Say hi to Jaia for me.”

“Will do.” At the door, Whit paused to shoot a grin at him. “Have a good night, brother.”

The door shut behind him and Everleigh tucked a lock of hair behind one ear, a habit he’d noticed she did when she was nervous or uncomfortable. “So how are you feeling?”

He hadn’t gone to the beach the other day intending to kiss her. But when she’d looked up at him with those big blue eyes and he’d seen the desire lurking there, he’d caved. He had zero regrets, but he wasn’t sure about her. “Pretty good. I’m glad you’re here.”

She seemed to relax a little at that, smiling softly. “Go stretch out on the couch,” she said, heading for the kitchen located on the other end of the great room. “I didn’t know how your stomach was doing, so I got you some just-made chicken noodle soup and some fresh rolls with butter. Thought that would be a pretty safe bet.”

“Sounds awesome, thanks.” He’d been queasy for a few hours after waking up in recovery from the drugs in the anesthetic. Now it wasn’t so bad. Mostly he was hungry. He hadn’t eaten anything since dinner last night.

“So what did the surgeon say?” she asked, emptying the bag on the kitchen counter. “Everything went okay?”

He lowered himself to the couch and put his crutches aside, stretching his legs out and keeping a cushion under his left knee. Three little incisions covered with Steri-Strips plus a little bruising and swelling were the only signs that he’d just had surgery. “Great. He was able to repair the meniscus rather than remove it. He also cleaned up my MCL, said it looked good and that my ACL is intact, just stretched.”

“Oh, that’s great news.”

“Yeah, big relief.” It meant he was looking at only a few weeks of recovery instead of months. He put an ice pack on the inside of his knee and wound a pressure bandage around it to hold it in place. “He said four to six weeks for a complete recovery.”

Everleigh nodded, busy getting a spoon out of the drawer next to the stove. “They’ll get you on a recumbent bike at the clinic when you go in, to

get your full range of motion back and keep those quads as strong as possible. When's your next appointment?"

"Tomorrow."

"Perfect. It's best to start rehab right away. You need to make sure you keep the vastus medialis strong. It's incredible how fast it wastes after an injury, and you have to strengthen it to support the joint." She carried a plate out to him holding a steaming bowl of soup and two rolls she'd split and buttered. "What?" she asked when he grinned at her.

"Nothing. You're adorable when you go into physio mode, that's all. And that looks amazing. Thanks for bringing it over."

"You're welcome. Careful, it's hot. Maybe we should sit you up higher first." She set the plate down on the coffee table, then reached behind him to ease his upper body forward and adjust the pillows at his back. "There. Try that."

God, she was so sweet to take care of him like this. He had to fight the urge to thread his hands through her silky hair and pull her down for another kiss. He wanted her more than he wanted food. "Much better. Thanks."

She handed him the plate and a paper napkin, then hovered there uncertainly. "Need anything else? Glass of water maybe?"

"No, I'm all set." He balanced the plate on his lap, shifted a bit to make room for her at the other end of the couch next to where his feet rested. "Come sit down with me." He could feel her nervousness and wanted to put her at ease.

She sat, smoothing the skirt of her dress over her knees as she crossed her ankles, looking around the room rather than at him. "It's cozy in here."

"Hey." Holding the plate with his left hand, he reached out and caught her wrist with his right.

Her gaze snapped up to his, full of silent questions and shadows he wanted to erase. He eased his thumb over the fragile skin on the inside of her wrist, telling himself to be patient. "No need to be nervous."

She did the hair-tuck thing again and glanced away, huffing out a little laugh. "I guess I am, a little."

"Because I kissed you."

She tensed for a second, then met his gaze again, her eyes solemn. "Pretty sure I kissed you back."

Ah, okay, so that was it. "And I loved every single second of it." He

wanted to pull her into his lap and do it again right now until she stopped overthinking everything and melted into him.

Instead, he rubbed the inside of her wrist one last time and let go, giving her a little bit of space. “Talk to me.” He wanted to clear the air and understand what she was feeling.

She pushed out a breath. Seemed to gather herself. “I don’t know where you see this going, if anywhere, but I’m still finding my way. Obviously this is all new to me and completely unfamiliar territory. And you’re leaving town soon.”

“I am.” That was the sticky bit, the only one that gave him pause.

He knew what he wanted. *Her*. Desperately, but the last thing he wanted was to cause her any more pain. He was leaving soon, so if anything more happened between them they both needed to be clear on that going in.

“It’s not that I feel guilty. Well, okay, maybe there’s a teensy bit of guilt deep down. But it’s been a year. I want to get on with the rest of my life. I like you a lot, and I’m attracted to you. Obviously.”

He barely stopped his eyebrows from rising in surprise. He hadn’t expected her to come out and say that so boldly.

“I guess I just...” She looked over at him. “I’m not sure where I’m at right now, so I want to warn you up front. And I don’t want to ruin our friendship.”

“I appreciate that,” he said, trying not to smile. He held out a hand, waited until she placed hers in it, and curled his fingers around her palm. She was scared. He got that. “I won’t push or pressure you into anything you’re not ready for. And seeing as I’m only here another couple months, I understand if you don’t want to get involved.”

But he hoped she did. Even though the future was uncertain and he wasn’t sure how he would handle it when he left. If he made SOST he would be gone a lot, traveling for training and deployments. She’d put down roots here and made friends, become part of the community. He wanted a future with her, but not at the expense of her happiness. It wasn’t fair to ask her to move to another state to be with him after all she’d been through, when she would be alone while he was gone.

She held his gaze for a long moment, and he could see her weighing the situation in her beautiful head. “I’ve already thought about that, so... What if we just don’t put any labels or expectations on it, and see where things go?”

Okay, he hadn't expected her to say that either. But he'd agree to damn near anything if it meant having a chance with her. Her directness and honesty, her willingness to expose her vulnerability humbled him. Made him want to wrap her up in his arms and hold her until she felt safe, promise her he'd never let her down.

But with him leaving in September, it was one promise he couldn't keep.

"And I'd want us to be exclusive," she added quickly. "I don't know if you're seeing anyone else, but I wouldn't be comfortable—"

"I'm not, and you're the only woman I want to be with. So that sounds good to me." The thought of her out with some other guy, some other guy touching her, kissing her... It made him edgy as shit.

A hint of relief bled into her expression, a little smile tugging at her lips. "Okay. Good. So...can I kiss you?"

"God yes," he said on a chuckle, and started to set the plate on the table but she was already kneeling on the floor beside him.

She hesitated just a moment, seemed to relax when he cupped her cheek in his hand, and leaned in to touch her lips to his. Light at first. Still a little timid.

He waited, slid his fingers under the silky curtain of her hair to stroke the side of her neck. Her hand came up to rest on his shoulder, then she kissed him again.

A thrill shot through him, heat pouring into his gut as she quickly gained confidence. Before he could deepen it the way he was dying to, she drew back, gave him a shy little smile that turned his heart upside down, her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. "Better eat your dinner before it gets cold."

I'd rather eat you.

He held the words back, not wanting to make her more skittish, but they were the truth. He was dying to hold her, map her curves with his hands, slowly peel that dress off her and explore every satiny inch of her skin with his lips and tongue until her fingers were clenched in his hair and she was begging him not to stop. But he had to go slow. Be patient and wait until she was ready.

"Should I put on a movie or something?" she asked.

He could feel her nerves returning, could tell she wanted a distraction. "Sure. Your pick."

She chose an action movie and settled back on the couch next to his feet.

He ate his dinner, watching her more than the movie. He couldn't believe she was actually here in his place, and that she wanted to give it a shot with him in spite of everything she'd been through. He wouldn't let her down.

She glanced over a few minutes later as he ate the last bit of the second roll. "Want more soup? There's enough for another serving."

"No, this was perfect, thank you."

"Welcome. Here." She took the plate and carried it to the kitchen. "I'll just put the rest in the fridge for later." She rinsed and put his plate in the dishwasher. "Do you need to take any meds or anything?"

It was adorable how much she wanted to take care of him. He'd spent so much of his life fending for himself and taking care of others, it felt strange to have someone take care of him. But he liked it with her. A lot. "I took some before you got here." They were starting to hit him now. Between that, the anesthetic that was still working its way out of his system, not getting much sleep last night and now having a full belly, his body was gearing up to crash.

Everleigh came back to him, paused beside the couch before gently stroking a hand over the side of his face. "Tired?"

He leaned into her touch, craving more of it. God, he wanted to kiss her again. Pull her down on top of him and feel all those soft curves meld into his body. But right now he'd settle for holding her instead. "Come here." He caught her hand, tugged. Ignored her half-hearted protests about not wanting to hurt him and shifted over to make room for her, then drew her down on her side, facing him.

She went reluctantly at first, lying stiffly as he wrapped his arms around her and drew her head to his chest. "Are you sure this isn't hurting you?" she asked, craning her neck to check that nothing was touching his bandaged knee.

"You're making me feel a hundred times better."

She flashed him an impish smile and laid her head back down against his shoulder. He closed his eyes. God, this was heaven to finally be holding her. He stroked a hand down her spine, willing her to relax, and she rewarded him moments later with a soft sigh, her weight sinking into him. He swallowed a groan as every cell in his body woke up, that hot flare of protectiveness she brought out in him burning bright—and a possessive streak he'd never felt before.

She was his. At least for now.

The possessive part of him roared in outrage. Refusing to accept that this was only temporary.

He pushed it aside, focusing on the here and now as he inhaled the sweet, clean scent of her hair. She was warm and so damn soft. Perfect. The pain in his knee began to drift toward the edges of his consciousness, the way she cuddled into him making the rest of the world fade away as the heavy weight of sleep began to drag him under.

His hand stilled on her back, the feel of her lingering in his mind. The last thing he was conscious of before he allowed himself to go under was the feel of her hand sliding up his chest to splay over his heart.

Chapter Ten

Everleigh went through her living room and kitchen one last time, stopping to stack some magazines on the coffee table. She'd already tidied up, vacuumed and wiped everything down in here but she still had some nervous energy to burn off and wanted everything to be perfect when Grady got here after his post-op appointment. His knee was healing well enough that he was going back to light duty at the hospital and the military next week.

She couldn't believe almost a week had already passed since she'd been at his place. Five days since they'd fallen asleep together on his couch, an incredibly intimate thing considering how "new" they were.

She'd left just before midnight, even though part of her had wanted to stay until morning. The next day, his dad had come into town to stay with him, and he'd just flown out this morning. She'd been slammed at work all week anyway, going in early and staying late to accommodate more patients, but she and Grady texted all the time and talked on the phone every day. He'd sent her flowers again yesterday.

A brisk knock on the front door signaled his arrival. She brushed aside her nerves and went to answer it, a heady rush of excitement and desire taking their place when Grady stood there smiling at her.

"Hi." He held out a white bakery box, even though he was the one who looked good enough to eat with his dark hair tousled over his forehead and his muscles straining the chest and sleeves of his button-down shirt. "Picked us up something from Whale's Tale on the way."

"Oooh, can't wait to dive into that." She stepped forward and slid her arms around his neck to hug him. She'd been needing this all week. "Hi."

He pulled her close and hugged her tight. "Hi," he murmured, nuzzling her hair. "Missed you."

She closed her eyes a second, drinking him in. Being this close to him, the way he held her made her feel dizzy. "Missed you too." She'd spent the last week thinking hard about everything. About them, and whether she was

ready to enter a relationship again, albeit a temporary one. She'd decided she owed it to herself to go with this, and soak up every single moment of happiness she could while he was still here.

"Thank you for this," she said, stepping back. "Come on in." She eyed his knee as he came inside. He wore a brace but had ditched the crutches a few days ago. "What's the verdict?"

"Doc says everything looks perfect," he said, taking off his shoes on the mat inside her door. His legs were just as sexy as the rest of him, golden-toned skin and defined with muscle earned by hard work in the military and the gym. "Range of motion is almost back to normal."

"That's great. And with you jumping on the rehab to keep your quads and hammies strong, you'll be good as new in no time." She set the box on the marble-topped island in the kitchen.

"That's the plan. Nice place," he said, taking in her clean, white kitchen and the living room beyond with its tufted gray velvet sectional with chaise. A huge picture window overlooked the front garden and the view of the sea at the bottom of the hill framed by the white arbor smothered by honeysuckle. From her bedroom upstairs, she had a view of the ocean out the window.

It felt strange to have such an intensely masculine guy in her private space after being alone for so long. Strange but nice. "Thanks. I fell in love with it the moment I saw it." Beckett Hollister's company was renowned for their quality work and attention to detail in the heritage homes they renovated, keeping as much of the original charm as possible. "They made these old row houses look even better than the day they'd been built back in the 1890s during the town's lumber boom. Can I get you anything?"

"Later." He came up behind her, hands closing on either side of her waist. A second later he was flush against the back of her, suffusing her with his body heat as he ran his nose along the side of her neck. She closed her eyes, her thoughts scattering like fallen leaves in a gust of wind, a delicious shiver running up her spine. "You smell incredible."

Arousal rippled through her, pooling low in her belly and settling into the throb between her legs. "Do I?" She barely recognized her voice, all soft and breathless.

"Mmhm." He kissed the spot just where her shoulder and neck met, an open-mouthed kiss with a stroke of his tongue that made her nipples go rock

hard and raised goosebumps.

But just when she was about to turn in his arms to drag him down for a kiss, he stopped and released her, stepping back.

Off-balance, she turned as he gestured to the couch. “Mind if I sit down for a bit?” he asked.

His knee. In those few moments she’d already forgotten. “Oh my gosh, yes, please, put your feet up and I’ll get you an ice pack.”

“That’d be great, thanks.” He sat in the corner of the sectional, stretching his long, powerful legs out on the chaise.

She hurried to the kitchen, grabbed an ice pack from the freezer and wrapped it in a clean kitchen towel on the way to him. He’d removed the brace, so she settled the pack on top of his knee and tucked the ends of the towel under his leg to hold it in place. “There. That okay?”

“Perfect.” Before she could move, he snagged her hands and tugged her toward him.

She threw out one hand to the back of the couch to catch herself as her knee came down on the cushion next to his hip, couldn’t help but smile at the way he’d brought them within inches of each other. A hint of nerves lingered, but the desire roaring through her took over when he slid his hand into the back of her hair and drew her down for a kiss.

She leaned into him, sank into the kiss while her heart tried to pound its way out of her chest. He completely melted her and turned her on. There were so many things she wanted to experience with him.

And somewhere in the endorphin rush he unleashed in her, a brand-new bucket list began to take shape in her mind. A list of secret things she’d kept locked away until now. Things she suddenly, desperately wanted to try with Grady.

He was solid. Dependable. Caring. Not to mention insanely talented and hot. But he was also leaving in another few months.

Maybe that makes him perfect.

She tried to brush the tempting thought away as he kissed her but it refused to leave, her brain circling back to it over and over. The kissing was spectacular but she wanted more.

They were both single, and the end date in September meant this couldn’t turn into anything permanent. So maybe this *was* perfect. This was her chance to enjoy herself without any pressure or expectations. If she had

the guts to proposition him, they could simply enjoy each other while it lasted.

Breaking the kiss to gather her thoughts and catch her breath, she stared into his eyes, her body humming with needs she'd suppressed for far too long.

It was time to be bold and take what she wanted. Find out what she'd been missing out on. There had to be more to sex than what she'd experienced.

"I've been thinking about something else," she murmured, heart racing. He was so damn sexy and made her want to do bad, bad things to him. "Something I thought you might be willing to help me out with."

"Sure, what?" he whispered against the side of her neck. He lit her whole body up when he did that, every nerve ending sensitized.

Her eyelids fluttered. "Another bucket list."

He eased his head back to gaze up at her with those gorgeous amber eyes. "That sounds intriguing."

"Oh, it is." She bit her bottom lip, drew a fingertip down the edge of his jaw and lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's an X-rated one."

GRADY STARED AT her a moment, not sure he'd heard her correctly. But yeah, from the desire he read in her eyes, he definitely had.

Holy shit. He didn't even need to hear the list, he was in no matter what was on it. "What?"

She eased forward and snuggled into him, still straddling him, that delectable ass nestled on his thighs as she tucked her head into the hollow of his shoulder. "Just a list of things I've been thinking about. Things I want to do. With you. And to you."

He bit back a growl at knowing she'd been fantasizing about them together. He'd been so careful to keep things light this past week, to keep his distance while his dad was here and give her more time to adjust when what he'd really wanted was to show up here every night and hold her, kiss and caress her, make her come until she was so addicted that she couldn't stand to be away from him.

He unfroze and stroked his palm up the length of her back, heat pouring into his gut straight down to his groin. "What kinds of things?"

"Nothing wild. You'll probably think they're pretty vanilla."

Didn't matter. He was hard as a goddamn spike already, vanilla or not. "Try me."

She made a gruff sound and snuggled closer. Hiding, he realized, and his heart squeezed that she was embarrassed.

"No, tell me," he coaxed, dying to find out what sorts of things she'd been fantasizing about. He wanted her to feel comfortable being honest with him about what she needed and wanted. "I want to know."

She stayed right where she was and flapped a hand dismissively, wouldn't allow him to tip her face up to look at her. "Different positions and stuff."

"Different from...?" He was trying to understand.

She finally lifted her head, searched his eyes for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether she wanted to say more. Grady cupped her cheek in his hand and kissed her. She leaned into him. Opened to the slow glide of his tongue across her lower lip. He dipped inside, stroking, caressing, ready and willing to fulfill any desire hidden in that pretty head.

Her soft murmur of pleasure, the way she pressed her body to his, those soft, lush breasts flush against his chest, sent a tidal wave of desire roaring through him. He told himself to rein it in, to go slow, but she was giving him every indication that she wanted more so he slid his hands up her ribs, one holding her close while the other gently skimmed the outer curve of her breast.

She gasped and arched into his hand. Grady cupped her, tongue tangling with hers as he brushed his fingers across the hard point of her nipple straining the fabric of her dress.

Another gasp, then a soft moan that set him on fire. He cradled her in his palm, kissed his way across to her jaw, down to the side of her throat, licking, nipping while he squeezed and played with her nipple. If she couldn't tell him what she wanted, maybe he could get her to show him instead.

Everleigh lifted her head, breathing fast. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes heavy-lidded and glowing with arousal he was dying to satisfy. "Can we start right now?"

He grinned, swallowing a chuckle. Was he dreaming? This was moving way faster than he'd expected, but she seemed completely on board so he would let her take this as far as she wanted. "Hell yes." He brushed a kiss across her mouth. "What do you want to tackle first?"

He'd meant it in a teasing way to try and lighten the mood, but she bent her head until their noses touched and whispered, "I really want to go down on you."

He stopped breathing, every drop of blood in his brain rushing straight to his already rock-hard erection. Holy *shit*. "You mean you didn't with...?" He wasn't even sure how to finish that sentence. Could hardly get his brain to compute it.

"I did, but he didn't like it much, so I didn't get to do it often."

What the *hell*??

"So can I?" Another whisper.

If she hadn't looked so endearingly eager and curious, he would have burst out laughing at the ridiculous question. Did she seriously think he would say no to that request?

He caught her chin in his fingers and ran a thumb along her plump lips, the thought of his cock sliding between them soon making every muscle in his body tighten with need. The hunger in her eyes had his heart hammering. What she'd just said was straight out of his hottest fantasies. "Angel, you can do anything you want with me."

She flashed him a naughty, wicked smile that made his cock ache and buried her face against the side of his neck. He slid his fingers through her hair, letting his eyes close while her lips and tongue danced over his neck, down to the dip between his collarbones while her slender fingers began undoing the buttons on his shirt. One by one she popped them open, every brush of her fingertips against his bare skin sending his pulse skyrocketing.

When she had them all undone she pulled the halves of his shirt apart, and the sound she made, partway between a hum and a purr as her hungry gaze roved over his bare torso with a mix of reverence and lust... Christ, he'd dreamed of seeing that look on her face, and he was suddenly grateful for every tortuous workout he'd done to stay in this kind of shape.

Her expression absorbed, Everleigh flattened her palms on his pecs. She traced every ridge of muscle exposed with her fingertips before following with her mouth, sending streaks of fire down to his groin. Then her hand slid down to cover the front of his fly, cupping the aching bulge beneath it. His fingers tightened in her hair, anticipation making his mouth go dry.

Lips and tongue busy on his abs, she shifted on the couch to kneel beside his right leg and deftly undid his shorts. Her hand dipped inside to slide over

the front of his underwear, and just that small amount of friction over his straining cock made his abs clench.

He forced himself to stay still, kept his hands in her hair and let her set the erotic, tortuous pace, dying for more. She pulled his underwear down, freeing him, and the raw hunger on her face as she curled her fist around his bare length almost did him in.

She stroked him with her fist, the pad of her thumb rubbing over the underside of the taut head. He inhaled sharply as pleasure blasted up his spine, bringing her eyes up to his.

She was so unbelievably gorgeous right now with the light from the setting sun flooding through the big window behind her, lighting up her fair hair, the red tint flushing her cheeks a darker pink. Her mouth was only inches from his cock, the look in her eyes telling him she was enjoying drawing this out. Enjoyed teasing him, making him wait.

Go on, baby, taste me.

Holding his gaze, she bent her head and pressed her lips to the crown. Grady swallowed, consciously forced his grip on her hair to relax and stroked his fingers along her scalp, the muscles in his thighs and belly clenching in anticipation.

He could fucking drown in those storm-colored eyes staring up at him with so much hunger. And when those soft, full lips parted, closed hotly around the swollen crown... *Fuck.*

The flick of her tongue along the underside of the head sent fire racing to his gut. He growled low in his throat when she sucked on him, ecstasy rocketing up his spine. His breathing went shallow, heart galloping. Watching her explore him with her mouth, reading the arousal in her eyes, was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Another silken glide of her tongue and she took him deep. He hissed in a breath, unprepared for it, or the brutal bolt of pleasure tearing through him. His fingers clenched in her hair, jaw tight while she sucked him and pulled up with her mouth, ending the stroke with a naughty little caress of her tongue right across his most sensitive spot.

"Ev," he groaned, his breathing unsteady. The innocent, eager sex-kitten vibe was killing him. She was unraveling him so fast. Too fast.

She repeated the motion, taking him deep slowly, then rising up to the tip. Over and over and over while she looked up at him with that innocent,

hungry expression the whole time. *Oh, Christ...*

He forced one hand to let go of her hair, drew his fingers down her flushed cheek and somehow found his voice. This had already gone way beyond anything he'd expected from her. He didn't want her to go any further than she was ready for. "Angel, you're gonna make me come if you don't stop."

In answer she made a sultry, sexy sound and took him deep again, cheeks hollowing as she sucked, tongue swirling...

"Ev," he groaned, part plea, part warning.

But she didn't stop. Didn't pause or hesitate as she proceeded to blow his mind.

Raw pleasure tore through him, so hard and intense he couldn't hold back. His eyes closed, both hands fisting her hair while his body corded, the feel of her hot, silken mouth pushing him past the point of no return.

He barely kept from shoving deep when the orgasm hit, obliterating him with white-hot pleasure. He threw his head back and groaned in helpless ecstasy, held tight while it tore through him. Everleigh stayed right where she was, taking everything he had to give and destroying him in the process.

Struggling to breathe when his brain finally began to kick back into gear, he peeled his eyes open and unclenched his fingers in her hair. She released him gently, turned her head to press a kiss to his thigh and then kissed her way back up his abs, licking and nibbling up to his chest, her hands moving over him as if she couldn't get enough of touching him.

He cupped the back of her head and sat up, tugging her toward him, the satisfied smile on those pink, swollen lips that had just taken him to heaven making him bite back a growl. "Good?" she whispered.

"Oh, angel, best I've ever had."

She laughed. "Come on."

"I swear." Now that his brain was mostly functioning again, he was starting to put the dots together. About her sexual experience—or lack thereof. He couldn't fucking believe that her husband hadn't wanted that—or her—all the time. And he was also now convinced that she hadn't been fulfilled sexually during her marriage.

It made him want to crush her to him, carry her to her bed, lay her down and make love to her over and over until he'd given her everything she'd gone without for too long.

“Come here, sweetheart.” Cradling the back of her head with one hand, he drew her in for a kiss, struggling to rein in the uncontrollable territorial streak she unleashed in him.

She hesitated a second, as if unsure whether he was okay with it after she’d just gone down on him. But yeah, he was more than okay with it, so he kissed her, delving his tongue inside to tangle with hers, wanting to drench her in the same pleasure she’d just given him. If going down on him was on her list of things she wanted to try, then he was willing to bet she hadn’t been on the receiving end of it much either—if at all. And that blew his mind too.

“Now let me return the favor,” he murmured against the corner of her mouth.

A subtle tension took hold of her. He reluctantly broke the kiss to look at her. Her cheeks were more flushed, her earlier eagerness and hunger dimmed by nerves. She ducked her head.

“Hey,” he murmured, capturing her chin and tipping her face up to his. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s...been a long time for me.”

Yeah, he was getting that sense. And he was pretty sure she meant longer than just the year Will had been gone, too. He drew his fingertips across her cheek, reading the lingering arousal swirling in her eyes, mixed with shyness he wanted to obliterate. “Are you wet?”

She blinked at his blunt wording, but gave a little nod.

He bit back a groan at her admission that sucking him off had made her wet. “Then let me. I want to make you come.” She had no idea how bad. But he would show her if she was willing to trust him with her body.

She stared at him another few seconds, the yearning and need written on her face tying him into a knot. Then she took his face in her hands and sealed their lips together, giving him all the answer he needed.

Chapter Eleven

Everleigh's heart raced out of control as she threw herself into the kiss, the arousal and hunger he'd ignited in her stronger than her momentary blip of shyness. For too long she'd wondered if she wasn't very good in bed. But the way Grady had just come undone for her had not only boosted her confidence, it had turned her the hell on.

She felt light-headed, couldn't seem to catch her breath as Grady's tongue touched hers. When he pulled her tight to the sculpted wall of muscle of his chest, the ache between her legs shot from arousing to unbearable.

His arms locked around her, muscles bunching and shifting as he lifted her and settled her sideways across his lap. One hand came up to cup her jaw, the other rising to cradle her breast. Her nipple throbbed, the layers of cloth separating it from his hand frustrating her.

She kissed him back, hungry for more and a release from all the pent-up need inside her. It had been well over a year since she'd done this with anyone, and her body was starving for it.

His long fingers found the top button on her dress. Flicked it open and worked his way down to just below her breasts, every tiny brush of his fingertips against her skin sending tingles throughout her body. She reached between them, impatient, and undid the front closure of her bra.

Grady paused to stare at her bare breasts, the tight, throbbing nipples, his eyes darkening. One big palm settled between her shoulder blades, the other cupping her breast as his head bent closer, closer...

She sucked in a breath when the wet heat of his mouth closed around her nipple. Moaned as silver threads of pleasure shot to the ache between her thighs. Her arms went around him, hands closing around the solid muscle in his shoulders.

It felt so good. The pull of his mouth. The thrilling caress of his tongue. The strength of his arm around her.

Being able to truly enjoy her sexual side without any shame or

awkwardness.

She'd yearned for that for so long. Here in this moment, there was only the two of them. Nothing else existed beyond Grady and what he was making her feel.

Liberated. Beautiful. Empowered.

He switched to the other side, both hands cupping her breasts now as he lavished attention on one nipple, then the other. Over and over until she was squirming in his lap, the ache in her clit getting worse.

As if he knew, he reached up to wind his fingers in her hair and tug her down for a long, lazy kiss, his other hand slowly gliding down her dress over her ribs to her waist, her hip, then her thigh. His tongue teased hers. Touching, caressing, retreating while he drew the hem of her dress up her thighs, then the heat of his fingers stroked along the smooth skin of her inner thigh.

She caught her breath, a tremor rippling through her when his hand paused inches from the front of her panties. He nipped her lower lip, soothed the tiny sting with his tongue and cupped her with his palm, the heel of his hand resting right over the intense ache.

She whimpered, rocked against his hand. Needing more. So much more, and feeling like she'd die if she didn't get it.

He made a low, soothing sound and delved his tongue back inside to tangle with hers, his fingers gliding up and down the center of her panties. Just when she thought she'd go insane with frustration, he worked the damp fabric down her thighs and came back up to slide his fingers through her wet, swollen folds.

Her head dropped back, a helpless moan coming from her throat. She spread her legs more, giving him room, silently pleading for the release she was certain he could give her. At first she'd wanted him to go down on her. Now she just wanted to come right here.

Grady didn't disappoint. He drew her wetness up to the throbbing bud of her clit. Circled it gently. She struggled to breathe as pleasure arched through her, both hands now clenched around his broad shoulders, fingers sinking deep into the hard ridges of muscle there.

He caught the side of her face with his free hand, pulled her back down for another slow, sensual kiss, his fingers stroking and rubbing her most sensitive spot, then stealing down to circle her opening. She squirmed,

whimpering into his mouth. She needed this. Needed it so bad.

Grady held her steady and repeated the motion, withdrawing to glide up to her clit, making her tremble and tense before sliding inside. The pleasure swelled. Sharpened, gathering low in her belly. He splayed his free hand across the middle of her spine and leaned her backward enough to take a nipple into his mouth, his hand still stroking between her thighs.

Her body tightened. Gathering for the coming explosion, the muscles in her belly and thighs quivering.

One more glide of his slick, talented fingers, one more flick of his tongue across her captive nipple, and he sent her flying. Ecstasy punched through her, tearing a wild cry of pleasure from her throat. Her hips bucked as she rode his hand, hungrily going after every ounce of pleasure he offered.

And when it faded, when her rigid muscles softened like melted wax, she curled up against his wide, bare chest and closed her eyes as those incredible, powerful arms gathered her close and cradled her to his racing heart.

“You’re so beautiful and sexy,” he murmured against the top of her head.

She’d never felt more like both of those things than right now. Because of him.

GRADY PRESSED A kiss to the crown of her head, breathing in the scent of her shampoo, still trying to believe this was all real. That Everleigh had just let go so completely for him in spite of her earlier shyness and was now snuggled up so trustingly in his arms.

He’d been about to roll her onto her back, spread her thighs and get her off with his tongue, but something about the tight, desperate way she’d clung to him as he’d stroked her had made him hold off, sensing he needed to wait longer for that next level of intimacy.

She sighed, the sound mingled with a soft groan of pleasure, and his heart squeezed hard. She had turned him inside out several times already tonight. They’d agreed to go with this and see where it went, but it was already way more than friends with benefits—this felt like the start of a solid relationship. But he didn’t want to say or do anything to scare her or make her pull away.

So he contented himself with running his fingers through her soft white-blond waves, savoring her warm weight and how she seemed to love being held like this. “You okay?” he murmured.

“Mmmm.” She nuzzled her cheek against his chest, and something hitched deep inside.

“Is that a yes?”

“Mmmhmmm,” she murmured dreamily.

He smiled, stroked his hand down the silky fall of her hair, bursting with questions and wondering how much to ask.

“That was good.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Sex was never all that important to me before, you know.”

His eyebrows rose at that unexpected and surprising announcement. “Okay...”

“Well, maybe it was at first early on, but Will— He was a wonderful guy,” she rushed to add, a defensive edge to her voice, “but he wasn’t all that...into it, so...”

Nope. How the *hell* had Will not been interested in having sex with her? How had he slept beside her in the same bed every night of their marriage and not wanted her? “What do you mean by ‘not into it?’ Just so I’m clear.”

She made a frustrated, embarrassed sound. “It just wasn’t that important to him. You know?”

“No. Not even a little. Especially with you.” Come on. He got turned on just looking at her.

Her soft laugh was wry. “Well, he was on the conservative side and kind of shy when we first met. We were each other’s first and didn’t sleep together until we were engaged because he wanted us to wait, and even after that it wasn’t a priority for him.”

Unbelievable. “Like how often?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Couple times a month maybe. At first. Less than that after we were married.”

His eyes widened in shock, his hand stopping in the middle of her back. “Were...you okay with that?”

“I thought I was. I didn’t see it as a big deal because we were good together in almost every other way. And okay, I’m going to tell you something else, but I am absolutely *not* bashing him when I say this.”

“No, of course not.” He respected her loyalty and protectiveness of her late husband. “Go on.”

She sighed and curled up tighter, snuggling into him like a contented

kitten. “Honestly, sex was a huge disappointment for me. I tried doing different things early on to see if that helped but he didn’t like most of it, so...I stopped.”

Healthy, normal and important things like oral and using different positions? Wow. “So you didn’t come with him?”

She made an embarrassed sound. “Not often, unless I used a toy.”

“But you could by yourself?” Please tell him she’d seen to her own needs if Will hadn’t.

“Yes. He only seemed to be comfortable with missionary,” she finished quickly. “I think it must have something to do with his upbringing. And I always thought to myself, ‘Is this it?’ So I guess I’ve always hoped there’s more to it like you read about in books and see in movies, and wondered if I’ve been missing out. And wondering whether there’s something wrong with my body because I wasn’t enjoying it.”

Her words floored him and horrified him at the same time. “Okay,” he said evenly, struggling to hide his true reaction. He’d never met Will, but to not want Everleigh on a visceral level every time he touched her? To not be concerned with her pleasure? Sounded like Will had either had some kind of serious unresolved sexual hang-ups or trauma in his past, or maybe he’d even been deep in the closet. So deep that he had refused to face the truth about his sexual orientation.

Not that Grady was going to say any of that to Everleigh.

“But I guess we just proved there’s not,” she said softly.

“No.” He squeezed her tighter, a deep well of tenderness and protectiveness flooding him. “I promise you, there’s *nothing* wrong with you. You’re incredible.” He would prove it to her over and over again. But given how emotionally raw she was probably feeling right now, he needed to let the subject drop. A change of scenery was in order.

She remained tucked against him, head on his shoulder, her gentle fingers gliding over his bare chest and shoulder, raising goosebumps. He already knew he would never get enough of her. “You hungry?” he murmured.

She tipped her head back to look up at him. “Famished. Should we order in?”

“No.” He took her by the shoulders and sat her up, noting how she hastily pulled the front of her dress together and started doing up buttons.

He grasped her hands to stop her. She looked up at him, and he felt that sharp hitch deep in his chest again. They'd moved fast and done things backwards.

She deserved romance. Seduction. Dinner at a nice place, then holding hands during a moonlight walk on the beach. Making out under the stars while the waves crashed in the background. Long, slow kisses that made her crazy.

Him finding and stroking every single one of her pleasure points until she couldn't take it anymore. Orgasms provided by his fingers. His tongue. His cock.

"Come on," he said, easing her off his lap, anticipating the night ahead. "Go get ready."

"For what?" she said on a startled laugh.

"I'm taking you out on a date."

Chapter Twelve

Warren glanced around the bright, classy waiting room on the second floor of Crimson Point Security, sizing the others up. Two guys in their mid-thirties or so. One clean shaven and wearing a suit who looked like he'd never served a day in the military. The other one had a beard and looked like he could take on a grizzly with his bare hands. Definitely former SOF.

He'd bet the first guy was one of his competitors for the IT position he'd applied for. And he was betting the second guy was what Warren wanted to do here eventually. He didn't have the tactical experience they would be looking for in a personal security specialist.

Yet. But hopefully once he got his foot in the door here and earned their trust, he would be able to start training with them for a bodyguard position one day soon.

When he'd first gotten out of the Corps he'd considered doing contracting work. Then he'd talked to some guys and quickly realized the real money was in private security. An IT job here at this firm was his entry point into that world.

He'd wanted a job with Crimson Point Security ever since it had first opened. It's why he'd moved here from the interior over a year ago and stayed at the coding job he hated, working remotely from home. He'd been biding his time until now to build up his resume more before applying here, knowing they would expect a certain level of experience and skill.

The waiting room door opened and an elegant woman with long black hair, dusky skin and wearing a skirt suit walked in. She put on a polite smile, her dark eyes sweeping the room, everything about her bearing screaming professional efficiency. "Warren?"

"Here." He stood and followed her out into the hall.

"I'm Jaia, Mr. Locke's personal assistant. He's waiting for you in the conference room. Follow me," she told him, striding down the carpeted hall lined with offices on either side.

He was already impressed. This place was slick, and five seconds in this woman's presence proved his initial impression was right—Crimson Point Security was a well-run machine.

Jaia led him to the frosted-glass conference room and opened the door, then flashed him a smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks." He resisted the urge to wipe his palms on his pants, squared his shoulders and entered the room.

Ryder Locke glanced up from a stack of papers in front of him on the long, rectangular table in the center of the room. A big dude with light brown skin, short black hair and a short mustache/goatee. Behind him, a wide bank of windows covered the back wall, flooding the room with natural light and showcasing a stunning view of the waterfront at the bottom of the hill and the ocean beyond.

"Warren." He stood, offered a hand. "Ryder Locke. Good to meet you."

"You too, sir." Warren shook it and sat across the table from him, forcing himself not to fidget.

He wanted this job. Wanted it bad. Here he could prove himself, showcase his skills and, in time, let them see he was meant to be far more than an IT guy. He had big ideas about security in general. Good ones. He just needed someone to listen and allow him to implement them.

"You served three years in the Corps?"

"Yessir. Semper Fi."

Locke smiled, deep brown eyes warming. "Semper Fi." He leaned back in his seat, his posture relaxed, clearly trying to put Warren at ease. But it was deceptive.

Warren had heard about Locke. Knew he'd been a captain before leaving the Corps and had heard rumors about him around town. About what a badass he was and how he'd singlehandedly taken out a wanted felon near Crimson Point before opening up this place.

"I'm interviewing you because I liked what I saw on your resume. But now I want to know about you personally. Tell me about yourself," Locke said.

He blinked, a bit taken aback. He'd prepared for this interview on the assumption that it would be strictly business-related, fielding questions about his time in the military, his education and work experience. Not personal stuff, and he wasn't sure why the hell that would matter to the company

anyway. “What do you want to know, sir?”

Locke’s lips quirked at his confusion. “Anything you want to tell me about your background, interests, hobbies. Things I can’t find on paper or with a Google search.”

He rubbed his palms against his thighs, wondering what to say. He wanted to impress him, and aside from the military and his skills, nothing about him personally was particularly interesting or impressive. He wasn’t the kind of guy to spend his weekends doing volunteer work—unless he counted the militia stuff, which he’d gone to great lengths to hide.

What background would Locke see as relevant? “Well, I was born and raised in central Oregon. My mom was a single parent. I’m an only child.” What the hell else was he supposed to tell him? He needed to steer this back to showcasing his strengths. “I joined the Corps right after I graduated.”

“And you earned a marksmanship badge.”

A surge of pride swept through him. “Yes, sir.”

“Why computers, then? Why not a different MOS or trying out for Scout Sniper?”

“I thought about it initially. But I’ve always liked and been good with computers. Self-taught, mostly. I wanted training in a career I could do close to home once I got out. Something that would transfer easily into the civilian world and allow me to make enough of a living to help support my mom.” They weren’t as close as they had been a couple years ago, but Locke didn’t need to know that, and he did try to give her some money every now and then to help out.

Locke nodded. “I respect that. Your professional qualifications look good. Your skill set is exactly what we’re looking for.”

Relief hit him. “Great.”

“What do you do with your free time?”

The question threw him so badly he blinked like an idiot. “You mean... for fun?”

Locke grinned. “Yes. And I don’t mean video games. On the weekends. What do you do with yourself?”

He definitely played video games. “I...like to hit the range. I spend time with my mom.” Not really at this point, but whatever. It sounded good. “But I always put in some overtime on the weekends. I work remotely, so it’s no big deal to put in a few more hours.”

Locke waited for him to elaborate. When Warren didn't, he filled the void. "Anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Something in the way Locke watched him made Warren's heartbeat quicken. He felt overheated suddenly, sweat beading the base of his spine and under his arms. But he dared not fidget or clear his throat. There was no way Locke could know about his...extracurricular activities. He'd been too careful and planned to keep it a secret. "No, sir."

"Then how about I tell you more about the position you've applied for, and the remuneration?"

"Sounds good."

A few minutes later, Locke leaned forward to pick up his pen and scrawl a couple of notes on the pad in front of him. "That's everything I have for now. Any questions?"

"Yessir. When will I hear back from you?"

"Someone from the office will contact you within a week if we want you to come in for a second interview. That would be with me and Callum Falconer. We'll also check your references and do a background check in the meantime."

He nodded, unconcerned. His references were solid and he knew how to cover his tracks online, only using his personal laptop at home to communicate with the group, never contacting any of them on his phone. "Great. Well, thank you for your time. I hope I'll be doing a second interview soon."

"Likewise." Locke reached across the table to shake with him, his grip firm and confident. "Thanks for coming in, Warren. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir." He walked out of the room feeling a foot taller. Locke made him feel respected. Valued already, even without offering him the job.

Outside, the summer sunshine streamed down through big gaps in fast-moving clouds pushed by the wind, warming his back and shoulders. He pulled his phone out of his pocket on the way to his truck and turned it back on. There was a message from his mom.

How did it go?? Rooting for you.

He smiled a little and shot off a response. For all she annoyed and nagged at him, his mom cared and had always been there for him. She was the only one who had always been there.

Really well, he answered. Hoping to get called back for another

interview next week.

Three little dots appeared. *Fantastic! Feel like a steak dinner to celebrate? I'll make those loaded twice-baked potatoes you love.*

It had been a while since he'd last seen her. Almost three weeks. Why not? *Sure, sounds good,* he answered. *See you at six.*

He got into his truck and headed east up the hill, sensing that he was just on the cusp of something important. That his life was finally about to take a turn for the better. The interview today had gone well. Hopefully he'd get that second one.

At home he walked into his condo, grabbed a hard lemonade and went straight to his computer. He booted it up, accessed the special server where the chat room was, and entered the security info he'd coded into the program.

Several messages popped up from a thread he'd missed while he was at the interview. The last one was from Rob.

Hey man. We're trying to put a last-minute meeting together for something. You free tonight? Seven at the range.

He glanced at the time on screen. It was almost five already. If he was going to make it there by seven, he'd have to leave right now because of the commuter traffic on the freeways.

He looked at his phone. Thought about eating a steak and a twice-baked potato on his mom's back deck. Then back at his computer and thought about meeting the guys at the range.

He picked up his phone and shot off a quick text to his mom. *Can't make it over tonight. Something came up last minute. Sorry.*

He only felt a little bit guilty as he tucked his phone away and headed for the door. Because something huge was coming. Something way more important than any job. Something that would change the trajectory of his life.

When it did, he would be ready.

Chapter Thirteen

As soon as his ICU shift ended at the hospital, Grady went straight down to the locker room on the first floor and packed his gear in record time. He'd had a tough shift, his knee was bugging him, and he couldn't wait to get out of here so he could go home and shower. The need to see Everleigh was a constant beat in his blood.

He'd never felt like this before. Never been consumed by a woman this way.

"Wow, someone's in a hurry," Travis joked from a few lockers down. "Got a hot date tonight?"

"Maybe." Their date three nights ago had certainly been hot. They'd both had a great time at dinner and spending a few romantic hours on the beach afterward.

He hadn't told anyone about him and Everleigh, and after not seeing her for the past three nights, he was dying to see her. Especially tonight. Was dying to kiss her senseless and then pin her to the bed while he went down on her, make her pant and moan and beg while her fingers knotted in his hair.

He wanted to forget everything that had happened in the past few hours and lose himself in her.

His inner caveman was revved up at the thought of being the first to show her everything she'd been missing out on, stoking that territorial, possessive place inside him he hadn't even known existed before her.

"Yeah? Well good for you," Whit said, slapping him on the back once. He wore his paramedic uniform. "Is it a serious thing?"

"None of your damn business. But yeah, it's serious." Everleigh was the furthest thing from a hookup.

"So when do we get to meet this girl?" Travis asked.

"Dunno. That's up to her."

"Hold up." Whit pushed away from the wall, stared down at him with an incredulous expression. "Are you talking about Everleigh?"

“Everleigh?” Travis parroted, cranking his head around to stare at Grady.

Grady grabbed his stuff from the bottom shelf, the protective alpha male in him bristling. He wanted it clear this wasn't just a hookup. “I care about her. So if any of you are thinking of making a wisecrack right now, don't.”

Whit held up his hands. “Hey, no, not saying a thing except that I'm happy for you, bro.”

“Same. Mia says she's great,” said Travis.

“She is.” He gave Travis a chin nod. “See you tomorrow.” With that, he strode out the door, aware of the stares following him out into the twilight.

Outside he drew in a deep breath and rolled his shoulders to dispel some of the tension in his body. Normally he could compartmentalize things fairly easily. Tonight he was struggling with the emotional toll of a patient death, and the reaction of the family when they'd received the news was a heavy weight pressing on his chest.

He drove home and took a hot shower, thoughts of Everleigh helping to chase the earlier death from his mind. As soon as he was dressed he hopped back in his truck and headed to her place, his pulse picking up, urgency riding him. When he finally parked out front of her place fifteen minutes later, the sun had just sunk into the ocean and his whole body was strung taut.

She opened the front door when he was halfway up the garden path, wearing a lavender dress that skimmed her curves, pale hair down around her shoulders, and gave a warm smile that pierced him where he stood. “Hey, stranger.”

He erased the distance between them in four quick strides and reached for her, hands sliding into her hair as he brought his mouth down on hers and backed her into the house. A wild tide of need and hunger swept through him, powerful and unstoppable. She was in his blood already. Deep under his skin and he needed more. So much more.

Her initial giggle of surprise was muffled by the kiss, then quickly turned into a moan when he shut the door with one foot and turned them to pin her to the back of it, lifting her so that his erection notched between her legs. She dug her fingers into his back, arching into him while her tongue tangled with his.

A dark, possessive need flooded him. The need to feel her fingers digging into his bare skin. Marking him as he claimed her.

He rolled his hips, earning another soft moan that sent a streak of lust

ripping through him. He was going to rock her world now. Bring her to the brink of orgasm and watch every flicker of expression that crossed her face when he pushed her over the edge and drank in every second of it.

The hand gripping her hair tugged her head back. He reveled in her tiny shiver as he trailed open-mouth kisses down the side of her neck to the top of her cleavage, nestled in the deep V of the dress's neckline. She smelled so goddamn good and felt like heaven as she wrapped around him, going to his head like a drug.

His other hand found the tie at the side of her dress. One sharp pull and the delicate bow slid undone. The thin, flowy material of her dress unwrapped from her body like he was opening a gift—and what a gift she was.

His hungry stare took in the black push-up bra and lace panties pressed tight to his throbbing erection, her breasts pushed up high, inches from his mouth. He buried his face between them, fingers tugging one cup down, then the other, revealing lush round breasts topped with erect pink nipples. Tight and hard, begging for his mouth.

“Oh, fuck, angel...” His voice was deep. Rough with the desire lashing him like a whip.

The sound of her quickened breathing filled the quiet room as their gazes locked for a long, electric moment. Then he lowered his head and she let out a long, liquid moan when he took one tight center into his mouth to suck. Her hands plunged into his hair, holding tight. Demanding the pleasure he was only too happy to give.

He looped both arms beneath her ass and lifted her from the door, keeping his mouth exactly where it was. She grabbed one of his shoulders for balance and wound her legs around his waist as he started through the entry into the living room and beyond. His knee protested but he barely noticed the pain, focused on sucking her tight, sensitive nipples while he took her to her bedroom.

The coolness of the room registered as he carried her inside. Her king-size bed dominated the far wall. He walked her to it, reached down to grab the duvet with one hand and yanked it back, sending it and a cascade of pillows to the shiny hardwood floor. Then he eased her down across it on the soft, clean sheets and came down on top of her, switching to her other breast, hands pushing beneath her back to unhook and toss her bra aside.

Everleigh curled both her legs around him again, making soft, sexy mewls at each pull of his mouth that drove him crazy. He wanted to immerse her in pleasure. Drown her in it.

He eased one hand down her side, following the sexy contours of her body to find her bare thigh. Slid his palm up the inside of it, letting his fingers brush the edge of her panties. She hitched in a breath, squirming under him as she tugged at his hair.

Reluctantly leaving her breasts for the moment, he kissed and licked his way down the smooth plane of her belly. His fingers curling into the waistband of her panties to slowly drag them down her legs and off, leaving her slick pink flesh revealed to his hungry gaze.

The urge to bury his mouth between her thighs was overpowering. But he kissed her belly again instead, paused to dip his tongue into her navel, making her squirm more as his fingers traced through her soft folds. Wanting to draw this out more. Make it unforgettable for her.

Everleigh watched him with heavy-lidded, dilated blue eyes, hands clenching his shoulders, the arousal on her face almost doing him in.

She was so damn soft. So wet, and the catch in her breathing when he stroked her swelling clit made him go hard all over.

His lips moved lower. Lower, until his shoulders were wedged between her thighs, holding her knees apart. He could feel the tension there, her muscles locking tight in anticipation and maybe a bit of uncertainty.

He looked up the length of her body and met her stare. Held it as he trailed his tongue across her velvety skin.

Let me, he willed her silently, heart pounding out of control as the scent of her arousal hit him. *Let me do this to you, angel.*

His mouth moved lower. The first brush of his lips at the top of her mound made her stiffen. He flicked his tongue against her flushed folds, sliding his fingers lower to find her opening.

She gasped, a little quiver rippling through her. He licked her gently, a slow lap that zeroed in on the tight bud of her clit.

“Oh,” she breathed, one hand flying up to bury in his hair.

God, yeah.

He licked her again. Tender and sensual, circling that hard little knot. Over and over, following the cues she gave him. The tilting of her hips and the pressure of her hand in his hair guiding him to just the right spot.

He stayed there. Added a little more pressure with his tongue, fingers circling, stroking. Sliding them inside her an inch or two. Just enough to find and rub that hidden spot inside and give her the friction she wanted.

Her hips lifted, rocking her against his tongue. And the sound she made as he licked and stroked her. Oh, hell, that soft sound of wonder and pleasure somewhere between a sigh and a moan as she melted under his tongue, a quiver rippling through her.

In seconds he was lost in her. Oblivious of anything but her. The tangy-sweet taste of her, the feel of her fingers digging into his scalp and knotting in his hair. The way her breathing shortened, tiny whimpers of need spilling free.

Lust and raw possessiveness roared through him. He wanted to mark her. Claim her.

Even as he thought it, the overwhelming sense of rightness hit him. This was crazy. He was already in way over his head with her. Every day he got sucked deeper and deeper into her. He couldn't pull back now even if he wanted to—and he didn't. He was addicted, already craving the next hit, and only Everleigh could satisfy it.

She cried out softly, her breathing turning ragged, hands locked on him in a desperate grip. He kept going, loving her with his tongue, his chest constricting at the thought of leaving at the end of the summer.

Time was already slipping away too fast. He'd never thought himself a selfish person, but it turned out he was, because damned if he could find the strength to walk away to spare her pain later. He didn't want to hurt her, but fuck, losing her now wasn't an option.

"Wait," she gasped out, tugging at his hair.

He lifted his head, breathing almost as hard as her. Body on fire. Cock aching.

Her gorgeous blue eyes were hazy with need. "I want to feel you inside me," she gasped out.

Christ. He'd intended to get her off like this at least once before moving to the next level, but there was no way he could ignore that sexy plea and the need in her eyes.

He ripped off his shirt. Slid his tongue along her folds again, pausing to tease her clit while he pulled a condom from his wallet and shucked his jeans and underwear, his mind in turmoil.

What the hell was he going to do? Two more months with her wasn't enough. He'd worked so long and so hard to get where he was, to finally have a shot at making SOST.

He still wanted that. So bad he could taste it, and his shot was coming up soon...

But now Everleigh had him questioning everything he'd thought he wanted out of life. Made him question whether SOST would mean half as much without her.

The words were right there, crowding his brain, filling his mouth. He swallowed them. She hadn't given him any indication that this was anything but temporary fun for her.

His heart howled in agony and denial that it was true. Fueling the dark, possessive part of him determined to claim her on every level.

"How do you want it?" he said, his voice low and rough as he sheathed himself. He was so damn hard he hurt, but he wanted to give her exactly what she had fantasized about.

Her tongue swept over her lower lip, deep pink and swollen from his kisses. "From behind," she whispered, and hearing those words in that sweet, sexy voice, the erotic image it conjured, almost ripped a growl from him.

He raised up to bring his mouth down on hers, pouring himself into the kiss. Into Everleigh, holding her tight while his mind and heart remained at war. If he only had a few weeks more with her, he was determined to give her everything he could while he was still here.

Heart pounding out of control, he raised his head, seized her hips and flipped her over, her shocked, aroused gasp sending fire streaking into his gut. One tug and he had her hips against the edge of the bed, her weight braced on her forearms, that beautiful round ass up, the flushed pink folds between her legs beckoning to him as he moved into position behind her, ready to make her fantasy come true.

Ready to feed the possessive alpha side she brought out in him.

Chapter Fourteen

Braced on her forearms, pulse racing, Everleigh shook her hair back and looked over her shoulder. Grady loomed behind her in the fading light, a wall of solid muscle and aroused male, his golden eyes burning with heat. Arousal pulsed through her, warm and decadent. She shivered as one big hand wrapped around her hip and tugged her back toward him.

She moved willingly, rubbing her ass against the solid length of his erection. Aching for more. Craving the intimate connection of holding him inside her. She'd never been this aroused in her life. Didn't even know she was capable of it. And if he didn't douse the flames soon, she might die.

His hand slid down to cup between her legs, his knowing fingers finding her swollen clit. Her eyes fluttered closed, her muscles tightening. She was more sensitive in this position and he seemed to know that too, his touch gentle as he stroked her. Slow.

Teasing her. Building her arousal back up. Tormenting her with the promise of what would come as tendrils of pleasure spread out from his touch, increasing the ache where his thick length lodged tight against her core.

Then he shifted his hand, fingers zeroing in on a spot that made her head drop and her mouth fall open, a low moan of need rolling from her throat. Already she could feel the orgasm building deep inside, the empty ache there making her crazy.

The hand on her hip tightened. Locking there to hold her firmly in place, sending a secret thrill through her. Then more pressure as he nudged at her opening and eased his cock inside.

Not nearly deep enough. Just enough to make the ache much worse. She whimpered, instinctively widened her knees and arched her back to try and take more of him.

His mouth fastened on the spot where her neck and shoulder met. "Feel good, angel?" he murmured, his voice like dark velvet.

She nodded, unable to find the words.

Hot, open-mouthed kisses trailed down the side of her neck, his teeth nipping before his tongue stroked over the spot lazily, erasing the tiny sting and sending another shiver through her. The way his fingers were stroking her was so damn good, spreading the pleasure like melted honey.

Fingers busy on her clit, he pushed deeper inside her, the sudden stretch, the hot thickness of him stroking that hidden place that ached for him combining with the stroke of his fingertips...

Then, without warning he plunged deep, making bundles of hidden nerve endings tingle and ache.

“Ohh...*Grady*,” she cried, her entire body lighting up. Sex had *never* been like this for her.

He growled against her neck. A deep, animalistic sound of triumph and approval, then drew back to thrust again, giving her the internal friction she needed more than her next breath while his fingers caressed her most sensitive spot. She rocked back into him, unable to hold still, each perfect stroke driving her higher.

She hadn't known. Had only dreamed it could feel like this, and Grady drew it out, holding her captive with that unyielding grip on her hip while he slowly, methodically took her apart.

Ecstasy shimmered, her gasping cries filling the room. More. *More...*

The tension built until she thought she would scream, then mercifully burst free, dragging a long, liquid moan from her throat. She shuddered, bucked in his hold, thick, sultry waves of release pumping through her.

She was only vaguely aware of him burying his face in the side of her neck moments later, of him stiffening as he shoved deep, his rough groan of release vibrating against her skin.

Struggling to catch her breath, she forced her eyes open and looked back at him. Her entire body felt weak, arms trembling under her. And the look on his face—that intense, worshipful expression as he gazed back at her—made her heart hitch in her chest.

She reached out an unsteady hand to cup his cheek, his stubble rough against her palm. He closed his eyes, leaned into her touch. *Oh, Grady...*

She'd been so stupidly naive to ever think she could keep her heart out of this equation. Or that she could guard it against him. She was already deep under his spell and the terrifying power he wielded over her without seeming

to notice.

And in that moment, she realized she didn't want to break free.

His lashes swept down as he leaned in to place a lingering kiss to the back of her shoulder, the hand on her hip sliding up her spine in a slow, warm caress. She arched like a cat under the caress, earning a deep sound of praise and another kiss.

Then he eased out of her, turned her onto her side. "Don't move," he ordered in a low voice, then disappeared into her bathroom, emerging seconds later. She drank him in, awed, tracing every beautiful line of his powerful body with her gaze.

He grabbed her duvet from the floor, dragged it up and over them as he slid in beside her. She rolled to face him, her body languid and sated even as troubling thoughts flitted through the back of her mind.

One big hand came up to cup her cheek, his gorgeous eyes searching hers in the faint purple light coming through her open bedroom window, the breeze carrying the scent of the sea. "You okay?" he murmured.

"Yes." She kissed the heel of his hand, snuggled into him and sighed at the feel of his powerful arm curling around her. Feeling safe and secure—and whole for the first time in memory.

But she sensed something was weighing on him. Something that had driven the intensity of what they'd just shared. "Better than okay. Are you, though?" She stroked his hair, wanting to soothe him.

He tugged her closer, didn't answer for a long moment. "I lost a patient this afternoon. She was young. It was unexpected. Her family took it hard. It was tough."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry."

He exhaled, and she felt the tension drain out of him. "Thanks. It's never easy, but this one..." He kissed the center of her forehead, making something deep inside her chest clench. "It reminded me how short and precious life is. I couldn't wait to get here and see you. Touch you."

"I'm glad you did." She ran her hand down the length of his bare back, wishing she could erase the lingering sadness she felt in him. "Can I do anything?"

"You're already doing it."

Her heart squeezed hard, her feelings for him swelling until her chest hurt.

She curled closer to him, trying to absorb his pain, and aware that he was going to cause her a lot more. Because when it came time for him to leave Crimson Point, a piece of her would be going with him.

Walker stepped out of the elevator onto the top floor of Crimson Point Security where the executive offices were located, checking the messages on his phone. There was a new one from his daughter, Shae.

My afternoon seminar got canceled. Wanna meet in town for an early dinner when I get off the bus? Should be around five or so.

They lived under the same roof but she was so busy now with college and her new social life, he didn't get to spend much quality time with her these days. So he was totally jumping on this.

Sounds great. I'll call and make reservations at the Italian place. It was her favorite. See you soon. Love you.

"A smile like that this early in the morning must mean good news," Jaia said from her office doorway, wearing a charcoal-gray pencil skirt suit with a white, frilly blouse underneath. Her long dark hair was twisted up in a clip and as always, she had her phone in one hand and her tablet in the other. She was Ryder's incredibly organized executive assistant and basically ran this place. No one here could do their job without her.

"Got a date with Shae later."

"Oh, so nice! Tell her I said hi."

"Will do." He strode down the hall past the HR department, where Kerrigan was already at her desk.

She spotted him and waved him in. "Do you have a sec?"

"Sure."

She shot a glance past him and then focused back at her computer screen. "Close the door."

He did, wondering what was up, and came to stand next to her desk. "Something wrong?"

"Yes and no. The third-party company we always use just completed a round of initial background checks on applicants for the IT position who were interviewed last week. Everyone passed initial screening. Then this morning when I opened my email, I found this little gem sitting in my inbox." She angled the monitor toward him.

He braced a hand on the desk and leaned forward to see it better. The

email named an applicant who had interviewed for the IT position and deemed him a possible security threat. Below it was a series of photos showing the man circled in red, posing with three other men dressed in camo tactical gear and all holding rifles in front of a flag he immediately recognized all too well.

Not good. "Home Front," he muttered.

"What is it? Or rather, who are they?"

"Extremist anti-government group started in the Pacific Northwest a couple years ago. Been gaining a bigger following recently. Where did this come from?"

Kerrigan scrolled down to the bottom of the email. "The email address isn't in our system. The note at the bottom just says these were recovered from recently deleted files on social media. The account wasn't Rutteger's. It belonged to this guy here," she said, pointing to a man second from the left in the first photo.

"Who sent it?"

"No idea. Whoever it was didn't give a name, and when I tried to reply, it bounced."

Interesting. And potentially concerning. "Whoever it is knows Rutteger applied here and wanted to warn us."

"Maybe." She frowned at her screen. "Either way, it's so weird. Glad to have a heads up about the guy though."

"Have you told Ryder?"

"Was just about to when you came by. And given his involvement with Home Front, I'll need to pass this on to the FBI as well."

"Forward it to me and I'll send it to my local contact."

"I ever tell you you're my favorite employee?"

He grinned. "Nope, but I'll remember that." He left and strode to his own office about two-thirds of the way down the hall. Callum and Ryder were both in already, he'd seen their trucks in the parking lot. He'd talk to them about this after he'd done a little digging on his own about the sender.

Once seated at his desk, he input his password into his computer and opened his email. Among the dozens of messages waiting, one sent several hours ago stood out immediately.

It was from the same address as the one that had contacted Kerrigan. He opened it, scanned it and frowned, growing uneasy. Given the sensitive

material he dealt with on a daily basis, his name and work email weren't listed on the company's website. Only certain people had access to it.

This guy is definitely up to bad things, it read. There's nothing on him at surface level. I'll keep digging and send you more as I find it. In the meantime, I recommend his application be rejected immediately and without explanation. Also, from what I've seen so far, you'll want to pursue this matter more. I have taken the liberty of informing your HR department as well.

The rest of the message contained the same as what Kerrigan had received. But that first part, along with the line about him wanting to pursue the matter more, bothered him. Because it hinted that the sender somehow knew about Walker's intelligence background.

Ivy?

He wasn't sure. But it was a strong possibility. Although if it was her, why not just tell him? Why the secrecy? They'd worked together before, albeit briefly.

He read the whole thing through again, then began trying to find the origin of the email. After a solid half hour of digging, all he knew was that it had originated somewhere in the UK. Which told him basically nothing.

He saved everything, then forwarded it to his local FBI contact in Portland and shot her a text as a heads up. Then he got up and headed for Ryder's office at the extreme end of the hall.

This definitely warranted a deeper dive. Not only was Rutteger's application getting rejected immediately, the contents of those emails could see him winding up behind bars for domestic terrorism.

Chapter Fifteen

“Hey, can you stick around a minute?” Rob asked him quietly as everyone else began packing up at the range.

“Yeah, for sure.” Warren set down his rifle case and removed his ball cap to wipe his sleeve across his sweaty forehead. It was in the nineties today out here with the sun beating down from a cloudless summer sky. “What’s up?”

“We’ll talk in a bit. Hang tight.” His quiet tone sent a secret thrill through Warren.

He went to his truck, stowed his gear and then sat against the back tire in a patch of shade, chugging a bottle of chilled water from the cooler he’d brought. The eight other guys who had come here to train stood around talking for a bit while they packed up. Then Rob and Tony said goodbye to them.

“Later, Warren,” one of the guys called out through the open window of his SUV.

He lifted a hand, watched him drive off, sending a trail of dust rising into the desert air. Half a mile east of the area they used as a range, the rough gravel access road was just visible at the top of a rise as a pale gray ribbon threading down into the valley below.

Now it was just the three of them. Rob and Tony stood talking together just out of earshot for a few minutes, the low murmur of their voices carried on the slight breeze that did nothing to cool the perspiration on Warren’s skin. They’d been out here nearly three hours today. His shirt was plastered to his chest and back, the material of his cargo pants sticking to his thighs.

Tony and Rob turned toward him at the same time and headed over. Warren pushed to his feet, wondering what was up. They’d never asked him to stay behind alone with them before. This had to be important. Something about whatever was being planned by the higher ups in the organization for a few weeks now. If anyone knew about that, it would be Rob and Tony.

The two men stopped a few feet in front of him and crossed their arms in identical poses, booted feet spread apart, their eyes hidden by dark shades. “Guess you’re curious why we wanted to talk to you alone,” Tony said.

“A little.” More than a little. The ripple of anticipation in his gut expanded.

“Got word from the organization a couple days ago,” Rob said. “If the right opportunity presents itself, they want us to go tactical.”

Warren went completely still, then his pulse kicked into overdrive. “For real?” he asked, unable to stop the grin from spreading across his face.

Tony nodded, expression unreadable. “You’re our best shooter. If anything goes down, we want you with us. But you gotta know up front what this means. The price could be high.”

“Only if it’s not planned right.” With the right preparation for all contingencies and a good exfil plan, the risk would be mitigated. That’s where so many others before them had failed. And why they were either dead or wasting away in prison. That wasn’t going to be him. He wasn’t some martyr they could sacrifice for the cause.

Rob smirked at that, then sobered. “You’ve more than earned your stripes with us. You’re careful, you’ve shown good work ethic, and you know how to keep your mouth shut. Whatever we plan, you’re going to be in the spotlight.”

Fuck yeah. Pride shot through him. “I’m ready. Have you got anything in mind yet?”

Rob glanced at Tony before responding. “We’ve come up with a couple ideas. But we wanted to bring you in on this and get your input as well. The op has to be small and tight, on a soft target. In and out, small crew. Top secret, obviously. No one else knows about this. Only you, us, and maybe one or two others later on into the planning process. So put your thinking cap on.”

“It needs to be symbolic. Really send a message,” Tony added. “We’ll keep brainstorming too. But if you think of anything good, contact either of us on the private message feature in the chat room.”

“Okay. And that could use a couple security upgrades, by the way.”

Tony lifted a dark eyebrow. “Yeah? Know anyone who could help us out with that?”

He grinned. “I might.” He got a kick out of that sort of project while

working a regular job at the same time. If Crimson Point Security hired him, the irony would be even greater—working for the best security firm in the region while conducting his extracurricular activities, and rising within the organization. One day he planned to lead it. He was going to *be* somebody and change this country forever. “I’ve got some time this week if you want me to start looking at it.”

“Yeah, that’d be great. How’s the job-hunt going, by the way? You hear back from Crimson Point yet?”

“No. I’m gonna call them tomorrow to follow up.” It had been over a week. Surely they would know if he was getting a second interview by now. He felt pretty sure he was, given how well the first had gone. “They might still be waiting on the background check.”

Rob frowned. “Think they’ll find out anything they shouldn’t?”

“No. I’ve been careful. No one’s gonna find out. Not even them.” He was paranoid about that shit. Didn’t have any social media, never used his phone to look at or communicate things the government might deem suspicious, or contact anyone involved with the organization. And his encryption and passwords on his laptop at home were damn good. It would take a highly skilled hacker or tech to break through everything he’d put on there and get to the good stuff. So he wasn’t worried at all.

“Good. Okay, man, that’s it for now. We’ll see you soon. And you know how to reach us if anything comes up in the meantime.” Rob clapped him on the shoulder.

“Yeah. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

He sat there in the shade, still sweating as the two men loaded up into their vehicles and drove away with a quick honk of their horns. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back.

So the org wanted to go tactical. Why now? There were so many things he wanted to know about the senior leadership, but for obvious reasons he and everyone else were kept on a strictly need-to-know basis.

Maybe one day he would be at the top. Who knew.

He finished his water, got in his truck and turned on the AC and the radio, pulling out his phone to check for messages. His mom had texted, checking up on him and asking if he could reschedule their dinner for tonight. He didn’t have any plans, so he responded sure.

On the radio the DJ came on the air. “Hey, for all you fans out there,

these guys have just announced a new concert date coming up. One night only at The Gorge Amphitheatre in Washington State. Looks like it's going to be an amazing show, and if you've never been to a concert at The Gorge, you're missing out. It doesn't get any more spectacular than that. Check out the details on their website or our posts on social media."

A new song started up. Two bars in, Warren clenched his jaw and quickly switched the station, shaking his head in disgust. Goddammit. That band was a perfect example of everything wrong with today's society. A bunch of freaks shoving their radical agenda down everyone's throats, and their idiot fans ate it up like it was fucking candy.

Worse, their whole angle was that they "supported the troops." Bullshit. Every single one of them was a loser who had never served their country because they didn't have the guts and wouldn't last two days in uniform. But they used it to garner public support and sucker people out of their hard-earned money, claiming they gave to all kinds of veterans' charities when in reality they made a killing and gave hardly anything back at all.

It sickened him. And it offended him deeply that they were coming to the Pacific Northwest in less than two weeks to spread their poison and grift the masses off the backs of *actual* veterans to make themselves richer. Fuck them.

He found a rock station playing eighties hair band music instead, turned the volume down and opened his email. A half-dozen ads and spam emails had still managed to get through his filters. It was infuriating. He deleted them one by one, growing more annoyed that they'd slipped through his net, then his heart skipped when he saw the next heading.

CONFIDENTIAL: Crimson Point Security.

He opened it, eager to read the contents. And got one hell of a rude shock when he read the pitiful few lines there.

Thank you for your application and initial interview. Regrettably, we have not selected you for further review. We wish you all the best in your...

He stopped reading, a cold, hard knot forming in his gut as he lowered the phone to his lap. Blood rushed to his face, pulsing in his ears. Goddamn it. Goddamn *them*. How had this happened? What the hell had gone wrong?

He'd aced that fucking interview, and his resume was the best they were going to come across for the position. He was exactly what they were looking for. And yet they'd rejected him anyway.

“Motherfuckers,” he snarled, pounding the bottom of his fist on the dashboard with a loud thud.

He threw his phone on the passenger seat in disgust, ran a hand down his damp face and sat there pulling in deep breaths in an effort to rein in his temper. What the *fuck*? That position had been tailor made for him. And now he was back where he’d started, stuck in the useless job he hated for a tiny company that was going nowhere.

He wanted to call Ryder Locke personally and find out why they’d turned him down. Better yet, storm into that office tomorrow morning and demand an explanation in person.

But he wasn’t pathetic enough to make a spectacle of himself that way. It was their loss. He would show them they’d made a mistake. He would find a better job with a competing firm and smear Crimson Point Security’s reputation. Online, he could ruin them. He could—

He stopped, letting his thoughts meld together as an idea took shape. Then flipped the radio back to the station playing the band that put his teeth on edge and made his blood pressure double.

But there was a method to his madness now. And the timing was perfect. Almost as if it was meant to be. A sign, maybe.

The rage burning inside him suddenly dropped to a simmer. But not a hot one.

No, this kind of anger was cold. Icy calm. Determined.

People had underestimated, disrespected and undervalued him his entire life. Shunned and rejected him because he was different. Well, fuck them all. After this, they would see he was a force to be reckoned with.

The organization wanted to make a statement? He and the guys would give them one. Written in the blood of the brainwashed sheeples who worshipped corrupt, useless parasites like the band caterwauling on the radio.

Chapter Sixteen

Everleigh let out a frustrated sigh and forced herself to step back from the table where she had everything laid out on a cutting mat. It was either that or throw something.

Come try our beginners quilting class, they'd said. It'll be fun, they'd said.

What had she been thinking?

"Need a hand?" the instructor asked, starting toward her with an enthusiastic smile.

"Yes, please, before I have a temper tantrum." Mia, Jaia and Kerrigan had all donated old military T-shirts for her to use on her quilt. She was using the designs on the front, or in some cases parts of them, to make a simple patchwork of squares within a thin black grid of something called sashing. Or at least that was the plan.

The lady laughed lightly. "No need for that."

"Told ya to start with an easier fabric," Marley said from down the row, busy cutting her fabric into neat little piles of perfectly straight, measured pieces of pink, black, white and pale green florals. She was making a pretty nine-patch quilt to take to the beach for future wine picnics.

Everleigh should have picked something like that too.

"Marley, don't make me cut you with this thing," she warned, handing her rotary cutter over to the instructor.

It was sharp as a damn razor. She'd already nicked the edge of her index finger twice while trying to cut along the straight edge of the thick plastic quilting ruler and narrowly avoided slicing off the tip of her thumb. And all she had to show for her efforts was a small pile of not-so-straight strips and squares.

Marley grinned and kept going, not even pretending to be scared. "You don't have the guts. And if you did, I still wouldn't be worried. I'd have you disarmed and flat on the floor in two seconds."

Annoying, but true. Marley was badass as far as Everleigh was concerned.

“Here, let me help,” the instructor said, stepping up to Everleigh’s cutting station. “Your friend’s right, T-shirt fabric is really hard for beginners to work with because of the stretch. But don’t worry, it’ll be a lot easier once you get the fusible backing on. Then we can trim them to size and they’ll be much more stable.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, stepping out of the way and glancing down the row of tables at the others. “Oh, wow, Nadia, you’re almost done cutting your fabric already?” Everleigh had met Nadia and her adopted sister Anaya at the book club. When she’d sent the email proposing this class, both of them had jumped at it.

“I hate her,” Mia muttered from the other row, scowling in mingled concentration and frustration as she cut another strip with her rotary cutter.

“Don’t say that,” Nadia teased, “because I was thinking about helping you cut the rest of yours once I finish mine.”

“Okay, I take it back,” Mia said.

“I don’t know what you bitches are even arguing about, because I. Am. *Done*,” Kerrigan announced with a big smile as she finished the last cut with a flourish and held her hands up to look around the rectangle of tables set up in the back room of the quilt shop.

Everyone made disgusted noises, except for Poppy, who laughed. “I don’t care if it takes me longer. I’m enjoying being out of the house by myself for a few hours. Don’t spoil it for me.”

“Who the hell’s idea was this again?” Mia said, apparently enjoying the process as much as Everleigh.

“Mine,” she said with a sigh. “Sorry, don’t know what I was thinking.” She’d driven past this place countless times since moving here. Then last week, the day after Grady had completely blown her mind and proven that hell yeah, she’d been missing out on a lot as far as sex went, she’d driven past here and decided to stop in on a whim.

She blamed him for it. He’d unlocked something inside her that had been suppressed for too long, and unleashed an unexpected creative energy she was reveling in.

Except for this exact moment.

The instructor nudged her with an elbow. “Oh, hush. It’ll be fine. I’ll

help you get all these cut out and iron on the fusible backing, then I'll show you how to use a walking foot with a wider stitch length on the machine. The top will come along fast after that, you'll see."

"I hope so. I need to have this completely finished in a few weeks." Apparently making the top was the "fun" part. After that there was still the "sandwiching" of the three layers together, the actual quilting part, and then making and sewing on the binding. Who knew?

"You will. No problem," the woman said cheerily.

"Hope so. Either way, I'm going to look at quilts with a whole new level of appreciation after this." She'd never dreamed they were so much work, and hers was about as easy as they came. The precision required at every step to make it look half decent was no joke.

"Same," Kerrigan said, folding a new piece of fabric to cut. "Who're you making your quilt for anyway, Ev? You didn't say."

Rather than answer, she glanced at Marley, who gave her an *it's your call* look and went back to work. "A friend," she said.

The others all stopped and stared at her. "A guy friend?" Nadia said.

"Yes."

Mia hitched an eyebrow. "Is it Grady?"

Damn. "Um, yes. But don't tell him, because it's a surprise."

Mia shot Kerrigan a smug look and high-fived her. "Told ya."

"You did. How long have you guys been together?" Kerrigan asked, all interest.

"We're not really—"

"Oh yes you *are*," Mia said with a laugh. "But okay, we'll drop it for now. Kerrigan, get your ass over here and help me cut this up."

"I think some wine might be required," Marley said to Everleigh. "You mind? Since you're not working right now."

"Sure. I'll pop down to the store and grab some—"

"Oh, we don't normally allow alcohol in the studio," the instructor said. But when everyone stopped to look at her, she relented. "Well, I suppose since this is a private adult class, a little bit of wine would be okay..."

"Perfect. I'll be right back," Everleigh said. She needed some air anyway.

She stepped out of the cool, air-conditioned quilt shop at the far north end of Front Street and into the hot summer sunshine, pausing to close her

eyes a moment and draw in a deep breath of the briny sea air. She didn't know why she felt so strange about the others knowing she and Grady were seeing each other, but she'd wanted to keep it private.

The liquor store was a block south on the opposite side of Front Street. She walked in, ducking behind a stack of wine cases when she saw Warren leaving the checkout area with a case of beer. She waited until he got into his truck and pulled away before stepping out of her hiding spot, relieved she hadn't had to interact with him.

After making her selections she went to the cashier, paid and exited the store. Across the street, the town vet was coming up the sidewalk, pushing her old rescue dog in a stroller. Smiling, Everleigh cradled the paper bag in her arms and crossed the road. "Hi, Sierra, hi, Walter. Out for your walk, huh, buddy?"

"It's his favorite part of the day," Sierra said with a smile. "Whatcha got there?"

"Some liquid refreshment for the girls. We're doing the quilt class today."

"Oh, right! Damn, wish I could've joined you, but Saturdays are our busiest day at the clinic. Maybe Danae and I can join you on another night if you do a class during the week."

"Sure. But don't worry, if it's any consolation, it's been more frustrating than fun so far." She reached into the stroller to stroke old Walter's head. He was some kind of a fluffy basset mix with long, droopy ears, and even droopier eyes and jowls. He gazed up at her with his perpetually woeful expression, the end of his tail thumping against the inside of the stroller. "You're so cute, buddy."

"He is, and he knows it. Spoiled monkey. And today's lawn mowing day too, his favorite day of the week in summer. As soon as Beckett comes home and heads for the ride-on mower, this guy magically comes to life and races over there to jump in the seat. Then they ride around on it together until the job's done. I'm not sure if Walter thinks he's navigator or supervisor, but it's pretty cute."

"Cute? Sounds adorable. I want to see video."

Sierra laughed. "I'll take some for you and send it later. Good luck with the quilt."

"Thanks. Gonna need it." She strolled up the sidewalk, eyeing the

restaurants as she passed. Whale's Tale was her go-to place to grab snacks and takeout, but she might be up for something a bit fancier after class. Maybe Marley or one of the others would hang around and go with her.

"I got us canned spritzers," she announced when she stepped back into the relative coolness of the quilting studio. "I thought that felt semi-fancy."

She passed them out to whoever wanted one, then they all gathered around the instructor to watch a demo of how to start sewing pieces together to make blocks. Once again, precision came into play. The instructor was all about emphasizing the quarter inch seam. Always the quarter inch seam, and there was even a special quarter inch foot for the machine, along with a magnetic guide on the throat plate.

Everyone went back to their tables after to resume either cutting or starting to pin the pieces together to begin sewing. The instructor helped Everleigh lay out her freshly cut T-shirt squares into a pattern she liked, then showed her how to stitch the sashing in between each block.

"See how fast this is coming together now?" she said to Everleigh with an encouraging smile.

"Sort of. Pretty sure this quilt's gonna be my one and only though." Hopefully Grady would love it. She hoped so. She'd decided to make him this so that he had something tangible of her to take with him when he left in September. And she already knew she would miss him terribly.

"Anyone got any fun plans for the summer? Trips or whatever?" Nadia asked the group.

"Not me," Kerrigan said. "Too busy with wedding stuff. Unless you count the honeymoon to Mexico after."

"That counts," Nadia said, then looked at Everleigh. "You and Grady planning anything?"

Six pairs of eyes fastened on her. She hid a smile at their curiosity about her and Grady. "No. He's focused on getting back to a hundred percent for September. But I was thinking maybe we could go to a festival or something where we can camp overnight." She shrugged. "We'll see."

It was so hard for her to figure out where the boundaries lay for them. While they were together and exclusive, both of them knew it was only for another few weeks. That left things pretty uncertain.

"And...how are things going?" Kerrigan asked, watching her.

"Great. He's great." She pinned a few more pieces of sashing to the T-

shirt squares in preparation for sewing, and when she realized they were all looking at her, even the instructor, she exhaled and decided to get real. “Honestly, it’s harder than I imagined it would be.”

“What? Why?” Mia asked in concern. “Did he do something?”

“No, not at all,” she said quickly. “It’s just that he’s leaving in a matter of weeks, maybe for good, so I’m... Trying to keep things casual, because it’s going to be hard enough to say goodbye when he goes.” He wasn’t making it easy, however. “Anyway, I need to make a quick call. Excuse me.”

“Tell Grady we said hi,” Marley called out in a smug tone, and the others snickered.

Blushing a little, Everleigh pulled out her phone as she stepped outside to check for messages. Nothing from her parents or Grady, but there was an email alert about an upcoming concert in Washington State for her favorite band.

She checked their website quickly, found the date. It was soon. She’d never heard of the venue, but when she looked it up, her pulse quickened. And, it had a campsite right beside it. “Oh, wow.”

She briefly thought of inviting Marley, who always made any event a good time, but she really wanted to go with Grady instead. Before she could change her mind, she called him. He was currently on back-to-back night shifts at the hospital, and she thought he’d be at home sleeping right now with his phone silenced, so it startled her when he answered.

“Hi. Been lying here thinking about you,” he said in a dark, velvet voice that did things to her insides.

An immediate picture of him popped into her head. Him lying there naked in bed with one arm tucked behind his tousled head, the sheets pulled down to his hips, exposing the acres of smooth skin overlying sculpted muscle.

Yummm. “Were you? I’ve been thinking about you too. I’m making you something.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“It’s a surprise.” She switched her phone to her other hand, stepped deeper into the shadows of a shop awning to let a young family pass by with a double-wide stroller. She purposely avoided looking at the babies in it. “I thought you’d be sleeping, so I was going to leave you a message, but I just found out my favorite band’s added a concert date coming up soon at The

Gorge in Washington State.”

“Who is it?”

She told him. “And...there’s a campsite right there too. So I was thinking, if you’re up for it, maybe we could go to the concert and then stay overnight at the campground after.”

“That sounds awesome.”

A smile broke over her face. “Yeah?”

“Definitely. What’s the date?”

“Next Friday night.”

A pause. “I’m scheduled to be up at Lewis-McChord that whole week.”

Her heart sank a little. “Oh. That’s okay, we can try camping some other ___”

“Would you be okay driving there on your own and I’ll meet you before the concert starts? I’m still on reduced duty, so I can probably get permission to leave base early that night. That sound okay?”

“Yeah, that’s totally fine.” The excitement was back, stronger than ever. “So this is happening? I can get the tickets?”

His deep chuckle sent heat pooling low in her abdomen. “Yep, pull the trigger. I’ll pay you back.”

“No, I’m getting this. I insist,” she said firmly before he could say anything else. “Don’t argue, or you’ll spoil my excitement.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Then I’ll bring all the camping equipment we need. Sleeping bags and all. You’ll just need your pillow and toothbrush. Don’t bother with extra clothes, since you won’t be wearing any once I get you alone in that tent.”

A delicious shiver ran through her. “Now I’m looking forward to camping more than the concert.”

He laughed. “I need to get up and get ready to head to work now. Text me before you go to bed.”

She loved that he wanted her to stay in contact with him during the times they were apart. “I will. Have a good shift. I miss you,” she added at the last second.

“I love hearing that, because I miss you too, angel. See you soon.”

“Can’t wait. Bye.”

“Bye.”

As soon as she disconnected she went online and purchased the tickets,

then reserved a campsite for the Friday night. She walked back into the quilting studio with a giant, sappy smile she didn't even try to smother. It felt so great to be really living again. Grady added so much happiness to her life and he was reliable and easy to be around.

“Wow, what did Grady say to put that megawatt smile on your face?” Marley said with a laugh.

“Got myself a camping date.” Better than that. In six days' time she was going to spend an entire weekend alone with Grady—and she couldn't *wait*.

Chapter Seventeen

Warren stowed his rifle in his storage locker and paused to make sure no one had been around to see him, then stopped when he heard feminine voices coming from around the corner. He stood there, frozen, as a peal of laughter filled the underground garage. A second later, Everleigh and Marley walked by.

They were too caught up in their conversation to notice him hidden in the shadows, but he heard what they were saying clearly. He hadn't expected to run into either of them here.

"I wish I was going with you," Marley said.

Everleigh stopped and looked at her. "I didn't know you wanted to! You should've told me, I would've bought you a ticket."

Marley snorted. "Are you kidding? And crash your first romantic getaway together? I don't think so."

Romantic getaway? Everleigh was seeing someone?

"I mean, as long as you didn't plan on crawling into the tent with us after, it would have been fine," she said with a laugh.

They continued toward the door that led to the elevator. Neither of them had seen him yet as he edged around the concrete pillar to get a better view.

"I've been to The Gorge for a festival once. It rained the whole time. But you're going to get perfect weather," Marley said, opening the outer door and holding it for Everleigh.

The *Gorge*? Oh, Jesus...

"I know, I can't wait," Everleigh said.

"What time will you leave?"

"Around one, I think, just to give myself some extra breathing room in case there's traffic or construction or whatever on the highways."

"Smart." The glass door closed behind them and they stood talking in front of the elevator while they waited for it, but their voices were too muffled to hear now.

But Warren had heard enough. Everleigh was going to the concert at The Gorge tomorrow with some guy she had hooked up with.

Jealousy and dread collided. He ran a hand over his face, a hard, tight knot forming in the pit of his stomach. Of all the concerts she could have chosen to go to this summer, she'd picked that one.

His heart rate kicked up, anxiety swelling. It was too late to stop the op. Everything was already in motion. People were being mobilized. But shit, he'd never imagined doing this when someone he knew would be in the audience.

Calm down, he told himself. *You can still warn her*. Stop her from going without giving anything away or jeopardizing the op or the organization.

He waited a few minutes to give the women time to get upstairs to Marley's place, then took the elevator up himself. The hallway was empty when he stepped out onto their floor. His boots were hushed on the low pile carpet, a sense of urgency building with each step.

Pausing in front of Marley's door, he raised his fist to knock, then stopped. Second-guessing himself.

No. He had to think this through more. Figure out exactly how to word this to make sure he warned Everleigh without making it seem weird or suspicious.

He retreated to his own condo, quickly logging into his computer to check for messages. Everything was a go and the countdown had commenced. They were in communication blackout from now until they met up tomorrow in person at the venue.

He glanced at his bag, packed and ready to go inside the front door, a pistol and extra ammo tucked in between his uniform and the rest of his gear. What could he say to warn Everleigh without tipping her off that something was up?

Tent. She'd mentioned a tent. Must be camping instead of staying in a hotel. At the venue campground maybe?

He could ask her about her plans for the weekend. Make it seem all casual, and then when she told him about the concert, he could lie and tell her that the best views of the show were from the campground. Or make up some reason why she needed to stay out of the seats down in the lower bowl.

He'd rather come up with an airtight reason to stop her from going at all, but he couldn't think of anything that might work without tipping his hand.

Slashing her tires would probably only delay her.

A fire at her place maybe? He'd have to follow her home today to find it, but that could work if the damage was bad enough to involve insurance and restoration companies.

He stood by his door, watching through the peephole so he wouldn't miss her when she left. It was over an hour later when Marley's door opened.

He shoved his open and stepped out just as she shut Marley's door. She paused when she saw him, her shoulders tensing slightly.

She looked so damn pretty with her hair down in soft waves around her shoulders. A streak of jealousy flashed through him at the thought of her spending the weekend with her new lover.

"Oh, hi," she said.

"Hi." He leaned against the wall and put his hands in his pockets in a casual pose. "I was just heading downstairs to run some errands. Got any plans for the weekend?"

She reached into her back pocket and drew out her phone, nodding. "I'm going to a concert. You?"

"Me too."

She nodded and glanced at her phone before tossing a smile his way, but it was distracted, a little stiff as she crossed to the elevator and hit the call button. "Well, I'd better get going—"

The doors slid open and he took a step toward her. "I'll walk you down." He needed to follow her home and wait until dark to set the fire.

She spun to face him, expression set. "No. I'm good. Thanks."

He blinked, taken aback by her abrupt refusal.

Then she closed the elevator doors in his face.

Shit. He lunged forward to hit the call button, but it was too late. The elevator was already on its way downstairs.

He glanced at the closed stairwell door at the far end of the hall. For a split second, he considered running after her. If he hurried, he could still beat her down to the ground floor and get in his truck to follow her before she drove away.

But the way she'd just snubbed him stung. Embarrassed and angered him.

He'd wanted to do the right thing, wanted to protect her. And she'd not only rejected him as if she couldn't be bothered to give him the time of day,

she'd literally shut him out. Not only that, she'd lied to his face saying she wasn't ready for dating. While she'd already hooked up with another guy.

Hurt gave way to a deep, hot rush of rage, suffusing his face with blood. She'd tricked him. Made a fool out of him by believing she was innocent and sincere and sweet, when in reality she was just another cold bitch.

Turning away, he stalked back to his door.

Fuck her then. She deserved whatever she got tomorrow.

The Sea Hag was packed full, with a lineup a dozen people deep out the door when Walker arrived. He walked right past them and entered the weathered black double doors, pausing to scan the interior.

Rosy light from the setting sun spilled through the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows on the far wall, its blood-red rays streaking across the crests of the waves in the distance. All the tables and the bar were full.

He spotted Callum and Donovan seated in a curving booth built into the wall in the relative darkness of the far corner and started over. The place had done well enough the past few years to allow the owners to do some upgrades, including custom scrolled woodwork and plush tufted leather seating areas along the walls. "How'd you two get this cozy seat on a crazy night like this?"

"Been here drinking for an hour already," Donovan said with a smirk, green eyes twinkling.

Walker was glad to see that twinkle still going strong. While Donovan deserved a big piece of the credit for turning himself around over the past nine months, Walker mostly saw that as Anaya's influence.

She had singlehandedly transformed Donovan from a guy crippled by guilt and regret to the relaxed and optimistic man sitting before him now, and it was a beautiful thing to see. "You lazy bastards. I told you I couldn't get here until now because I had a meeting."

"Whatever, stop bitching. We saved one for you," Donovan said, sliding a chilled bottle of beer beaded with condensation across the polished table to him.

"Thanks." He took a seat opposite them in a chair and took a pull. It was loud in here with so many conversations happening at once on top of the music, forcing him to lean over the table a bit to be heard. "So, what are we celebrating?"

Donovan and Callum looked at each other, and Callum grinned. “You tell him.”

“Tell me what?” Walker asked.

Donovan set his beer down, a grin breaking through the heavy dark growth on his face. He was going overseas for a security job shortly and needed the beard to blend in better there. “You got any news for us first?”

“Naw.” He still hadn’t heard anything more from his FBI contact about Warren Rutteger and, having worked in intelligence for most of his career, he considered no news to be good news. “So? What’s up?”

“Anaya’s pregnant.”

Walker’s mouth fell open. “No way.”

“Way. Six weeks.”

“Nadia too,” Callum added, a grin splitting his short, red-gold beard.

“Holy shit,” Walker said. “Both of ’em? At the same time?”

Donovan nodded. “Yep. Anaya’s due in mid-January, and Nadia’s due in early February.”

“How the hell did you manage that? You two plan it out? Keep a chart and text each other when it was ‘go’ time?”

Callum laughed and shook his head. “Ew, no. Just worked out that way.”

Walker smiled. “Congrats, man.” He held out a hand, shook Donovan’s, then reached for Callum’s. “You too, brother.”

“Thanks.” Callum shook his head, blew out a breath. “Gonna be crazy for the next few years. Ferhana’s already keeping us busy all on her own. Adding a newborn to the mix is gonna be interesting.”

“You’ll adapt.” Callum had been a Delta Force operator. He could adapt to anything. Walker turned his eyes on Donovan. “Does Shae know?”

“I just told her before coming here. And warned her not to say anything to you until after we met up.”

“And? What’d she say?”

A proud smile curved his buddy’s mouth. For too long, Donovan had blamed himself for not being there for Shae when she was little. As her bio dad, he’d carried around that guilt and regret since the age of twenty-one while serving in the Army. “She’s ecstatic. At our place right now with Anaya, celebrating.”

Pride swelled in Walker’s chest. He had stepped into Shae’s life when she was in elementary school, and been lucky enough to watch her grow and

blossom into the young woman she was today. They might not be related by blood but she would always be his daughter. “Not surprised. Our girl’s a doll and she’s gonna be the best big sister ever.”

Shae was a survivor with a big heart. Losing her mother several years ago to cancer had been hard on them both. Walker had done the best he could to be there for her, and somehow between his and Donovan’s support she’d become a loving, responsible young woman who continued to amaze him every day with her determination and compassion.

“Yes, she is,” Donovan said with a proud smile.

Walker held up his beer. “To both of you old guys going back to the parenthood starting line.”

Both men grinned and tapped their bottles to his. They ordered dinner and sat around talking about work, Shae and the new babies until Walker’s phone rang. It wasn’t Shae’s ringtone but he glanced at it anyway and saw his FBI contact’s name from Portland.

A tiny seed of disquiet settled in his gut. “Gotta take this. Back in a few minutes.” He got up and strode away from the table, heading for the doors as he answered. “Walker.”

“It’s Gloria.”

“Yeah, hi. Got something for me?”

“Yes.”

Her tone made it clear it wasn’t going to be good news. “Hang on a sec. I’m just heading outside.”

He moved through a knot of people standing inside the door waiting for a table and stepped out onto the sidewalk, turning right past the lineup to take the concrete steps down to the sand. Here the soothing rush of the waves drowned out the sound of voices and traffic along Front Street.

“Okay, I’m good. What’ve you got?” He stood facing the ocean, the strong sea breeze blowing over him as he watched the hypnotic motion of the rollers as they hit the beach. Jillian had never been here but she would have loved it.

“I’ve been looking more into Home Front and Rutteger’s involvement. Nothing else concrete on him so *far*, other than he received an honorable discharge from the Corps sixteen months ago and we know he’s an expert rifleman. We’re still digging on him. Unfortunately, others he’s affiliated with—at least according to the intel we’ve retrieved—aren’t coming back as

clean.”

No surprise. Home Front wasn't made up of angels. Although they saw themselves as patriotic avenging ones. “How many suspects are we talking?”

“At least seven in the Home Front cell operating in Oregon and Washington, with the most critical being two men we think may be the leaders. One of them recently returned from a stint as a freedom fighter in Ukraine. There's definitely dirty money involved with their funding. Way more than we anticipated. Forensic accounting is on it now, trying to unravel it so we can build a case.”

He tucked his free hand into the front pocket of his jeans, searching his own mental data bank for everything he knew about Home Front and its activity in the region. “Any idea who's funding them?”

“Yes.” She paused, never a good sign. “We think it's Elliot Fornam.”

He stilled, his entire body going rigid. “What?” he said, his voice almost a growl.

“Everything we've found so far points to this Home Front group being linked to Fornam's old network.”

“That's impossible.” His voice was clipped. Hard. Fornam was down in the supermax in Colorado, serving four consecutive life sentences in a deep dark hole without the possibility of parole. His last breaths would be behind bars. Walker had made sure of that.

“It should be. But from where I'm sitting, it looks like the only possibility.”

“How?” he demanded, anger punching through his normal calm. He prided himself on being composed, clear-headed and removing emotion while he worked. But goddamn it, he'd spent years chasing down Fornam across Europe and the US. Now he was finally going to die behind bars, and that should have been the end of it.

“I don't know. And there's more. We also got a tip a few hours ago. From an untraceable email address originating in the UK. Not sure if it's the same sender as before, but this person provided credible evidence from chat forums on the dark web. It's not good. And the word on that street is, an attack is imminent somewhere in the Pacific Northwest in the next forty-eight hours.”

He clenched his jaw, infuriated that Fornam could still pull strings in what was supposedly the most secure prison on US soil. But money talked

behind prison walls just as loudly as it did on the outside.

Maybe more so, because paying off guards could be a lucrative business. “And did our mystery source have any specifics on it?” Whoever it was could be feeding them bullshit to make them chase their tails.

“No.”

Well, Gloria was just full of good news tonight. “I’ll head back to the office and dig into this more. Send me what you have.”

“I already did. Thanks, Walker.”

“Sure. Update me if anything else comes in, about the intel or the sender.” They needed to find out who it was.

“I will.”

He stood there a moment, deep in thought as he gazed out at the ocean, no longer soothed by its rhythmic rush. He texted Donovan and Callum to say he had a work emergency, then got in his truck and drove back to the office, his mind racing with possible targets Home Front would want to hit in the region.

There were way too damn many.

Alone in the building, he logged into his computer and opened his email. Gloria’s came through almost instantly, along with a half-dozen others, and one with the subject line *Elliot Fornam* from another address in the UK.

Bracing for more bad news, he opened it, scanned the contents that contained pretty much exactly what Gloria had just told him. Except for the last line.

Given your history with Fornam, I thought you should know.

Yeah, goddamn right he should, but... “Who the hell are you?” he snapped, frustration lacing his voice. This mystery source knew too much about him. Only a handful of people knew about his past with Fornam, and all of them except for Gloria had Top Secret security clearance.

And then there was the likelihood of an imminent attack this weekend somewhere in the area.

He picked up his phone and sent a text to Shae, not wanting to scare her but needing to do what he could to protect her. *Not sure if you’ve got any big plans for the weekend, but I think it’s a good weekend to stay home.*

He hated that he even had to send it. Hated that there were still dangerous assholes out there plotting to kill innocents to make a statement. Hated that after all the years he’d dedicated to capturing terrorists and

thwarting plots here and abroad, it wasn't safe even here at home.
Worse than that, he knew it never would be.

Chapter Eighteen

Grady couldn't remember the last time a day had crawled by this slowly. He hadn't hit his bunk here at Lewis-McChord until a little after 01:00 this morning and had been up with the rest of the guys at 05:00. Except while everyone else had been doing PT and drills until lunch, he'd been stuck in the unit's office helping with admin tasks.

Same thing this afternoon, making time drag to the point that he'd been checking the time every half-hour. And because he had a weekend alone with Everleigh ahead of him, he couldn't wait to get out of here.

When it finally hit 16:00, he hurried downstairs to cross the base to the building where he and the others kept their gear. His knee was still sore but improving every day, and while the brace helped keep swelling down and improved stability, he was anxious for the day he could ditch it and get back to full activity. Being sidelined made him nuts and feel useless.

Turning the corner, he found Groz, Travis and Whit all leaning against the exterior wall in the shade, waiting for him. They all looked tired, faces slick with sweat, T-shirts sweat-stained and stuck to their chests. Whereas Grady hadn't even come close to breaking a sweat the entire day.

Groz eyed him and shook his head in mock disgust. "I think you're faking it." He nodded at Grady's knee. "Just so you can do light duty and get dismissed early to go spend the weekend romancing your woman."

"Totally faking it," Grady said cheerfully. Part of military brotherhood was giving each other shit, and he dished it out often enough himself. "Especially the surgical incisions. Drew them on with a Sharpie."

"Nah, he faked the whole thing so he could sit around and watch us do all the damn work without him while he pushed paper around a desk," Whit said with a smirk.

"More computer work than paperwork, but yeah," Grady joked. He made a show of glancing at his watch, winced. "Love to stay and let you haters rag on me more, but...I gotta go. Four hours early. You know how it is when you

got important things to do and places to be.”

“You’re a bastard, Mendoza,” Groz said. “You know that?”

“Am I?” He shrugged. “Well, no one’s perfect.”

Travis clapped him on the shoulder, fighting a grin. “Okay, get outta here. Have a good time.”

“Oh, I will. You guys have fun too, cleaning all the equipment and whatever.”

A chorus of sarcastic comebacks followed him inside. He went straight to the locker room to grab the last of his gear and zipped up his bag with a flourish.

Smiling to himself, mentally already at The Gorge with Everleigh, he stepped back outside into the hot July sunshine. The new blacktop area outside the building radiated the intense heat of the sun up at him while the sounds of vehicle and aircraft engines drifted on the hot air.

He turned the corner at the side of the building to head for the parking lot, gasped when a powerful stream of icy water shot him right in the face. He sputtered, tried to block it and spun around, disoriented. *What the hell?*

Hoots and hollers erupted around him as the icy blast continued to pummel him. Shielding his head and face, he managed to peel his eyes open just enough to see Groz and Whit manning a damn fire hose. “Fuck! Cut it out!”

They sprayed him for another ten seconds, then finally shut it off. He stood there soaked to the skin, water pouring off him as he spun around and nailed them with a dark glare. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Wrong? Not a thing,” Groz said, grinning from ear to ear. “What about you, Whit? Anything wrong with you?”

“Not anymore,” Whit said, laughing.

“There’s definitely something wrong with both of you,” Grady muttered, wiping his face and shaking the water off his arms.

“Oh, calm down, we only opened the line to twenty percent,” said Groz. “I wanted to do fifty, but Trav wouldn’t let me.”

Grady slicked a hand down the front of his soaked chest, unleashing a small wave of water that poured out on the grass at his feet, and spotted Travis leaning against a tree nearby, arms folded across his chest and a giant smile on his face. “Really?” he said, fighting like hell not to smile back. As far as pranks went, this one was pretty funny.

“Well, didn’t seem fair that we were all soaked and sweaty while you were so dry and comfy,” their team leader said with a shrug. “Besides, it’s hot out. We thought we should cool you off for the drive. You’re welcome.”

Grady shook his head and picked up the duffel he’d dropped. It was as waterlogged as him and weighed a good twenty pounds more than it had a minute ago. “Lucky for you, I’m in too good a mood to be bothered with revenge right now. But starting next week, you guys better watch your backs.”

“Uh-huh,” Groz said dryly. “Whaddya gonna do, sneak up on us while you’re ‘laid up’ at the moment,” he said, using finger quotes. “So I’m not real worried.”

“Okay, big guy. But when I get back? Sleep with one eye open.” He shot them a smug grin just to rub it in that he was leaving early. “See ya.”

His truck was parked across the lot in a shady spot under some trees right at the edge. Water squished from his saturated boots with each step. He shrugged off his soaked ruck, dumped it out and unleashed a small tidal wave from inside, then did the same to his duffel.

Luckily, he had dry clothes packed in the backseat already. He stripped down next to his truck, earning a few whistles from others passing by, and tugged on clean shorts and a shirt before loading everything up and setting it on top of all the camping gear he’d packed in the bed of the truck before making the drive up to the base.

He sent a text to Everleigh after starting the engine and opened the windows wide to let in warm air to help dry his hair on the way. *I’m on my way.*

Three dots appeared seconds later. *Drive safe! I’m already here. Don’t stop for food, there are lots of food trucks here that look great. Can’t wait to see you.*

Can’t wait to see YOU, he responded. Her excitement was palpable, heightening his own. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d looked forward to anything this much.

He drove for the I-90 to head east into the state’s interior, windows down and the stereo blasting. In three hours he would see Everleigh and have her all to himself for the entire weekend. Heaven.

Being with her had changed him, made him interested in having fun again instead of always focusing on work, school and training. In the few

weeks they'd been seeing each other, she had filled his life with so much joy and sunshine. He was gone over her already, and that made him keenly aware of the ticking clock hanging over them, the grains in the hourglass slipping through the bottleneck too fast.

Three months with her wasn't going to be enough.

He was starting to think that nothing would ever be enough with her, and while he intended to make the most of the remaining time he had with her, he was starting to envision a different kind of future.

For so long his only goal and the prize at the end of the road he'd been traveling was SOST. But somewhere over the past few weeks it had become entwined with Everleigh as well.

Warren's truck bumped over the weathered road leading up to The Gorge. All around him, dry, sunbaked, low-rolling hills cut away sharply into a deep ravine where the mighty Columbia River flowed toward the Pacific. Traffic was steady here and a lineup already forming behind him, eager, clueless concert-goers with no clue what was about to happen tonight.

He tuned that out, focused on nothing but the drive, listening to his favorite music and taking time to appreciate the scenery. He knew this whole area by heart from studying various topo maps and satellite images as soon as he'd suggested the op. They had planned this carefully, Tony and Rob taking the lead and handling most aspects and including him for smaller parts while he'd trained continually with his new rifle.

He was ready. As ready as he was going to get.

He reached the parking area for crew, turned off the ignition and sat there for a few minutes until his heart rate had calmed to normal before getting out and sliding his sidearm into its holster at his right hip. Tony and Rob would be here already and in their assigned positions at various points around the bowl. They'd staggered their arrival times to decrease suspicion.

A constant stream of concert-goers passed him as he waited in line at the crew entrance. Two guys wearing the same security uniform as him took his ID and checked his name off the list. "Sold out tonight," one guy said, handing him back his ID. "Could be a wild one."

Way wilder than anyone here could imagine.

"Guess we'll find out," he said, accepting the radio and earpiece they handed him.

They let him through and he strode down into the lower bowl of the amphitheater where the paid seating sections were, slipping the new earpiece into his left pocket. He and the others already had their own comms.

He glanced around, seeing everything was as expected. Anyone above this lower fence splitting the venue into assigned and general seating had to find a spot where they could on the grass.

So far nothing hinted that they needed to make any last-minute adjustments. From his right pocket he withdrew the earpiece he'd brought and put it in, leaving the radio on his belt off so it didn't mess with their comms.

"I'm in," he said in a low voice, looking around. The lower bowl was half full already, the hillside above it dotted with hundreds of people sitting on blankets or lawn chairs. To the west the sun was a golden-orange ball of fire sinking toward the horizon, its heat amplifying the hot, dry air.

"We see you," Rob replied, and Warren glanced across the bowl toward the eastern ridge where the others were setting up. He couldn't see them, but that was the beauty. No one would see any of this coming until it was too late. "Your equipment's waiting at your post. Head there now."

"Roger." He started across the lower bowl, trying not to look at the people sitting in the audience. But his gaze caught on a little girl of about five or six. And stuck.

She was sitting next to an older woman he guessed might have been her grandma, her dark brown hair pulled up into pigtails. She was chatting away animatedly and wearing a T-shirt with the band's logo on it, the excitement on her little face plain.

Warren ripped his eyes off her and kept going, fighting the queasy sensation rolling through his stomach. The guilt wasn't as easy to block as his view, however, and he tried to soothe his conscience by mentally marking this lower part of the bowl off limits. As long as the little girl stayed in her seat, she should be okay.

He cleared his mind as he made his way up the far side and began climbing the steps that led up the hill. To anyone watching, he looked like any other security guard here, doing a perimeter check.

But in reality, he was a hunter scoping out his killing ground.

Chapter Nineteen

Grady should be here any time now. Everleigh tucked her phone into her bag and used the rearview mirror to freshen her lipstick. Her hair and makeup were on point today, because Marley had dragged her to the mall earlier in the week to buy a bunch of new stuff and made her promise to use it.

Pausing to study her reflection, a little thrill ran through her. She looked—and felt—like a whole new person. Unrecognizable from the lost, broken woman she'd been a year ago on that terrible night in the ER.

She'd thought her life was over then. That she would be forced to live out the rest of her days in a fog of pain and piercing loneliness. Then Grady had come along and changed everything.

It's going to rip your heart out when he leaves.

She forced the thought away, refusing to let it take hold and ruin the anticipation and excitement that had been building all week. Yes, letting him go would tear open her newly healed heart, but she was resilient. She would deal with it and be grateful for the time they'd shared. For the lessons he'd taught her, and all the things he'd shown her about herself that she'd never known before.

For right now, she was determined not to think about the future and milk every bit of enjoyment possible out of this weekend. She owed it to herself, and Grady too. Nothing was going to spoil it for them.

Getting out of her car, she lifted her arms over her head to stretch her spine and tipped her head back, letting the hot summer sunshine bathe her face while she listened to the live music coming from the opening act on stage below at the bottom of the amphitheater. She inhaled deeply, pulling in the scents of savory and sweet offerings from the food trucks lined up at the far edge of the parking lot, set against the road between the campsite and the concert venue.

She walked across the road and past the food trucks to take in the view below. Low, rolling hills spread out as far as the eye could see in shades of

brown and gold, baked under the July sun. Directly in front of her, a large, wide grassy area sloped down toward the theater, which cut into the side of the hill in a deep bowl. The stage itself was set up at the edge of the cliff beyond, with the backdrop of the Columbia River gorge behind it slicing through the landscape like a skein of blue ribbon sparkling in the sun.

The campground looked like it was booked solid, a sea of tents and trailers set up and ready for the weekend. Hundreds more people were already spread out across the hillside above the concert bowl or in the assigned seating sections at the bottom of the amphitheater.

She walked back to the campsite, glanced left as a vehicle approached on the road and broke into a smile when she saw Grady's truck. He flashed her a grin through the windshield and pulled into the space she'd saved for him beside her car. She was at his door when he opened it, flinging her arms around him.

"Hi, angel." He looked tired but happy to see her.

"You're here," she breathed, burying her face in his neck, inhaling his scent and savoring the feel of those big strong arms wrapping around her. He made her feel so safe and cherished. When he held her like this the rest of the world fell away, and it felt like nothing bad could ever happen again.

"I am." He hugged her tight and lifted her off the ground, rocking her from side to side. Then he set her down, cupped her chin in his hand and tipped her face up for a long, slow kiss that made all her nerve endings sizzle and tingle. "Missed you so damn bad," he whispered.

A bittersweet pang hit her, followed by a spurt of alarm as that voice whispered at the back of her mind again. How was she supposed to give this up? How was she ever going to let him go when September rolled around and he left for selection?

Because he's going after his dream, and if you care about him then you need to support him in chasing it, she told herself sternly.

She'd gone into this arrangement from the outset knowing that whatever happened between them would be temporary. Looking back, it had been completely naïve to ever think she could get involved with him and not get deeply attached emotionally. If she could go back in time, she wouldn't change it though.

The way she saw it, she had two choices. Focus on the here and now and enjoy each and every moment they spent together, or live in dread of the

moment when he walked away.

She was going to live in the moment.

She leaned into his strength and melted under the kiss, uncaring if anyone was watching. His lips cruised down the side of her neck, hitting a sensitive spot that made her squirm and giggle. “You don’t know how much I’ve been looking forward to this. Feels like a month since I booked the tickets,” she said.

“Me too.” He straightened, smiled down at her with a combination of heat and admiration that made her all quivery inside and think about what would happen when they were alone in their tent together late tonight.

If she didn’t love the band so much she would have seriously considered skipping the concert altogether and spending the entire night in the tent instead. “Let me help you get everything unloaded.”

“Sure.” He went to the truck bed and reached over the edge to grab his ruck and a duffel, setting them on the ground with a squishy thud.

She glanced down. Frowned. “They’re sopping wet. What happened?”

“Guys got me with a fire hose on my way out the door at base.”

“A *fire* hose?” Extreme. She looked him up and down, frowning harder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. They took it easy on me. But everything I packed in these are pretty much out of commission for the weekend.”

“Let me guess. Groz?”

One side of his mouth quirked up. “And Whit. Travis, too, in a way. He gave them the green light and stood by watching the whole thing.”

She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “I’ll never understand military humor.”

“It takes some getting used to.” He hooked an arm around her, tugged her back into his body and kissed her again. “Man, it feels like all I’ve done this week is think about you.”

“Yeah?” she grinned and dropped a kiss on his lips. “Good. Fair’s fair, because the only time I could stop thinking about you was while I was with patients, and sometimes not even then.” She poked him in his rock-hard abs. “You’ve turned me into an addict,” she whispered accusingly.

His low chuckle stroked down her spine and settled low in her tummy. “Not sorry.”

“No, you don’t look very sorry.” She stepped back, let out a breath. Just

looking at him made her chest ache. “So, where do we start?”

He glanced at his watch. “Why don’t you go pick out a spot for us while I set up here? I’ll grab us some dinner from the food trucks after and meet you down there. Got a hankering for anything specific?”

“You.”

His eyes lit up. “You’ll get all you want of me later,” he promised, dropping another kiss on her mouth. “You want to sit on chairs or a blanket?”

“Blanket.” Then they could cuddle up together.

He reached into the truck and handed her a thick, heavy blanket and some pillows, eyed her as she shifted the awkward bundle in her arms. “Can you carry all this on your own?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You doubt me?”

His expression turned surprisingly serious. “No. You’re one of the strongest, most capable people I know,” he murmured, stroking a hand down the back of her hair.

She leaned up, stole another kiss. “See you in a bit.” She started across the parking lot, energized by the vibe of the event and already having an amazing time.

High up on an eastern bluff overlooking The Gorge, Warren lay stretched out on his belly surveying the area through the scope of his rifle. The opening act had started thirty minutes ago. He hadn’t moved a muscle since.

Beads of sweat rolled down his face and back, the ghillie suit and lack of a breeze intensifying the heat of the evening sun hanging low over the horizon directly in front of him, still hours away from setting. Up here in his suit, he was camouflaged perfectly into the landscape. No one had seen him. No one had any clue he was up here.

From his position he had a perfect view of the entire venue and the gorge beyond it where the river snaked through. The music was loud even at this distance, amplified by the shape of the theater and drifting on the air.

This was still so surreal. He’d done combat tours overseas and killed people in the line of duty to protect himself and his fellow Marines. But he’d never been involved in anything like this. He’d never imagined having to do this here at home.

As he scanned the packed slope below, he made a point of not focusing

on the faces out there on the hillside and in the lower bowl. He had a job to do and couldn't afford to hesitate. Couldn't allow an attack of conscience at this point.

Except he couldn't stop thinking about that little girl in the lower section of the assigned seating. The innocent excitement on her face.

He would avoid that area. Still, he knew there would be other kids in the crowd tonight. They weren't his intended targets—he wasn't a monster—but there was a high chance of that kind of collateral damage, especially once the panic set in down there.

In spite of his resolve, for one horrible, endless moment, he wavered. Wavered so bad that he released his grip on his weapon and dug into a pocket inside the suit to grab a couple of pills he'd brought to ramp himself up again, just in case.

He swallowed them, struggling to shut out those thoughts, to calm his racing mind. He couldn't think about any of that now. This mission and the organization were depending on him. It was a cause he believed in deeply. The people had to wake up and realize they were all being controlled and brainwashed by the same sorts of messages pushed by this disgusting excuse for a band.

He and the others were about to deliver a dose of the medicine this great country needed so badly.

Within minutes the amphetamines hit his bloodstream. Erasing the awful doubts swirling through his mind. Ramping up his heart rate and hardening his resolve.

Steadier now, he again positioned himself behind his weapon and put his eye back to the scope, filled with a sort of euphoric invincibility.

It was going to be okay. This time he wasn't up close the way he'd been overseas while searching villages and bombed-out streets. Killing at this range would be way easier. As long as he didn't focus on the faces, he'd be fine.

Yet he couldn't resist the urge to search for one face in particular, along with the telltale flash of white-blond hair in his scope.

Down to the last few minutes now. Once those freaks came on stage, the real show would start.

Chapter Twenty

Everleigh got up to stretch her legs and smooth out the blanket she'd spread out on the grassy slope earlier as the starting time for the main act approached. She'd managed to secure a spot just left of center with a fantastic, clear view of the stage.

All around her, couples and small groups of people dotted the hillside with their blankets and lawn chairs, talking and enjoying a picnic dinner or some tempting offers from the food trucks while waiting for the headline act to take the stage.

Farther down the hill below the grass, the assigned seating part of the venue was packed full of eager fans waiting to see their favorite band perform live in this sold-out show. At the bottom, the stage and huge screen towered over everything, silhouetted by the vivid blue sky.

She paused to draw in a deep breath, pulling in the scent of deep-fried goodies and cinnamon from the mini donut truck up across the road that encircled the campsite. Still no sign of Grady as she scanned behind her, her view partially blocked by a row of lush green trees marking the edge of the road.

The opening act had been great, and The Gorge was nothing short of spectacular, its breathtaking scenery bathed in deep gold early evening light. In another hour or two the sun would sink behind the hills to the west, painting the sky with every color of the rainbow and casting blue and purple shadows across this vast, gorgeous landscape.

She sat back down, crossed her legs and texted Grady. He'd been up there for the better part of half an hour now, getting everything set up. Maybe he'd run into problems because all his gear was wet. She'd texted him earlier to tell him where she was sitting.

Almost done?

He responded moments later. *Sorry, had to hang up my stuff to dry. Got the tent all ready. Just gonna grab us some food and be right there.*

Don't forget the mini donuts! After being tormented by their delicious sweet scent drifting on the breeze for the past thirty minutes, her mouth was watering for them.

He sent a thumbs up in reply. She sent back a heart emoji and had just tucked her phone away in her pocket when loud drumbeats thundered from the massive speakers set up on either side of and around the base of the stage.

The crowd reacted immediately, fans whipping around to face the stage and throwing their arms in the air, cheering. The huge screen behind the stage came to life, the tempo of the drums building. And when the band burst out onto the stage with their instruments a minute later and launched right into one of their most popular songs, the roar of the crowd was deafening.

Everleigh cheered along with them and lifted her phone to take some video for Grady, feeling bad that he was missing this. The band was on point, their music sending a rush of goosebumps across her skin.

It was one of her favorite songs. She bobbed her head and tapped her foot in time to the music while the lead singer belted out the lyrics along with the audience. She couldn't wipe the smile from her face. This was already amazing, even better than she'd hoped. All she needed was Grady to join her, and the weekend would be off to a perfect start.

The band's energy was incredible. The whole crowd was feeding off it, or maybe it was the other way around. A wall of sound projected from the stage, the blended harmony of voices and guitars ringing in her ears while the thud of the drums and base reverberated in her chest.

They finished the first song with a flourish, all members holding their arms in the air while the crowd went crazy, screaming their approval in a deafening roar that seemed to echo off the surrounding hills. Grady still hadn't arrived yet.

Everleigh was too far away from the stage to see the members' faces clearly, so she watched the giant screen behind it instead. The lead singer stood dead center with a huge smile on his face. "Hellooooo, Washington State!"

Another cheer erupted from the crowd, pierced with excited, higher-pitched female screams. The drummer immediately launched into the next song, joined a few bars later by the lead and bass guitarists.

Facing the audience, the lead singer burst into the first note, his voice rising above the blended voices of the riveted crowd before him. Partway

through the song he turned to face the left side of the crowd, raised an arm toward them as he belted out a long, gorgeous note that sent a pleasant chill up Everleigh's spine.

Suddenly he jerked forward, his voice cutting off mid-note. He dropped the microphone and hit the stage, grabbing his chest.

Instantly the crowd went quiet, everyone staring in alarm. Everleigh tensed. Was he having a heart attack?

He twitched but didn't get up. The drummer had stopped abruptly, rising from his seat behind his kit to peer at his front man in uncertainty. Everleigh glanced around to see everyone else's reactions.

Over the sudden, eerie silence that descended, a hushed murmur swept through the crowd. Everyone's attention remained riveted to the lead singer lying so still with his back to them.

The bass guitarist had carried on for a few more bars, not realizing what was happening, but now stood there frozen with the others as they gaped at the singer.

And the look on his face up on the big screen behind the stage told Everleigh everything she needed to know. Something was desperately wrong.

A tech raced out on stage, kneeling beside the singer. The lead guitarist quickly shrugged out of his strap and started toward his fallen bandmate.

He'd barely taken a step when he jerked and dropped to his knees, pitching forward onto the stage with a crash that sent his instrument flying out of his hands. He curled into a ball, his hand flying to his chest.

And this time the video clearly showed blood pouring from the wound there.

A jolt shot through her, her skin prickling as screams of alarm erupted all around her. A heartbeat later, pandemonium broke loose.

She jumped to her feet as people turned and began rushing up the slope toward the road, glancing around in confusion. Ice flooded her veins when she heard the loud cracks ripping through the air in the sudden vacuum of silence. And down in the lower bowl, a sea of bodies began to scatter as people bolted in all directions.

A wave of abject terror slammed into her as reality hit, sending her into a blind run. Whoever had just killed two of the band members were now firing indiscriminately into the crowd.

“Go.”

At the calmly spoken command from Rob in his earpiece, Warren cleared his mind, released his breath and squeezed the trigger, dropping the lead singer where he stood center stage. Next, he took aim at the guitarist. Fired.

The instant his second target fell, he shifted his aim into the audience in the lower bowl. His pulse raced out of control, the drugs in his blood making his aim a little shaky. He didn't pause, focused on the task at hand. The mission. Refusing to allow himself to think.

There was only action. Purpose.

It took the audience longer to figure out what was happening than he'd thought it would. When they finally realized, people began to scatter like bugs under a lifted rock, panic on their faces, their shrill screams of terror echoing up the hill.

He tuned it all out, unaffected by the chaos just as when he'd faced the enemy in combat overseas. Deliberately sweeping his rifle scope past the area where the little girl had been sitting earlier, he blurred his vision slightly to obscure the features in front of him and fired at the first moving target to land in his crosshairs.

The figure dropped out of sight and was immediately swallowed up by the surging crowd. Warren shifted his aim right. Fired at the next target to fill his scope. He caught only a vague impression of an elderly man as he crumpled under the stampeding audience around him.

More shots rang out above the din. It was all happening so fast now, the others firing from their positions around the upper rim of the theater. Warren aimed at the top of the lower bowl and found a new target, stopping on a group of young women cowering in a knot behind the seats and doing a piss-poor job of concealing themselves.

He squeezed the trigger. A heartbeat later the round went straight through the seat and whoever was behind it. Next, he aimed up and to the left, trying to avoid kids or parents with kids. He was a patriot, not a child killer.

The next several minutes passed by in a blur. He shot at random targets in the lower bowl while more rifle reports echoed from the others above the screams. Then his scope landed on a woman with long white-blond hair. His heart stuttered, finger freezing on the trigger.

The woman's head whipped around. Not Everleigh.

Air rushed back into his tight lungs, his skin going clammy beneath the stifling ghillie suit as he moved to a different target, shaken. And just like that, the initial rush of adrenaline faded beneath an onslaught of dread.

The suit offered good concealment in this position but what little security there was around the venue would be searching for him and the others soon. That meant they had only a few more minutes to finish this before enacting their exfil plan.

Clenching his jaw, Warren shoved aside the rattled feeling and found another target, racking up the body count. Prepared to keep shooting until he heard Rob's order to cease fire and haul ass to the RV point.

Chapter Twenty-One

The music stopped abruptly. Seconds later, screams erupted from down the hill. Grady froze in the act of handing money over to the guy in the food truck window. What the hell was going on?

He quickly moved to the side of the truck to see what was happening below on the other side of the road. When he did, his blood ran cold.

Through a gap in the trees he saw the mass of people fleeing on the sloping hillside. Their screams and shouts broken by the unmistakable reports of high-powered rifles echoing from somewhere nearby. Coming from different directions.

“Fuck,” he breathed, whipping out his phone as people around him cried out and hit the ground, huddling together in terror. Everleigh was down there somewhere, trapped in the crowd.

He dropped into a crouch and looked around for signs of where the shots were coming from as he called Everleigh, scanning the grassy hillside for her. The scene down there was utter chaos. People were surging up out of the lower bowl area and barreling through the chain-link security gate separating it from the grass, racing up the hill to escape the shooters. Some were carrying kids.

The phone rang and rang until her voicemail picked up. He hit end and dialed 911, then jumped up and raced the short distance back to the campsite to grab his weapon. He had to get to Everleigh. Had to get her to safety.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“Multiple shooters at The Gorge Amphitheatre. They’re using high-powered rifles to shoot into the crowd,” he reported, running for his truck as fast as his sore knee would allow. The moment he was armed, he was going straight down there to find Everleigh and get her the hell out of harm’s way.

THERE WAS NOWHERE to run.

The crowd was wild with panic, forming a series of chaotic whirlpools

flowing around others too paralyzed by fear to move and were instead huddled on the ground. Everleigh was forced to stop behind a wall of people all struggling and pushing each other in their panic.

A man barreled into her from the side, knocking her over. She hit the grass on her hands and knees, quickly scrambled to her feet before the stampeding crowd could trample her, jagged bolts of terror coursing through her.

In an instant she was swept along with the fleeing tide of people, heart in her throat as the human current carried her along. Shots were still exploding around them. She was too afraid to stop and look behind her, focused on getting across the road to Grady. He would be coming for her. She just had to find him.

Everyone was packed together too tightly. There was no room to move. People began shoving and pushing each other, yelling and screaming, adding to the chaos. Several were toppled over and disappeared beneath the masses of feet.

More shots. More screams, this time from close behind them.

Trapped in a knot of struggling people, Everleigh threw up her arms to shield herself from blows as the surge behind her shoved her hard against a man in front of her. At a shrill, bloodcurdling scream from the left, she whipped her head around to look, skin crawling with the knowledge that some homicidal maniac was out there and she might be in the crosshairs right now.

Realizing her predicament, she made a snap decision. There was no way she was finding Grady in this, and she couldn't stay put. She had to get out of here.

Through the constantly shifting mass of bodies she cast a frantic glance around, looking for a way out. For some sort of cover. There was nothing on the grassy slope. The seats in the lower bowl below it wouldn't stop a bullet.

Then to the left of them, her eyes fell on something solid down near the stage.

The crowd continued to surge around her. Buffeting her back and forth like a buoy carried on a rising tide as she tried to push her way through and escape.

The speed of the shots suddenly intensified. More screams erupted around her. Sobbing.

With a hard shove, Everleigh pushed aside the man blocking her way and ducked to dart through a tiny gap in the crowd before it closed up and swallowed her again. She stumbled out, breathing fast.

She stood near the top edge of the bowl now, close to the west side. The low barriers lining the edge of the stage below seemed so damn far away but they were the only cover she could see and others were already hiding behind them.

The chain-link fence separating the assigned seating from the grassy slope had been broken and trampled in certain areas by the fleeing crowd. She darted through an opening and immediately took shelter behind a row of seats, heart hammering in her throat as she battled with herself.

Every instinct she had told her to stay right there. To curl into a ball in the midst of the human chaos swirling around her and not move, shut her eyes and hide until this was over.

But she knew she wasn't safe here amongst the crowd. That she had to move away from here, out into the open and get behind those concrete barriers a hundred feet away. A moving target was harder to hit.

A sob caught in her throat, the fear swelling again. She didn't want to die. She wanted to be with Grady. Had to find a safe spot where she could send a message and then wait for him when the shooting stopped.

It had to stop!

Wrestling the fear back, she crawled through the fleeing masses to the end of the aisle and focused on those barriers down below. Blood rushed in her ears, mixing with the rapid shots and screams of agony and terror that would be forever burned into her memory.

Move. You have to move!

Going against all her instincts, she shoved up and rushed down the row of seats before she lost her nerve, heading for the barriers. Her legs felt weak. Clumsy.

Other people had the same idea as her and came barreling down another aisle just as she reached the one running parallel to it and someone rammed into her. She fell headlong onto the smooth concrete between the rows, wincing as her back slammed into the edge of a hard plastic seat. Pain blurred her vision for a second, stealing her breath as more people rushed past her.

No! Get up. Keep going.

On shaky legs, she pushed up and tried to cover the remaining distance.

Out of the corner of her left eye she saw a man several rows up throw his hands up, his face twisting in agony as he fell. The steady report of rifle shots continued to echo across the bowl.

A fresh wave of terror and urgency hit her. She kept running. Tripped over someone lying facedown in the aisle who she hadn't seen.

Throwing out a hand, she caught herself on the back of a seat and broke her fall. She glanced down, horror flooding her when she saw a man lying prostrate in front of her, a pool of blood spreading out from under him.

She wanted to stop and help, but the shooter was still firing in the area. She forced herself to go on, made her numb legs propel her forward, her lungs and heart feeling like they were about to explode.

Finally, she was within range of the barriers. With one final burst of speed she reached the edge of the first one, dove behind it, skinning her palms and knees on the concrete floor, barely feeling the sting. There were dozens of others already here, all of them cowering against the concrete barriers, darting frightened glances at the rear side of the bowl because no one knew where the next shot was coming from.

Gasping for breath, she hunkered down beside a young woman next to her. She was shaking now, a hard, rapid tremor that rippled through every limb and made her teeth chatter, her muscles weak. Then, above the screams and the low rumble of panicked feet, another voice called out.

"Help me! For God's sake, someone help me!" a man called out, the raw plea in his voice unbearable.

She closed her eyes. Tried to block it out as she took out her phone and texted Grady, her fingers shaking so badly she could barely type.

Behind barriers left side stage.

She was still so fucking terrified, and now worried about Grady.

Are you okay? She typed. Please let him be okay. She couldn't handle the alternative.

"Please," the man sobbed from nearby, the terror and pain in his voice raising the hair on the back of her neck. "Someone please help me!"

The sound of his anguish tore at her. She wanted to clap her hands to her ears to drown him out. But he kept calling to them. Begging for help.

No one made a move to go to him.

She glanced down at her phone. No response from Grady. No dots to signal he was responding. And every second the wounded man lay there in

the open, he suffered alone.

“Oh, God, please!”

Fuck this. If no one else was going to help him, then it was up to her.

She crept to the edge of the barrier and risked a peek around it. Afraid the whole time a bullet would hit her.

She caught slight movement to the left. A dark-haired man lay on his belly, trying to drag himself toward them. To the safety of the barrier she and the others were all hiding behind like cowards while he struggled to save himself. His hands were slick with blood, his face filled with pain and terror, every move leaving bloody prints on the concrete.

Suddenly he locked eyes with her. His face twisted. “Help me. Please...”

Her stomach grabbed and she looked away from him, glancing around. The shots had slowed, at least for now. Several people who had been hiding in the aisles suddenly jumped up and began to run.

They ran right past him, jumping over him on their way to the concrete steps leading to the exit, much as she had done to the dead man farther up.

The wounded man reached out a hand, tried to grab someone’s leg. They all kept running. “No. Don’t leave me here...”

She drew a steadying breath. She was the closest one to him. And if she didn’t do something, he would die.

Before she could chicken out, she pushed to her feet, preparing to go out there and grab him.

“No!” someone said behind her. A hand grabbed the back of her shirt.

She wrenched free and broke from cover. The man’s gaze locked on her again, the desperate plea there tearing at her.

The twenty or so yards separating them felt like a mile. Time slowed to a crawl. With every step she cringed inside, bracing for the slam of a bullet.

Staring at her, the man stretched out a hand. She raced over, clasped both his wrists and leaned backward, dragging him foot by terrifying foot toward the barriers with all her might.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Warren fired the last round of the magazine and paused to quickly reload, the lash of adrenaline fueling him from the start of the attack now waning. The horror of what he'd done was starting to sink in. But he had long since passed the point of no return.

The others were still firing from their positions. He settled the butt of the rifle firmly against his shoulder and pressed his cheek to the stock, peering through his scope as he moved the barrel slightly to the right of his last position. Then stilled when he caught sight of a woman with long white-blond hair.

Zeroing in on her, his chest constricted when he saw Everleigh. He lay there, barely even breathing as he watched her dart forward from the barrier she'd been hiding behind a moment ago.

She grabbed hold of someone hidden between the rows of seats. Started dragging them backward.

A man he'd wounded only seconds before. Hit in the back. Probably paralyzed from mid-chest down from the way his legs were trailing behind him.

In that moment, a barrage of conflicting emotions blindsided him. He'd been so angry and disgusted with her yesterday. Furious at the way she'd rejected him before and acted like she was too good for him.

Enraged that she'd made him feel like he was beneath her. And hated that she'd paid money to come here and support this freak show and their sickening message.

Yet in all his dealings with her, he'd never considered her brave. She was so soft and feminine and sweet, but damn, here she was, risking her own life to try and save a man who was almost certainly a stranger.

It affected him deep inside. How could it not?

His finger remained curled around the trigger while he battled with himself. He'd come here with the intention of unleashing chaos and taking

lives—including Everleigh’s if she entered his crosshairs. But now that he had her in his sights, he couldn’t.

Couldn’t add those few extra ounces of pressure needed to take the shot. Couldn’t live with himself if he did.

He switched his focus to the man she was dragging toward the barriers instead. Only a dozen meters away from her goal now.

He set his jaw. Maybe he couldn’t find the will to kill Everleigh, but he could still send a message she wouldn’t soon forget—and teach her the consequences of snubbing him when all he’d ever done was try to be nice to her.

Adjusting his aim, he fired, putting a round through the wounded man’s head.

As if a string connecting her and the man had suddenly been severed, Everleigh instantly dropped out of view.

For one heart-stopping moment, Warren went rigid, fearing he’d somehow hit her by mistake. He didn’t dare wait to find out. Aiming his weapon left, he instead searched for Rob with the high-powered scope. They’d been shooting for long enough. Rob should have given the order to cease fire by now.

He hitched in a breath when he saw Rob’s position was empty.

Tensing, he scanned the wider area.

Rob was nowhere to be seen. And when he moved his scope to the right, Tony was gone as well.

A spike of fear jolted him. He tapped his earpiece, sure there must be an explanation. Maybe security movement had forced them from their positions. “Where are you guys? Over.”

No response. Just the rush of stampeding feet below along with the frightened cries of the crowd fleeing the area.

And there were no more rifle shots.

At that ominous sign, he risked rolling to his side to look behind him, his stomach dropping like an anvil when he saw two figures wearing the same dark uniforms as the real security contractors hired by the venue, running away from him down into the gulley where Rob and Tony had left their vehicles.

They were abandoning him.

Warren cursed as he released the rifle and scrambled to his feet, a wave

of fury and terror rushing through him. He stripped off the desert-pattern ghillie suit, started to chase after them, then stopped abruptly.

They were too far ahead of him. He'd never catch up to them in time to get into one of their vehicles. They'd be long gone before he even made it to the other side of that ridge.

For one terrible second, he considered shooting them both in the back. It was what they deserved for being such fucking cowards.

Then he whipped around to face the concert venue, heart racing, sweat slicking his skin. Standing up like this with the setting sun on him made him feel like he was in the middle of a spotlight. Someone would have seen him now.

He shot a desperate glance to the south where his truck was parked strategically on the far side of the campground.

Little good it would do him at this point. And fleeing on foot was too risky.

Only one way out now. Straight through the crucible he'd created for himself below, his uniform hopefully allowing him to get through the remaining crowd and up to where the closest vehicles were parked near the stage.

Drawing his sidearm from its holster, he started toward the theater at a full run, using the contingency plan that should never have been necessary. His only remaining chance to escape was to lose himself in the crowd and find a vehicle on the other side.

And should he need a hostage to shield him, he knew exactly who to grab on the way out.

EVERLEIGH GRITTED HER teeth, the muscles in her back and thighs straining as she dragged the helpless man backward toward the barriers. It felt like she was having an out-of-body experience, as if she was watching herself do this, fresh chills of fear running through her every second.

All around them people scrambled in the shooting lull, fleeing for their lives toward the exits on the sides of the amphitheater. With each step she expected the shooting to start again. No one was helping her—everyone was too scared and focused on saving themselves. It was up to her.

The man stared up at her, his blood-slick hands clamped around her wrists while she strained to haul him to safety. His face was contorted with

pain, blood pouring from the hideous wound in his back she tried not to look at.

“I have kids,” he choked out, his voice barely carrying above the din of panicked feet and voices. “Tell them...t-tell them I love them...”

She couldn’t answer, all her energy and strength poured into dragging him. But she couldn’t leave him. She would get him behind cover and then try to stop the bleeding, call for help.

Sweat broke out on her forehead, her pulse thundering in her ears.

Two steps later, the face staring up at her disintegrated in a burst of red.

Something pepped her right arm as she fell back onto the unforgiving concrete. She screamed in horror and pain and curled into a ball between the rows of seats, her horrified gaze straying to the dead man in front of her. His face was misshapen and unrecognizable, the bullet having blown half his head away.

She slammed her eyes shut and turned her face away, choking back a sob as she cradled her wounded arm. She was frozen to the spot, too afraid to move.

The burning in her arm stole her breath. Forcing her eyes open, she looked down to see a dozen little wounds in the back of her forearm—shrapnel from when the round had shattered the plastic seat next to her, the jagged hole in it surrounded by gore.

Her brain flipped into autopilot. She spun to her hands and knees, crawled to the end of the aisle, shock settling over her in a numbing blanket.

The concrete barriers seemed so far away. She felt hideously exposed. Vulnerable, the memory of the man’s head being blown apart playing over and over in her mind.

Someone finally noticed her when she reached the end of the aisle. A man reached out, grabbed her wrist and hauled her toward where he was half-hidden by the barrier.

She cried out as the burning in her arm intensified, took several lurching steps toward him. He caught her, pushed her down flat on her stomach behind the barrier.

“Where are you hit?” he demanded, crouching next to her.

She shook her head, trembling so hard her jaw shook. “Arm,” she choked out, struggling to breathe. “N-not bad.”

He frowned, turned her over and quickly checked her. She glanced

down, realized she was covered in blood...and brain matter. It was in her nose. Her mouth. The awful, metallic taste coating her tongue.

She gagged, rolled to her belly and struggled to suck in air as nausea wrenched her stomach. Someone laid a hand on her back. There were dozens of people hiding here with her, all on their phones.

Grady.

Her hand shook as she reached for her front pocket and drew out her phone. Trembled so badly that it took three tries to pull up his number. But it rang as she pressed it to her ear, the sound barely penetrating the roar of blood there.

And then he answered.

“Everleigh!” His voice was sharp. Urgent. *“Are you okay?”*

Only a sob came out. Tears flooded her eyes, the sound of his voice breaking the last tether on her tenuous control.

“Where are you? Are you hurt?”

“I’m d—” She shuddered, had to pause to drag in a shaky breath. *“D-down by the left...left-hand side. S-stage. Behind...b-barrier.”* Oh God, where was he? He sounded okay, but she was so damn scared—

“Are you hurt?” he demanded.

“N-no.” Not really. Not like...that man... She shuddered, swallowed as bile rushed into her throat. *“Y-you?”*

“I’m okay. Stay where you are and don’t move. I’ll find you.”

“W-where—”

“I’m stuck up at the top by the road. Security won’t let anyone through to go down near the stage. There were multiple shooters.”

Multiple? But it made sense. That terrible volume of fire opening up on the helpless crowd. Dear God...

“Just stay right where you are behind cover and don’t move. I’ll find you, I swear.”

“Ok-kay,” she gasped out, because she didn’t have any other choice. She couldn’t move even if she’d wanted to, and she didn’t.

All she could do now was stay put and pray that this unimaginable nightmare was finally over.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Grady shoved his way through the crowd continuing to stream up the hill toward the road where security was evacuating everyone, feeling like a damn fish fighting its way upstream against a powerful current.

The situation was still chaotic and fluid but the initial blind panic seemed to have died down slightly. And the shooting had stopped. People who had been rooted to the spot in fear were now running toward the few exits available to them.

“I’m coming, Ev,” he said into the phone, free hand on the butt of his weapon hidden beneath his shirt as he scanned the upper rim of the venue, searching for a way down to her.

“Please hurry,” she whispered.

“I will.” At least she was okay physically and behind cover. He’d grabbed his med ruck from the truck too, the weight of it solid against his back. Security would be swarming the area. If they saw his weapon they might think he was one of the shooters, but he had to risk it. There was no sign of the shooters now, but they sure as shit had been up there minutes ago. “Just hang on for me, okay, sweetheart?”

“Okay,” she whispered, the wobble in her voice tearing at him.

This never should have happened. It was heartbreaking and made him fucking sick to his stomach.

The hillside before him was littered with upturned chairs and abandoned blankets and picnic hampers. Children’s toys and food. And amongst the carnage, bodies. Sprawled out on the grass. Some alone. Some with people gathered around them, looking around frantically for help.

“I gotta hang up now and alert Travis,” he said to her. From here he couldn’t see a way down to her position. He was going to have to go out through one of the security exits and then head down to the stage from the outside. “Stay strong for me.”

“Hurry,” she choked out.

“I will. Just stay safe. I need to know you’re safe, Ev.”

“C-careful.”

His heart squeezed. “I will be.” He hated ending the call, but he had to alert the unit. They needed major backup here immediately to try and save lives.

Thankfully, Travis picked up on the first ring. “You calling to rub it in ___”

“Multiple shooters at The Gorge. Mass casualties, way too many for local EMS to handle. Need you to mobilize immediately.”

“Jesus,” Travis breathed. “Are you and Ev okay?”

“For now, but we got separated and I can’t get to her from here. She’s stuck down near the stage. Don’t know whether the shooters are still here or not.”

“Watch your six. Groz and Whit are both still here. I’ll alert the unit and update you when I know more.”

“Copy.” He ended the call and shoved his phone into his back pocket, then gripped the top of the five-foot tall chain-link fence in front of him and vaulted over it, ignoring the shouts of the security behind him near the road.

His knee screamed in protest when he landed. He sucked in a breath, reached back to grab the fence to steady himself for a second as pain ripped through the joint. A security guard was racing toward him with a weapon in hand, blocking his way.

Grady pulled out his wallet showing his military ID. “I’m an ICU nurse and combat medic,” he called out. “There are critically wounded down there.” And Everleigh. “You need to let me through right the fuck now.”

The guy stopped and blinked. “Lemme check your ruck.”

Though he understood the guy’s concern, Grady bit back a snarl of frustration. He curbed the urge to slam a fist into the guard’s jaw and keep going, quickly shrugging out of his ruck and showing him what was inside. “Now let me through, goddammit,” he snapped.

“Okay, okay, go,” the guy said, waving him through and getting on his radio. “There’s a combat medic coming your way. Tan cargo shorts, black T-shirt, wearing a camo ruck. You see him? Alert the others...” His voice faded into the background as Grady pushed through the never-ending stream of people flowing toward him up the hill.

Dammit, Everleigh was too far away. It made him insane that he couldn’t

get to her. Couldn't protect and defend her himself. Couldn't even see her hiding spot from where he was.

He kept going, got thrown back twice by a wall of bodies flooding up from the lower bowl. People were crying, eyes wide with horror, parents crouched over as they rushed their kids to safety, acting as human shields.

The eerie quiet in the aftermath was punctuated by sobbing and rushing feet. Grady just prayed it was over, that the shooters weren't setting up somewhere new. He kept running, clenching his teeth against the pain stabbing through his knee with each stride.

Up ahead three people were crouched beside a wounded man sprawled out on the grass. A young woman with a blood-spattered face saw him coming and waved him over frantically. "Help! We need help here!"

Grady wanted to ignore them and keep going, wanted to get to Everleigh and see for himself that she was safe. But one look at the man and the hole in his upper thigh, and he had to stop.

Someone had tied a belt around the upper thigh above the wound and cinched it into a sort of tourniquet, but the guy's ashen color and amount of blood glistening in the grass told Grady he was critical. If he didn't control the bleeding fast and get fluids into him, the man would die.

He knelt beside the wounded man on his good knee and quickly dug through his ruck while doing a visual assessment. Right femoral artery hemorrhage. Patient conscious but not alert. Skin pale and clammy, breathing labored and shallow.

Grady pulled on gloves and got to work, directing the good Samaritans who had stopped to help the man on what to do to assist. Somewhere in the background sirens echoed, emergency responders finally arriving on scene.

While he got a real tourniquet in place and started an IV, others gathered on the hillside saw what he was doing. They came running to him, pointing at where they'd left severely wounded patients.

A middle-aged woman rushed over, panting. "I'm a trauma nurse," she told him. "How can I help?"

Fantastic. "We need to set up a casualty collection point and do emergency triage. Get five people to help you and report back to me."

"On it." She got up and ran back from where she'd come, calling out orders on the way.

Grady finished doing what he could for the wounded man he'd been

treating, took his vitals and wrote them down on a scrap of paper a woman dug from her purse, passing it to the young teacher who had been helping thus far. "Give the first responders this. I have to go."

He shoved to his feet, ignored the stab of pain in his knee and took out his phone to send Travis a SITREP.

At least a hundred wounded. Unknown KIA. You guys launching?

He was working on his next patient minutes later, a young woman in her twenties with blue eyes that reminded him too much of Everleigh's, when Travis responded. She'd been shot in the stomach, her tear-stained face streaked with blood.

Deploying now, the message read.

The cry of the sirens was louder now as more and more units rushed to the scene. Grady glanced around at the carnage. He hoped the cops found the bastards responsible and took them out. By his best estimate there had been at least three of them, positioned along the ridge overlooking the venue.

Giving them the perfect view of this killing field below.

EVERLEIGH STRUGGLED TO pull herself together, shudders rolling through her every few seconds. Now that she was behind cover again, she was afraid to move. Was it over? She didn't hear any more shots. Didn't hear any more of those bloodcurdling screams that came in waves.

Gradually, she became more aware of her surroundings. Her arm stung but the little wounds were only bleeding lightly. Someone next to her took off his shirt and tore it up, then used it to wrap around the wounds.

"Thank you," she whispered, still shaky.

Someone handed her wet wipes and helped her clean up her face and hands. The group hunkered behind the barriers had almost doubled now. She didn't know where Grady was but he'd sounded okay, and he would find her.

Some walking wounded managed to stumble over to their hiding spot. Feeling a little steadier, Everleigh took some strips of the shirt from the man who'd helped her and bandaged someone's lower leg, then a woman's shoulder.

She barely managed to conceal her horror when blood suddenly spurted from beneath the woman's clavicle.

Since no one else in the group seemed to have any kind of medical or anatomical knowledge, she took charge. "Lay her down, quick," she directed.

While someone elevated the woman's legs, Everleigh and the man who had torn his shirt up worked to try and stop the bleeding. But the bullet had hit the woman's subclavian artery. An injury that could prove fatal if they didn't slow the blood loss fast. Her face was already gray, skin clammy and breathing shallow.

"Put direct pressure right here," she told the man, guiding his fingers into place directly underneath the woman's collarbone. "Hard. Don't let up." She glanced around for more help. "She needs emergency care. Does anyone see an ambulance or paramedic?"

With so many people still fleeing the lower bowl and blocking her view of what was happening above it on this side, it was impossible to tell if there were any police or ambulance crews around. And there was still no sign of Grady. She wished he was there.

"They're still up at the top of the hill," a young woman said, face pale and pinched. "I called 911 already and requested help. The operator told me they've dispatched every unit they can, but I don't know if..."

Everleigh checked the woman's pulses. Carotid was weak and thready. Radial on the same side as the injury was nonexistent.

This woman couldn't afford to wait for better help.

Everleigh turned to the man applying pressure against the wound. "We have to get her out of here." She took out her phone, called Grady back.

"You still okay?" he said when he picked up.

Her throat tightened at the sound of his voice. "Yes. Where are you?"

"I've been helping the critically wounded I find on the way. But I swear I'm coming—"

"I'm okay, but we have a middle-aged female here with an injured subclavian artery. We're applying direct pressure but she's in shock and she needs emergency care right now."

"You have to find someone to transport her up here. There's a casualty collection point on the west side of the hill right next to the road. EMTs are there with ambulances."

Heart sinking, Everleigh glanced at the man, who must have overheard because he nodded. "Okay," she said. "We'll come your way."

"Be careful."

"You too." She slipped her phone into her pocket. "We need more help to carry her while you keep pressure on the wound during transport." She

glanced past him at the others still hunkered down behind the barriers. “Any volunteers?”

The others all looked at each other uncertainly, fear clear on their faces. It was so damn frustrating. She understood why they were reluctant to move, but this woman’s life depended on them getting her to an ambulance as soon as possible.

“What about you?” she said to a thirty-ish guy wearing sunglasses and a cowboy hat. He was big and looked fit.

He opened his mouth, closed it and shrank back behind his girlfriend, and everyone else averted their eyes, refusing to look at her.

Everleigh glanced around in frustration. She caught movement in her left peripheral vision, turned and read the word SECURITY written across the front of a black uniform shirt as the man hurried toward them.

Thank God.

She lifted a hand to wave him over, cried out in surprise and relief when recognition hit. “Warren! Over here!” She hadn’t known he was working here, but he would help them.

His features were set as he ran down an aisle toward them, his eyes locked on her. She got to her knees, slid her arms beneath the woman’s shoulders and prepared to lift just as Warren came around the end of the barrier. “She needs help fast. We need to get her up the hill to where the ambulances are. Can you—”

“He’s got a gun!”

Frightened cries rang out around them as Everleigh looked up, her voice giving out when she saw the weapon rising in his hand.

Stared in stunned disbelief as he aimed it right at her.

“Get up,” he growled while everyone else shrank back with gasps of alarm and cries of fright.

Everleigh sat there, frozen, her eyes glued to the muzzle of the black pistol aimed at her head.

“I said, get *up*,” he snarled, lunging forward to seize her bandaged arm.

She let out a startled cry, stumbled as he wrenched her to her feet. “No, don’t,” she protested, trying to pull away. What the hell was happening?

Her mind whirled, stomach twisting as the only logical explanation settled in. Was Warren in on it? Had he been involved in this slaughter?

Without answering, he yanked her to him, her back to his chest, and

locked a thick forearm around the front of her throat. He was breathing hard, smelled of sweat and the metallic tang of fear.

She struggled in his grip for an instant, then went dead still when he pressed the muzzle of the gun to her lower back. “Fight me and I’ll put a hole through your kidney and leave you to bleed out right here and now. Got it?”

She managed a nod, dragged in a shallow breath and choked back a frightened sob as he began to drag her away from the others toward the stairs that led to the exit above.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Isn’t there anything more we can do for her?” the man kneeling beside the wounded teenage girl asked in concern. She’d been wounded in the leg and back, was deep in shock, shaking and crying.

Grady stripped off his gloves, frustrated. He was out of medical supplies already, and had already done what he could to help slow the bleeding and make her more comfortable. Which wasn’t much at this stage.

“You’ll need to move her to the casualty collection point up there by the road. They’re doing emergency triage there. Give them her status and vitals I just told you and they’ll treat her as soon as possible.”

More and more first responders were arriving all the time but with only a handful of routes into the venue they were completely overwhelmed by the ensuing chaos and number of casualties. People still alive right now were going to die while waiting for help.

“Take her now,” he said, his knee on fire as he rose, then slipped his mostly empty ruck back on and took out his phone to check for messages. Travis had sent one several minutes ago.

Wheels up in five.

They should be in the air now then. The wounded here needed all the help they could get, and the emergency personnel on scene would be calling for every available unit in the surrounding area.

He kept moving down toward the stage, searching for a route. He’d seen some shit while serving overseas during his time as a PJ, but never this many wounded at once, and certainly never here at home.

Even if they did get help, the reality was a good chunk of the critically wounded weren’t going to survive long enough to make it to a trauma center. The slaughter here today was so goddamn heartbreaking and senseless.

Finding a possible path through the tattered fence below, he dialed Everleigh and started at a lope down the hill. It rang and rang with no answer. He hung up and kept going. More people were streaming across the slope,

some limping, some carrying more wounded. It was like watching a disaster movie unfold in front of him.

He hopped another barrier the security had hastily set up in the aftermath, tried to land on his good leg. A sharp spike of pain ripped through his knee on his first step, but he refused to slow down. Stopping to treat the critically wounded he'd come across had cost him time getting to Everleigh. He needed to see her for himself now, make sure she was okay and get her up to the campsite before he went back to help anyone else.

Near the edge of the lower bowl, groups of people were gathered around more wounded. He was out of supplies, had nothing to give them, and could only direct them to get the wounded up to the CCP near the road.

He pushed his way through another throng of people coming through a security barrier. Up ahead the chain-link security fence dividing the grassy hillside from the seated area had been trampled flat by the human stampede running for their lives.

He stepped over it, scanning the left side near the stage. The wounded band members had been removed from the stage at some point, but from what he could tell, no ambulance crews had made it down this far yet.

Finally, he could see the concrete barriers lining the left edge near the stage. People were beginning to trickle out from behind it, shooting frightened glances around them as they went before darting up the concrete steps toward the top of the bowl.

He vaulted a seat in the back row and hurried down the aisle toward the west side. Had only gone twenty yards when a flash of white-blond hair caught his eye.

His heart lurched, insides freezing when he saw Everleigh being dragged away by a man in a security uniform holding a gun to her head. What the *hell?* "Everleigh!"

Her head whipped toward him, the terror on her face like a knife plunging into his guts. At the same time the man whirled, aiming his pistol at him.

Grady hit the ground just as the shot cracked out, hitting the bloodstained concrete hard as the round pinged off something ahead of him. He drew his own weapon, chambered a round and got to one knee to risk a peek over the top of the seats.

The shooter had already dragged Everleigh partway up the steps. And to

make matters worse, everyone currently on the staircase freaked out and began to scatter all over, tripping and falling and blocking the exit. Others who had been hiding amongst the seats and behind the barriers in this part of the lower bowl were now up and fleeing right at Grady.

He rushed forward to make it to the end of the aisle before they reached him, only to be knocked back by the onslaught. “Out of the way!” he shouted, blocking two people with a straight arm. They staggered back under the impact of his hand.

He shoved past them, racing down the aisle as fast as his knee and the restricted space would allow. The bastard had Everleigh at the top of the stairs now. Waved his weapon at the people near him.

More screams broke out, people scattering or hitting the ground where they stood.

Heart in his throat, Grady finally reached the base of the stairs and rushed up them, dodging people, jumping over others cowering on the steps, his knee almost buckling under the pain.

A gunshot rang out. His gaze snapped up to see a security guard fall near the exit above, holding his stomach. Then a flash of pale hair a split second before Everleigh was dragged from sight.

Grady put on a burst of speed, desperate to stop the shooter and free her.

More gunshots from up top. More screams.

Raw terror exploded in his gut. *Oh, Jesus, please let her be okay.*

When he finally made it to the top, breathing hard, knee on fire, he searched around frantically for them. Whipping around in a tight circle, he spotted her bright hair as she was dragged deeper into a surging crowd of people trying to escape the new threat.

He tore after them, gripping his pistol. They were about fifty yards ahead of him now, heading for a row of vehicles parked in the staff lot. As Grady watched, horrified, the shooter opened the driver door, shoved her through it and climbed in.

“No!” he shouted, running as hard as he could, denial punching through him. His goddamn knee was going to cost Everleigh her life.

The truck’s engine fired up, its tires spitting up gravel and a plume of dust as it took off. It veered sharp right past the other vehicles parked in the row, heading for what he guessed must be an access road leading down to the river.

Cursing under his breath, Grady whipped out his wallet. “Police!” he lied, still running. People froze ahead of him, watching him warily.

He raced straight up to another security guard just reaching the vehicles. “I need a vehicle. *Now.*”

The guy blinked once, glanced at the ID in Grady’s outraised fist, and waved him to a pickup three spaces down. “Take this one.”

Grady snagged the keys from him. He jumped inside, started it and threw it into gear to race after Everleigh just as the other truck disappeared out of view over the edge of the ridge in front of him.

WARREN CLENCHED HIS jaw as he sped down the narrow access road leading down to the river, darting worried glances in the rearview mirror. This route was the only way he could escape now. Emergency crews had completely blocked off the upper feeder routes. They were probably after him now, along with that guy who’d shouted Everleigh’s name and chased them.

Beside him, Everleigh was rigid in the passenger seat, one hand splayed against the door, the other on the edge of her seat. Her shirt and shorts were spattered with blood and her right forearm was covered with a bloodstained bandage. Now he felt a little bad about that.

“Let me go,” she said hoarsely.

“Not until I’m in the clear.” Maybe not even then. She was his insurance to help him get out of this shit storm. And once he did, he was going to go to ground and figure out a way to make sure Rob and Tony paid for ditching him.

A sharp pang of betrayal knifed his chest. He couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe they’d abandoned him like that. Fucking cowards, leaving him to pay the price alone. Probably hoping he’d get gunned down in a battle with the cops who were now swarming the area.

He was forced to slow as the road made a hairpin turn down a switchback leading into the river gorge. In a quick move, Everleigh grabbed for the door handle.

He lunged over the console to seize her wrist and wrench it back and up, ignoring her yelp of pain and surprise as he jerked the wheel with his free hand to correct their course and stop them from plunging over the edge into the steep ravine below.

“Don’t make me shoot you,” he growled. He didn’t want to do that, but he would if she didn’t cooperate. Somewhere non-lethal for now, to make her comply.

She wrenched her wrist free and cowered against the door, staring at him with such terror and disgust that it sliced him like a razor. “Just let me go. *Please*, Warren. I haven’t done anything to you.”

Hearing his name from her lips and the break in her voice made him wince inside. But she *had* done something to him. She had rejected him repeatedly. Dismissed him and treated him like shit. Like he was nothing.

“No,” he said flatly. If he needed to use her as a human shield in order to do this, then so be it.

He’d do whatever it took to get out of here. He’d find his way to Arizona where he had friends in the organization. People he trusted. Once they found out what Rob and Tony had done, they would be fucking livid and only too happy to help him get across the border into Mexico using their network.

“Stay still,” he snapped, focused on navigating the winding road.

It veered sharply right in another hairpin as it wove down into the deep canyon. He slowed again at the next hairpin, glanced in his mirrors as he turned into the straightaway. A jolt of surprise hit him when he saw a gray pickup tearing after them. Just nearing the first switchback now.

Swearing, he pressed harder on the accelerator, restlessly scanning the riverbank below. There were a bunch of tents set up in the camping area he’d seen on satellite maps when he’d checked just before leaving the coast this afternoon, and a pair of docks jutting out into the river. With any luck there would be a boat there he could take.

He’d cut across to the other side, find another vehicle and dump Everleigh somewhere if it was safe enough. She would only slow him down and complicate things more after that. He would have ditched her right now if he could be sure the guy in the other truck would stop chasing him. But he wasn’t willing to risk it.

He wiped the sleeve of his shirt over his sweaty upper lip. Checked for the pickup. It was still back there, somehow seemed to be closing the distance between them.

He refocused on the narrow road ahead. Cursed and stomped on the brake when he saw the massive pothole up ahead too late. The front tires hit bottom, the truck’s momentum shooting the front end into the air for a split

second before the tires slammed back down again.

Everleigh's sharp cry echoed in his head as he hit the brake, fighting with the wheel to keep them from going off the road. The big vehicle skidded on the loose gravel for a heart-stopping second, then he regained control.

Heart galloping, he made the final turn at the bottom and sped up as the terrain flattened out in a straightaway along the riverbank. He whipped past campers and kids riding their bikes, speeding for the docks.

A kid walking a dog suddenly stepped out in front of them.

Everleigh screamed a warning. Warren cranked the wheel hard right, his foot stomping on the brake pedal. The truck veered sharply, flew over the short concrete divider between the road and the grassy play area and rammed into a tree with a bone-jarring thud.

The seatbelt jerked taut across his chest and shoulder an instant before his back slammed against the seat, but the airbags didn't deploy. One look through the windshield at the crumpled hood told him the truck was fucked. And so was he if he didn't get moving.

Reaching across the console, he grabbed Everleigh by the arm and hauled her toward him. "No," she cried, trying to twist away.

"Shut up." He ignored her struggles, clamped her to him with one arm and shoved the truck door open, pistol in his free hand. He was running low on ammo. Down to this last partial mag.

He stood behind the truck door and faced the road ahead where the other pickup was now barreling toward them. He gave Everleigh a warning jerk, locked his arm around her throat and raised the pistol.

"No!" Her scream echoed in the air as he pulled the trigger, putting three rounds straight through the windshield of the oncoming truck.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Grady sped toward the wreck, heart thudding. Saw the shooter emerge from behind the door, one arm locked around Everleigh's throat as his hand came up.

He ducked an instant before three rounds punched through the windshield, burying themselves into the headrest where his skull had been a split second before.

He swerved, hitting the brakes hard. The truck veered left, tires sliding on the film of gravel covering the road until it plunged to a stop at an angle along the narrow shoulder next to the riverbank.

Before he could move, two more shots slammed into the engine block.

Sonofabitch!

He drew his weapon, shoved the door open and hid behind it, using the hood of the truck as cover. They were only a few hundred feet apart now. Close enough for him to see Everleigh's expression when he peered around the edge of the door.

The raw fear in it knifed him. He shifted his focus to the asshole holding her in a headlock, weapon aimed right at him.

The damaged windshield meant driving closer was out, since he couldn't see where he was going. Forcing him to stay behind the door. And there was no way he would risk taking a shot with Everleigh standing in front of the shooter.

"Let her go," he called out, aware that people along the beach and campsite had scattered. Someone would have called 911 by now. Not that it would help him or Everleigh end this safely, because every first responder in the vicinity was already overwhelmed trying to deal with the aftermath of the attack up at the concert venue.

The shooter suddenly broke from cover and bolted for the trees lining the opposite side of the road, dragging Everleigh with him.

Grady jumped out from behind the door to give chase. Dove to the grass

when the guy whipped around and fired at him. Heard the thuds as they hit the truck.

The shooter took off again. Even with Everleigh slowing the guy down, Grady's goddamn knee made it impossible to close the distance between them. He was too far away to stop him. Too far away to get off a clean shot without putting Everleigh at more risk.

His lungs and thighs burned as he ran. Every step sent a fresh bolt of agony through his healing knee. He fought it back to the edge of his mind, eyes locked on the fucker holding Everleigh hostage.

People cowered under picnic tables and behind their tents as they raced past. Beyond the thin strip of grass lining the river, Grady saw the first of the two docks jutting out into the water.

The shooter was practically carrying Everleigh now as he ran for the closest one. There was one boat tied to the end of it. Low in the water. An inflatable.

The handful of people standing on the dock froze when they saw the shooter coming, gathered their kids and hunkered down on the wooden planks.

Grady's stomach dropped as the shooter ran past them, heading for the boat. If that son of a bitch managed to get it away from the dock, Grady didn't have a prayer at catching him.

To save Everleigh, he had to stop that from happening.

THERE WAS ONLY one boat tied to the end of the dock. An inflatable with a decent motor.

Warren ran for it, panting, his heart about to explode as he hauled Everleigh along the dock as fast as he could go. "Move!" he screamed at her, tempted to toss her in the water now. Maybe then the guy chasing them would stop to help her.

It might give Warren enough time to escape. But he was down to his final round now. Would only have one shot to drop him.

No. Can't risk it. Have to keep her longer.

Until he was safe on the other side. Then he'd either let her go...or use his final bullet on her.

His boots thudded along the dock. Five people cowered at the end of it, backing away from the boat. He ignored them, all his attention now on the

inflatable. Someone was in it. An old man.

“Get out of there!” he screamed at him, waving his weapon.

The old man stood rigid near the motor, palms up, eyes popping out of his head.

“Out or I’ll fucking shoot you,” Warren yelled. “Leave the keys in the ignition!”

The old man took a step forward toward the bow, hesitated.

Behind him, Warren could hear the thud of running footsteps. Everleigh’s would-be rescuer coming closer every second.

He almost whirled and fired the final bullet at him. But if he missed, he was fucked.

Snarling, Warren reached the edge of the dock and shoved Everleigh off it into the bow of the boat. She hit the bottom on her hands and knees. He was forced to reach down and undo the line holding the boat to the dock, costing him precious seconds.

A shot rang out behind him. He screamed as a bullet tore through his upper back.

Pain hazed his vision. He lunged into the boat, reaching over Everleigh’s prostrate form to grab the old man and throw him overboard.

The man let out a frightened cry and hit the water with a splash just as Warren grabbed Everleigh again and reached for the start button on the side of the ignition, keeping her between him and the guy running at them. Fire burned through his chest, every breath like breathing in broken glass.

The running steps on the dock came closer.

Fuck, come on! he willed the engine, the pain making it hard to think.

The instrument panel came to life. He reached for the throttle. One twist and the engine came to life. His hand closed on the grip, started to turn the tiller and get them away from the dock.

The steps were louder. Closer.

He whipped his head around. *Too late.* The guy was right behind them, weapon up and ready to fire.

Half-blinded by pain, Warren locked his arm back around Everleigh’s throat, yanked her upright and shoved the muzzle of his pistol against her temple. “Back the fuck off now,” he snarled, dizzy from pain and adrenaline. The boat was beginning to drift away from the dock now, pulled by the fast-moving water flowing under it. “Or I’ll blow her goddamn—”

Everleigh dug her nails into his arm, hard, and sank her teeth deep into his wrist.

He let out a bellow and flung her away from him. Barely saw the blur of movement coming at him as the guy pounded to the edge of the dock, coming right for them.

Bleeding, enraged, Warren turned toward the threat, ready to make his last stand.

And fired his final bullet.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The explosion of the shot ripped through Grady's eardrums as he launched off the edge of the dock, the bullet missing him by inches. A split-second later he slammed into the shooter's side full force.

They flew back into the boat, hitting the deck with a teeth-rattling thud. The shooter's weapon skidded across it.

Grady lunged for him. Ducked his head an instant before a fist whistled past his jaw. Grady dove on him again, grabbing for his wrists.

"Warren, *don't*," Everleigh cried from near the stern.

Grady sensed her moving behind him. How the hell did she know the guy's name?

"Ev, stay back," he commanded, straining to keep Warren under him. The guy was big and fucking juiced, face dark red, veins popping out on his forehead, a throttled roar of rage coming from him in spite of the blood coming from the exit wound in his chest.

With a violent twist, he threw Grady off him. Grady's back slammed into the edge of a seat. He hissed in a breath, shoved to his feet just as Warren came at him. Barely had time to brace before the impact, somehow flung his arms around Warren as he hurtled backward over the side of the boat, dragging Warren with him.

The shock of the cold water a heartbeat later stole the breath from his lungs. He immediately let go of Warren, surfaced to drag in a breath. He couldn't see Warren. Maybe the bastard had dragged water into his shattered lung and drowned.

"Grady!"

Ev. He spun around, blinked the water out of his eyes. The boat was being pulled along with the flow of the river, out of reach and drifting toward the center. She was crouched near the bow, hands planted on the inflatable bladder, wide eyes fixed on him.

"Hang on!" He turned onto his front and took a few strong strokes

toward her.

Her face filled with alarm. “Look out!”

He stopped, immediately turned around in the water. A fist hurtled straight at his face.

He lunged his head to the side, caught the fist just as Warren’s other hand locked on the front of his shirt. Grady wrenched backward and shot a wave of water in the asshole’s face.

Warren sputtered, his grip easing. Grady twisted free and dove under. Visibility was nearly zero, the water murky and filled with sediment. He stayed under for several seconds, guessed on where to come up and surfaced, trying to get his bearings.

“Grady!” Everleigh scrambled toward the stern, appeared to be trying to figure out how to steer the boat.

He started swimming toward her. Got a mouthful of water when hands suddenly grabbed his leg and yanked him down. Fire ripped through his sore knee. Stifling a howl of pain, he lashed out with an elbow, made solid contact.

The hands released him. They surfaced feet apart, far from shore. Over Warren’s shoulder Grady briefly spotted the truck he’d been driving, left sitting at the edge of the road. The current was strong, the cold already sapping the strength from his muscles and intensifying the deep, gnawing ache in his knee.

At the last second, he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. A big log carried by the river, twisting and turning as it hurtled toward him before it plunged under the water. To his right, Everleigh was still trying to figure out how to maneuver the boat, well past him now and pulling away fast with the current in the center of the river.

Warren bared his teeth and flung out a hand to try and drag him back down. Grady dodged it and threw a punch, managed to glance the side of Warren’s face. He drove his good foot out, slamming the sole of his boot into Warren’s gut.

Warren doubled over and went under briefly. Grady treaded water, watching the surface, saw the exact moment when Warren came back up at him. This time he grabbed the top of his head and shoved him under.

A hand shot out of the water, fingers curved like claws as they went for Grady’s eyes. He wrenched his head aside, held on to Warren and shoved

him under with all his might.

Warren fought like a madman, clawing, twisting, punching, thrashing. Jaw clenched, muscles straining, lungs burning and chest tight, Grady doggedly held on. But his strength was beginning to ebb, the cold draining his muscles.

The thrashing gradually slowed. Warren's painful death grip on Grady's wrists started to ease. Grady gritted his teeth, muscles shaking with the continued effort of forcing him under. He barely saw the giant log as it broke through the surface only a few feet away.

Shit! He let go of Warren, tried to throw out a hand to protect himself, but too late.

The jagged end of a broken branch sticking out slammed into the side of his head. Pain jolted through his skull, stunning him. An instant later the raging water dragged him under.

Water rushed into his mouth. He choked.

Survival reflex kicked in, taking over everything. His lungs burned as he fought his way back to the surface, blindly flung a hand out as he broke through the water.

His fingers hit wet wood. Instinctively, he grabbed it. Held on as he dragged his head out of the water. Clung to the bucking log as he choked and coughed.

But he was in trouble.

The cold was a raw ache in his bones, rendering his fingers clumsy, the pain in his head making the entire world go blurry. He blinked, struggled to clear the confusion, numb fingers digging into the wood, but already the dark tide of unconsciousness was pulling at his limbs. Stealing what little strength he had left.

Slowly sucking him down into the icy depths of the river.

"GRADY," EVERLEIGH CRIED as he went under. Oh my God, the log had slammed into him and now she couldn't see him. There was no sign of Warren.

She frantically bent over the motor again, gripped the tiller with unsteady hands and twisted the end of it. How the hell did you work this thing?

Her heart hammered in her throat as she tried to get it going, casting desperate glances over her shoulder. Somehow Grady's hand managed to

grab onto the log, but he looked really out of it, and she didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

"Come on," she yelled at the engine through gritted teeth. With one savage twist, the motor finally responded. The boat shot forward, almost knocking her off balance. But she was going the wrong way.

She pulled the tiller hard to the left, swinging the bow around in a tight arc to face the opposite direction, and aimed for the log. Grady was slipping under the water. All she could see now was his hand over the edge of the log. She raced toward him but the river was pushing the boat back, trying to force it downstream.

It seemed like forever until she got close. The log was tossing around in the current, making it impossible for her to come near enough to grab him.

"Grady," she yelled, slowing the throttle when she was as close as she could get and reaching over to throw out a hand toward him. "Grab my hand!"

He was slumped over a branch, his eyes barely open, lips a horrible purplish color, and the back of his neck was red with blood.

No. No, no, no. "Grady, please, look at me," she begged, fingertips straining as they reached for him.

She jumped, a strangled scream clawing from her throat when an arm suddenly hooked over the side of the boat. Then let go of the tiller and whirled around just as Warren's face appeared over the edge. She glanced around frantically for something to knock him back into the water with.

The only thing she saw was the gun lying on the bottom of the boat.

She lunged for it, gripped it with shaking hands, aiming it at where Warren was struggling to drag himself over the inflatable side. Her breathing was choppy, her chest so tight she could barely breathe as she stared at him, darting a desperate glance at Grady. He was still holding on, but probably not for much longer.

She directed her stare back on Warren, hatred forming a hot ball of rage in the pit of her stomach. He'd killed so many people today and wounded countless others. Had taken her hostage. Would probably have killed her eventually, and had just tried to kill Grady.

He managed to get both arms around the curved inflatable rubber. Dragged himself up enough to throw a leg over. He looked up at her, their eyes locking.

And in that instant, Everleigh knew. *It's either him or us.*

She lowered her aim, pointing right at his chest. Closed her eyes and pulled the trigger.

Click.

She paused, caught off guard for a moment, then quickly tried again.

Click. Click.

No bullets.

She froze, stared into Warren's pain-glazed blue eyes. He was halfway in the boat. Another few seconds and he would be able to grab her.

With a cry of rage she lunged at him and slammed the butt of the gun into the side of his head with all her strength, splitting his scalp open. Warren jerked, a look of utter shock and reproach on his face as he fell back into the water and disappeared under the swirling surface.

Choking back a sob, she made sure he didn't come back up, then looked for Grady. He was still slumped over the branch, but every time the log moved in the current, he slid a little farther down into the water.

She rushed back to the motor, turned the boat and maneuvered it as close to him as she could. "Grady. *Grady,*" she yelled.

His eyelids fluttered. Bleary amber eyes blinked at her.

The lack of recognition in them terrified her. "We have to get you out of the water," she yelled. "Come on. Grady, please, you need to help me..." She tried three times to get the boat close enough to try and drag him in, but every time she did the current ripped her away.

Then one end of the log dipped, getting sucked under with the roiling water. Grady disappeared with it.

"No!" The agonized howl was ripped from the deepest part of her. And she was still too far away to grab him.

Having no choice, she climbed up onto the side bladder, stared into the swirling depths below for a heartbeat and then launched off the edge as far as she could.

The sudden shock of cold made it feel like a vise was compressing her chest, the power of the swift current terrifying. But not as terrifying as watching Grady die.

She swam toward him with all her might, managed to reach the log and wrap herself around him from behind, trying to pin him to the branch. "Grady, I need you to hold on. Okay? I can't do this without you." Her teeth

were chattering, muscles seized with shivers, and she'd only been in the water for less than thirty seconds. His normally bronze skin was pale with that terrifying purple cast to his lips that told her his core temp was dangerously low.

Clinging to the branch with her remaining strength, she shot a frantic glance toward the shoreline. Someone must have called for help by now, but what if all the emergency crews were occupied up at the concert venue and no one could get to her?

She looked ahead of them. The river was sweeping them continuously downstream to where it widened in the distance and curved right. She was a decent swimmer in a pool, but this situation was way out of her depth.

There was no way she could swim to shore in this, let alone while trying to tow Grady with her. They'd both drown for sure.

Their best bet was to stay on this log until something stopped it.

She hitched in a frightened breath when it suddenly bucked beneath them. Before she could reposition her grip, it went under, dragging them with it.

She went rigid as terror exploded, hands locked around the sturdy branch, body pressed tight to Grady's back to keep him there. She kicked frantically, trying to drive them back to the surface.

They broke through a moment later, but Grady was listless now, slumped completely over, eyes closed. And she didn't think she had the strength to hold on if the log went back under again—which it would.

She choked back a sob, looking around desperately. It couldn't end like this. Not after all she and Grady had just survived.

Not after all she'd already lost, and not after they'd just found each other.

Just as despair set in, through the rush of the river and the pulse of blood in her ears, she heard something. Lifting tear-blurred eyes to the blue summer evening sky, she saw the black silhouette of a big military helicopter cutting toward them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Boat,” Groz called out over the noise of the engines and rotors, pointing a long arm through the Blackhawk’s open doorway.

Sitting between him and Whit, Travis leaned out slightly and looked down. An inflatable boat was bobbing around in the middle of the river with no one on it.

Not a good sign given the most recent intel they’d received several minutes ago. Grady had called command on his way down here, and they had relayed the message to the unit after the helo launched. Shortly after that, someone on shore had called 911 about a shootout on the riverbank, with two men and a woman fighting in a boat.

The boat that was now floating empty down the middle of the river.

He scanned the breadth of the river, looking for survivors. His eyes snagged on two people clinging to a large log near the middle. “In the river, ten o’clock,” Travis said into his mic, alerting the crew.

“Roger,” the captain responded.

“Is that Grady?” Whit said, peering down intently.

“Can’t tell, but that white-blond hair has to be Everleigh.” How the hell had they both wound up in the water?

Travis and the others quickly moved to the rear of the cabin to get ready to perform the dual rescue while the crew chief took his place in the doorway, directing the helo into position.

Suited up in the harness a minute later, Travis set up next to the doorway and hooked onto the cable, keeping an eye on what was happening beneath them. They were close enough now to see the two people clinging to the log.

“Is it Grady?” Groz shouted from behind him.

He nodded. “And Everleigh. Looks like he might be unconscious.” The tension inside the aircraft went up sharply. With the life of one of their own hanging in the balance, it was way harder to keep emotions in check.

Everleigh was conscious and alert. She was staring up at them, lifted an

arm to wave at them for a second, then grabbed hold of the branch again. In front of her, Grady was draped across it, slumped over the log, and it looked like Everleigh was trying to hold him in place.

Travis waved back, hoping to reassure her, and waited for the crew chief to clear him for the descent as the helo dropped lower and moved into a hover. *Hang on*, he willed her silently. *I'm coming*.

The fast-flowing water meant the pilots had to constantly maneuver to keep pace with the moving log, increasing the risk and technical difficulty of the rescue. There was no sign of the second man the witnesses had reported earlier.

When Travis got the signal, he exited the cabin and began the descent toward the water. Everleigh watched him anxiously the entire time, squinting against the spray of water kicked up by the rotor wash.

As he got closer he could see the bluish cast to her skin—and Grady's. She was shivering, teeth chattering.

"He's h-hurt b-bad," she called over the noise.

Grady was conscious, but barely, his eyes open to mere slits and he showed no sign of being aware of what was going on around him. "Mendoza," Travis yelled as the cable lowered him within reach.

No answer. Barely a flicker of his eyelids.

Travis glanced left. The river bent to the right up ahead. He needed to get them into the helo before they reached the turn.

There was no place to put down here, but he needed more room to maneuver. He signaled to the crew chief to give him more slack in the line. It lowered him down a few more feet until he was in the water next to Everleigh, and grabbed hold of the log for support.

"Hey, you hanging in there?" he asked, helping her into one of the life jackets he'd brought down.

She forced a nod. "Please h-hurry."

"I will. I need to get Grady up first. Can you hold on just a little longer?"

A shaky nod.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Good. I'll be as quick as I can." Grady was limp as he put the lifejacket on him.

"He h-hit his...head," Everleigh gasped out, her rapid, shallow breathing and coloring telling him she was borderline hypothermic.

"Got it." Grady's skin was cold. His eyes fluttered open when Travis

turned him to clip him into the harness. “Hey, buddy. It’s Trav. I’m getting you out of here, okay? Whit and Groz are up in the helo waiting for you. Then I’m coming right back down for Ev.”

Bleary amber eyes focused on him for an instant, then the eyelids drooped again. He had a gash at the back of his head that was bleeding pretty bad. They’d need to get his core temp up while they did a full assessment on board.

He turned to Everleigh. “As soon as I get him on board, I’m coming straight back for you. Okay?”

“K-kay,” she said, fear in her eyes as she looked at Grady.

Travis signaled to the crew chief, held Grady to him and the cable lifted them from the water. Groz and Whit hovered in the doorway above, waiting. They took hold of Grady the instant Travis got him there and pulled him inside. “Head injury, borderline hypothermic. Conscious, but barely.”

“Copy,” Groz said as he and Whit pulled Grady toward the back. “Hey, Mendoza. Wake up, bro.”

Travis swiveled around to sit in the doorway and pushed out of the aircraft again, heading back down for Everleigh, shivering from the cold water. The turn in the river was coming up fast. He had to do this quick.

Once again, the cable lowered him down. Everleigh watched him the whole time, stress and exhaustion clear on her face.

“All right, let’s get you outta here,” he told her once he was next to her in the water, quickly buckling her into the harness and clipping her onto the cable. “Ready?”

She nodded and curled into him, wrapping her arms around his middle. His chest tightened. God, she was such a sweetheart, and he knew what she’d already been through. This on the heels of the rest of it was fucking cruel.

“Here we go.” He cupped a gloved hand around the back of her head, held on to her with his other arm as he gave the signal to the crew chief waiting above. “Just close your eyes and I’ll have you aboard in a minute.”

The cable began pulling them up. The rotor wash sent a powerful downdraft of cool air and water droplets rushing over them.

Everleigh shook and shivered in his hold, staying huddled against him. Waiting in the cabin doorway, the crew chief grabbed hold of her and pulled them inside. Travis quickly crawled in after her, slid the door shut and unbuckled his harness. Whit and Groz glanced over from the back, both of

them kneeling on either side of Grady where they had him on his back.

He gave them a thumbs up and went to Everleigh, taking a thick blanket from the crew chief. She was staring at Grady, face tight with strain. He knelt in front of her, blocking her view to refocus her. She'd already been through hell and didn't need the stress of watching the guys work on him.

Her shirt was bloodstained but it was diluted, and he couldn't see any obvious wounds on her other than the bandage wrapped around her forearm. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

She shook her head adamantly, trying to peer past him.

"We need to get you out of those wet clothes and warmed up," he said close to her ear so she could hear him over the combined noise of the engine and rotors.

Her blue eyes lifted to his face, tears welling. "Is h-he..."

The helo rose and banked right. He braced her from tipping with the motion. "He's gonna be fine, Groz and Whit are taking care of him. Now I'm going to take care of you." He softened the words with a smile. "Okay?"

At her nod, he held the blanket in front of her like a shield while she stripped off her sodden shirt and shorts. Then he laid her down on another blanket and began an assessment. Her vitals were surprisingly good, core temp a bit low but not too much of a concern. The shock was another matter.

He sat her back up, took a dry T-shirt, socks and pants from his ruck in the corner. She pulled them on, shaking all over.

Once she was dressed, he wrapped the blanket back around her and rubbed her arms and back to stimulate more circulation. "Bit better now?"

She nodded, tried to look past him at Grady. He didn't budge, tried to keep her calm and focused on him.

"What happened?" he asked, to keep her talking as much as he wanted to find out the details.

Her expression tensed, her gaze meeting his, bright with tears. "W-Warren," she gasped out. "My f-former n-neighbor. He..." She swallowed, struggled to compose herself. "He was one of...the sh-shooters."

Stunned, Travis listened as she haltingly told him what had happened, all the while keeping up with the friction to warm her. Her color was already a bit better, her lips changing to a lighter shade of blue.

The helo banked again and began its descent. Everleigh glanced around. "Wh-where..."

“They’ve cleared an LZ up at the campground. You guys were going to stay there tonight, weren’t you?”

She bit her lip, nodded. “Grady—”

“He’s going to be okay. As soon as we land, we’ll coordinate with emergency personnel on the ground.” They had to hand over care of Grady and Everleigh because he and the guys had to get to work helping save the critically wounded on the ground. Every minute counted. “What happened to Warren?” He needed to tell law enforcement.

Her face crumpled. One hand shot to her mouth and she seemed to struggle with herself a moment before choking out, “I k-killed him.”

“Mendoza. Hey. You with us?”

Grady struggled to pry his heavy eyelids open. Found the source of the familiar voice staring down at him and blinked groggily. His head hurt like a mother and he was fuzzy as hell. “Hey,” he mumbled, his voice muffled. They had an oxygen mask on him.

Everything was blurry around the edges. He was bouncing slightly. Being carried somewhere. And the cold. Jesus, it felt like his bones were frozen and his head pounded like a drum with each heartbeat. He winced at a sharp pain on the right side of his head.

“Hey,” Whit said, smiling down at him. “Welcome back.”

In an instant, everything flooded back in a rush.

The shooter. The river. “*Ev*,” he blurted, trying to sit up as panic lit up his chest.

A hand flattened on his sternum and pinned him down, and he was too weak to fight it. Travis appeared next to him. “She’s fine. She’s right in front of us, leading us to your tent. Just lie still for now, because you took one hell of a shot to the head.”

He gingerly lay back down, vaguely remembering Everleigh’s warning cry and the log coming at him. “She’s all right?” he insisted.

“Cold, but not hurt,” Travis said, then stepped back out of the way.

Groz and Whit carried the litter into the tent he’d set up earlier and lowered him onto the queen-size mattress he’d inflated. Where he’d planned to spend the night doing all kinds of sexy things to and with Everleigh.

“Silk sheets? Nice,” Groz said with a grin, helping him slide onto the mattress.

Then the most beautiful face in the world appeared above him.

She looked like an angel with the evening light streaming into the tent forming a halo around her pale blond head. A wet, bedraggled angel, her hair damp and tangled around her shoulders, face pale, lips slightly blue.

“Ev,” he croaked, reaching a hand up to touch her face.

“Hi,” she whispered, bending close. She caught his hand, kissed it and pressed his cold palm to her comparatively warm cheek, gorgeous smoky-blue eyes shimmering with tears. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he said. He was weak as hell, half frozen and apparently stunned by the hit to the head, but it could have been a lot worse. “You?”

“Yes.”

She had a bloody bandage on her right forearm. “What happened?”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Travis said, coming down on one knee beside him, “but we gotta get out there and get to work. Your core temp’s still a bit low but Everleigh will no doubt warm you up fast, and Whit did a nice stitch job on your scalp. Eighteen of ’em. No other significant injuries.”

He laid a hand on his shoulder, then looked at Everleigh. “I’ll send someone to talk to you when I find one, okay? It’ll be a long while before you get transported to the ER.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for.” He focused back on Grady, gripped his shoulder. “Take care of her, brother. We’ll see you guys back on the coast.”

He tried to nod but it made him dizzy as hell, and then Everleigh was stretching out beside him to press her body close to his, drawing the comforter he’d brought over them. He groaned, closed his eyes as a shiver racked him and wrapped his arms around her.

She nestled in close, draping a leg over him while she rubbed her hands over his naked skin. The guys had stripped him down to his underwear before wrapping him in the survival blanket. Her body heat was heaven.

“I’ll get you warmed up, then we’ll have to talk to the police.”

“Who was he?” he said, the attacker’s face far clearer in his mind than the rest of the details.

“Warren Rutteger. The guy who lives down the hall from Marley.” She slid her arms under him, moved her palms up and down his back from beneath. He could feel the warmth rushing back to his limbs. “I mostly

avoided him because he creeped me out, but I never dreamed he'd be involved with something like this." She shook her head.

"It wasn't just him. There were others."

She nodded, cuddled close and tucked her face into his neck. He hugged her to him, thankful she was alive and unhurt. "And they were wearing security uniforms."

"Yeah," he murmured, aching for her. The things she'd seen and gone through today would stay with her for a long time. Him too. Probably forever. He wished like hell he could do something to change that. For now, all he could do was hold her. He hoped it was enough. "But you're safe now."

She gave a nod, pressed closer. "We both are, thanks to Travis and the others."

"What happened to Rutteger?" He barely remembered the log coming at him. Or him coming at the log. Nothing more about Rutteger.

"I..." She paused, drew an unsteady breath. "I killed him," she whispered.

Shock blasted through him. He ripped off the oxygen mask. "What?"

"I thought he drowned, but then he tried to get back in the boat. His gun was lying on the deck. I grabbed it and...didn't see another choice. I t-ried to fire but there were no bullets left. So I-I smashed it into his head."

"Oh, angel. My brave, sweet angel," he whispered hoarsely, throat tight as he hugged her to him. A fresh wave of ice swept through him to imagine her facing Rutteger alone in that boat and having to do the unthinkable to save herself.

"It was h-horrible," she choked out, chest hitching.

He held her closer, cradled the back of her damp head with one hand. "You had no choice."

"No, but... God, I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"Okay, then just hold on to me and I'll hold on to you. We'll get through this together."

"Okay," she whispered.

It felt like he'd just said it when someone came through the tent flap. Everleigh jerked upright and he levered up on one elbow as a middle-aged man in an FBI windbreaker walked in.

"Ms. Manning. Mr. Mendoza. I'm Special Agent Winthrop." The guy

flashed his badge. “I understand you were both directly involved in an incident with one of the suspects.”

Grady’s heart sank. He reached for Everleigh’s hand and squeezed it, offering what reassurance he could. But it was going to be short lived.

So much for getting through this together. Because between the independent questioning and eventual medical treatment, they were about to be separated for the rest of the night.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was after four in the morning when Everleigh finally heard the key scrape in the lock of her front door. She'd been in bed for hours but sleep had been impossible, her brain turning everything over again and again and her wounded forearm throbbing.

She jumped out of bed and rushed out into the living room, worry clawing at her. It had been almost nine hours since she and Grady had been separated. Because of their direct contact with Warren, the FBI had interviewed them separately on scene, then put her in an SUV and driven her to the Portland field office for more intensive sessions with various departments.

Over and over, she'd had to recount the ordeal. To the point where the horror had faded beneath a numbing fog.

She'd just wanted to see Grady. But since she'd lost her phone in the river, she had no way of contacting him. Eventually, an agent had passed along a message from Grady telling her he would meet her at her place once he was free to go.

"I've got it," Marley called from the living room.

Everleigh watched as her friend strode to the door, having kept watch over her from the living room for the past few hours. Marley had driven all the way to Portland to pick her up and drive her back here, then stayed with her so she wouldn't be alone. She was such an awesome friend.

Marley checked the peephole and opened the door. Grady limped in, spare key in hand. His gaze moved straight to Everleigh, the tension in his shoulders easing. "Hi."

She rushed straight over and threw her arms around him. "Hi." She hugged him tight, relief washing through her in a warm wave. He was here. He was okay. It was really over.

He held her to him, kissed the top of her head. "Didn't mean to wake you. Sorry I'm so late."

“That’s okay. Just glad you’re here.”

“I’ll see myself out,” Marley said from the door. “Gonna go home and crash but call me if you guys need anything, okay?”

Everleigh lifted her head from Grady’s shoulder to smile at her friend. “You’re the best. Thanks.”

Marley waved her off. “No need for thanks. But yeah, I am the best.” She winked and shut the door behind her.

Everleigh tilted her head back to look up at Grady, taking his face in her hands. “How are you feeling?” He looked exhausted, with dark shadows under his eyes. But at least they were clear, and his skin didn’t have that awful pale cast anymore.

“Tired.” He stroked her hair back from her face. “You?”

“Exhausted, but I couldn’t sleep. Did you get checked out by a doctor?”

He nodded. “Mild concussion, and my knee’s swollen as hell again. X-rays were negative though. So all things considered, I’m great.”

She caught his hand, tugged it. “Come to bed.”

“Mind if I shower first?”

“Of course not.” She’d taken a long hot shower herself when she’d come home. Crying under the water the whole time.

She got him fresh towels from the closet next to the en suite door, then leaned up on her toes to brush a kiss across his mouth. “You okay in there on your own?”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Yeah. But I’m definitely taking you up on that offer later.”

She smiled back. “Okay.”

Crawling back into bed, she curled up on her side and listened to the shower running, all the tumultuous thoughts that had been spinning through her mind all night finally slowing. Just having Grady here made her feel better. Safer.

She didn’t want to think about the awful things that had happened anymore tonight. Needed time and space from them. To curl up in Grady’s arms and sleep so she could deal with whatever came tomorrow.

A few minutes after the shower stopped, he emerged from her bathroom in a cloud of steam with a towel around his waist. She scanned him with a critical eye, noting all the bruises and scrapes on his torso, but was most worried about his head. “You all right? Not dizzy.”

“No. They did an assessment at the hospital, just want me to take it real easy for the next week.”

“Of course.” They’d do more assessment after he had time to rest and recover, then give him a gradual return to activity depending on his symptoms, beginning with light aerobics. Hopefully nothing more serious or prolonged than that, and he’d be good to go—if maybe not completely back to normal—in a couple weeks.

Although the thought of him leaving after all of this gutted her.

“My cognitive function’s good, except for a few fuzzy spots in my memory when I was in the water. Got one hell of a headache though, but to be honest I’m more worried about my knee at the moment.”

She made a sound of sympathy and pulled the covers back for him. Of course he would be concerned about recovering fully in time for his tryout on top of everything else. “I’ll look at it after we get some sleep.” She took a moment to admire the raw, beautiful power of him when he dropped the towel, then he slid in next to her, his arms coming around her.

Nestling into his chest, she sighed and closed her eyes. “How did it go with the FBI?”

“Slow and painful.” He nuzzled the top of her head. “You?”

“Same. Though not as slow as you. Did they tell you anything? They wouldn’t tell me any details about the investigation. But I won’t be charged for...what happened.” She was still a little numb inside about that. Couldn’t quite believe that she’d killed someone, let alone someone she’d known.

“No, there’s no way they would charge you for defending yourself.” He pulled her closer, the wonderful heat of his body relaxing her more. He smelled like her soap. “As far as they can tell, there were at least three shooters involved.”

“Three?”

He made an affirmative sound. “All armed with high-power rifles.” His fingers stroked through her hair. “They pulled Rutteger’s body from the river a couple hours ago. And the other two were killed in a standoff with the cops just after midnight near the Idaho border. They’re still looking for more accomplices right now.”

“So they’re all dead.” The shooters at least. Maybe there were others who had helped plan the attack.

“They think so.”

“Good,” she said savagely.

He made a low sound of agreement, his fingers still keeping up their lulling motion in her hair. “They’re all members of a local extremist group called Home Front.”

“Never heard of it.” But she’d bet they would be hearing about the group nonstop in the media after this. “Any word on the total number of casualties?”

“Not yet, but it’s bad. I talked to Travis briefly on my way here. He thinks it’s going to be over a hundred dead, and around three times that wounded.”

“My God,” she whispered, stricken as she thought of all those poor innocent people who’d gone to The Gorge simply to enjoy a beautiful summer evening concert with friends and family.

She was quiet a while, gathering her thoughts. “I tried to save someone. He was wounded in the back, probably paralyzed from the waist down. I was trying to drag him behind cover. And then he...” She broke off, burying her face in Grady’s chest and squeezing her eyes shut. Not that it stopped the horrific images from flooding back.

“He what?” Grady murmured.

“A bullet blew his head apart.” She shuddered, remembering the shock and horror of it. “It was all over me.” Her throat closed up, tears burning her eyes.

“God, I’m so sorry, angel.” Grady wrapped around her, the pressure of his hold increasing. “Is that how your arm was hurt?”

She nodded, unable to speak as she dragged in slow breaths to calm herself. A nurse had pulled a few slivers of plastic from her skin, given her a tetanus shot and one of antibiotics, then dressed her arm with a fresh bandage. “It’s nothing. Just superficial damage.” Nothing compared to the rest of the carnage she’d witnessed.

The past several hours had given her a lot of time to think through everything that had happened. Would Warren have killed her in the end?

It horrified her on the deepest level to know she’d come into such close contact with a monster like him without realizing it. That he’d lived right here in the community she loved without anyone having any clue what he was up to.

“Thank you for coming after me,” she murmured into the quiet. He’d

nearly died trying to save her. His bravery astounded and humbled her.

He stilled. “Ev, seriously? Angel, I would do *anything* to protect you. Don’t you know that?”

Oh, damn, he was going to make her cry again. Because she knew he meant every word. He had raced after her last night without any hesitation, at huge risk to his own life.

“Just...just let me get this out,” she managed, struggling to hold it together. “It’s like when I... When I lost the baby.” She drew another breath, let out another shuddering exhale. How could she make him understand how she felt? “You don’t know. Don’t know what it m-meant to me that night, to have you there beside me. I don’t think I could’ve made it through otherwise.”

“Yes, you would have, but I’m glad I was there.” He kissed her forehead, his lips warm and tender. “Travis said when they found us you were holding me onto the log so I wouldn’t fall into the water.”

She nodded. “I couldn’t let you go without a fight,” she choked out, not knowing how the hell she was supposed to let him go in another two months after everything they’d been through together.

“Ev,” he said in a pained whisper, crushing her to him while she soaked up every moment of it.

She was glad Warren and the others were dead and could never hurt anyone ever again. If true justice existed, they would all be suffering in some kind of hellish afterlife right now.

She released a long breath, then another, reined in her thoughts and concentrated on the present. “Sleep now,” she murmured, running a hand down the length of his bare back. They were both safe and they had each other to lean on through whatever came next.

For another few weeks, anyway. She didn’t want to give him up. But he might not feel the same way.

Grady made a low sound and rolled her to her back, breaking her out of that awful thought. Early morning light filtered in around the edges of the shades on her bedroom windows, illuminating the gorgeous, masculine planes of his face. Outside, the birds were awake, twittering in the trees and shrubs in her garden.

Life carrying on around them as usual. As if the horrors of last night had never happened.

He settled on top of her, forearms braced on either side of her head to stare down into her eyes, his expression so intense it made her pulse trip. “I love you, Ev. Love you so damn much. I wasn’t going to say it yet, but I had to.”

Her heart swelled, then cracked open. “God, I love you too.” She drew him down to her, wrapped her limbs around him. He buried his face in the side of her neck and a sharp, bittersweet pain ripped through her chest as they clung to each other in the emotional aftermath. What were they going to do?

Their timing was tragic. She’d gone into this relationship determined to keep things light and fun. Never expecting that he would steal her heart completely or so quickly. But he had.

She would never hold him back from going after his dreams. So as much as it was going to hurt to let him go if that time came, she didn’t regret her decision to go for it with him. Not for a second.

Never would.

The coffee in the cup next to Walker’s elbow had gone cold over an hour ago. He stared at the laptop screen on the kitchen table in front of him, frustration eating at him like acid.

Nothing. Nothing he’d done so far had helped him crack—or even come close to cracking for that matter—the mystery of the source that kept sending him intel to his work email. Intel that had proven correct and reliable every time.

It was now Saturday morning but it had been a shitty start to the weekend. As soon as he’d heard about the attack at The Gorge last night, his heart had sunk like a rock. Even with all the chatter leading up to it, even knowing a domestic terror group was planning an attack and an FBI taskforce scrambling to identify the target, they hadn’t figured it out in time to stop it.

The numbers coming in were horrific. At last count, 112 dead and almost three times that wounded. The death toll would continue to rise in the coming days because some of those wounded would die yet. Others would be left coping with severe injury and loss of function for the rest of their lives.

And every single one of the survivors would have to live with the memory of the attack for the rest of theirs.

He sat up, folded his arms and kept staring at the little intel he’d managed to compile on the email sender thus far. Judging by this latest

message from his mystery source, the weekend wasn't about to improve any.

According to whoever was communicating with him, the Home Front cell linked to last night's massacre also had an active branch operating in the UK and seemed poised to launch its own attack.

Maybe that UK link was the answer to why this person kept sending him intel. He'd spent a handful of years based in England, splitting most of his time between London and Cheltenham with occasional trips overseas to hotspots where enemy combatants and terror groups were looking to plot and carry out attacks against the US and its citizens.

Maybe the sender was hoping he could somehow help figure out where the next attack would be, or come up with some brilliant insight on Fornam and that former network that would stop it completely. Or...shit, he didn't know what this person thought he could do.

He'd been out of the game for years now, had given up that way of life back when Jillian got sick so he could be here to look after her and Shae. And after she'd died, he'd stayed to be here for Shae. No regrets.

As if he'd conjured her, the side door opened and his daughter walked in wearing the comfy weekend sweats she rarely wore anymore, not a hint of the sophisticated makeup she'd taken to wearing when she left the house, her hair up in a messy bun.

His little girl was back, if only for a little while. And thankfully she hadn't been planning to go to the concert last night. "Hey, where you been?"

"Whale's Tale," she said, setting a steaming to-go cup of coffee in front of him along with a white bakery box that smelled of fragrant cinnamon. "Knew you'd been pulling an all-nighter with everything going on and I couldn't sleep either, so I popped into town first thing to grab you some sustenance." She leaned in to kiss the top of his head, her hand on his shoulder.

He reached up, squeezed her hand as something tightened in his chest. She meant everything to him. He'd never known a love so deep. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And this was on the front doorstep when I got back." She handed over a small courier envelope.

He took it, glanced at the address. His name was in the recipient field, but the sender portion was blank. The stamp was postmarked London.

Instant tension formed in his gut. He tore it open to reveal a small, flat,

rectangular box. Inside that, wrapped in green tissue paper, was a sprig of ivy and a black crow feather set on top of a folded note.

What the hell?

Frowning, he unfolded the small piece of paper. It was handwritten in black ink.

Fornam's definitely pulling strings behind the scenes. Hope you nail the other sons of bitches involved.

At the bottom was a list of names with arrows showing how they were linked together. Names he wasn't familiar with but potentially linked to Fornam—

He stared at the feather and piece of greenery as his brain finally caught up. Holy shit, *Ivy*?

"Dad? What is it?" Shae said in a worried voice.

"Ivy," he said, setting the box aside.

"No way! *The Ivy*? The badass female operative who—"

"Looks that way." But he needed to know for certain. Wanted to know why she was digging around in this and why she hadn't told him her identity sooner. Why the secrecy?

He toggled through his contacts, tried the number she'd used during the op to rescue Nadia from Kabul almost a year ago. Not that he expected it to actually work.

Sure enough, an automated British female voice came on the line. *This number is no longer in service. Please—*

He ended the call and immediately pulled up the number for the only person he knew who might be able to get hold of her.

"Walker," Alex Rycroft answered moments later. "Great to hear from you. How are you? I heard about last night."

Walker was willing to bet that Rycroft had heard almost instantly through his contacts. Very little happened in the intel world that Rycroft didn't hear about immediately, even though he'd officially been out of the game for even longer than Walker. "I just got a surprise package from London with a note hinting that it's from the sender who's been feeding me sensitive security intel on this case that the FBI doesn't even have—along with a piece of ivy and a black crow feather."

"Really?" He sounded mildly surprised.

Walker wasn't sure he was buying it. For all he knew, Rycroft was the

one sharing this intel with Ivy. Maybe Rycroft had asked Ivy to send it because as a former NSA god, it was too messy for him to be involved with this in his “retirement.”

“Was it you?” he finally asked.

“No.”

“Then where is she?” he said in a no-bullshit tone. He was tired of the games and secrecy. If she was the one behind this, how in the hell was she getting the intel in the first place? And why send it to him at all?

Rycroft paused a moment before answering. “It’s time we had that beer. Let me know when you want to meet me in London for a pint.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next few days were a complete and draining blur. Between meetings with the FBI and law enforcement, changing his work shifts to the following week and a steady stream of friends coming over to visit or drop off food, by the time Tuesday night rolled around, Grady was wiped.

He exited the doctor's office with a noticeable limp and stepped out into the parking lot, craving time alone with Everleigh for the rest of the night. His knee was still sore and swollen but he refused to go back on crutches, stubborn man.

She saw him, started her car and drove to the curb to pick him up. "Well? What did she say?" she asked when he got in.

"Brain scans are negative." Which they'd expected, since his concussion had been fairly mild. "My knee's not great. Swelling and effusion in the medial joint. No new tears in the MCL or meniscus though, so like you said it should improve after a week or two if I take it easy. And I have to wait to do much of anything until I don't get dizzy during activity anymore." He still had headaches, but all things considered, it was the best possible outcome in both cases.

"Oh, that's fantastic!" She beamed at him and started out of the lot. She'd shifted her patient load to next week to give them time to recuperate together. "Big relief."

"Yeah." It was. But this past weekend had shifted his entire worldview on its axis.

While he still had plenty of time to recover and ensure he was ready for selection in September, and though it was everything he'd been working toward for so long... Now he was having serious reservations.

Because of Everleigh. Because what they'd been through together had forged a bond stronger than anything he'd ever known.

Because he fucking loved her with everything in him.

She meant more to him than anything, even the career he'd been single-

mindedly focused on until she'd changed that a few weeks ago. He couldn't imagine his life without her. Couldn't imagine leaving her behind when he went to selection and then moving on without her.

God. The whole reason he'd held off on getting involved with anyone in a serious way the past few years was because he'd known that once he made SOST, a relationship was out of the question.

Asking her to upend her life here after everything she'd been through, asking her to potentially move around the lower part of the country with him and be alone whenever he was deployed or on training exercises, seemed too damn selfish.

He already had a job he loved here, both at the hospital and the military. He had great friends here. And he had Everleigh, who had just settled herself into the fabric of the community again. He still wanted to try out for SOST, but...if he made it, what then?

If he wound up forced to choose between SOST and Everleigh, there was no contest. There was only one way that could go.

"You're awfully quiet," she said as she drove them back to her place.

He'd stayed there every night since the attack. They both needed it. She was coping well overall, but the fallout from the hell she'd experienced that night wasn't something she was going to get over anytime soon. If at all. He wanted to be with her, be there to support and comfort her when she needed it.

So how the fuck was he supposed to move to a different state without her?

"Just thinking," he said.

"Yeah? About what?"

"You," he murmured, reaching out to glide his fingers through her long pale hair.

She shot him a smile. "I like to think I make you happy, but you look pretty serious."

He slid his hand around to cradle her nape. Drew his fingertips across her soft skin and down the side of her neck.

Her indrawn breath and the goosebumps on her skin sent a dark wave of arousal through him. They hadn't been physical since the attack.

That was changing here and now. He needed her. Needed to connect with her on the deepest level of intimacy and show her without words what

she meant to him.

She shot him a sideways glance and kept driving, making a soft, needy sound when he stroked the edge of her breast that went straight to his swelling dick.

“I want you,” he said in a low voice.

“Behave before you get us in an accident,” she said with a flustered laugh.

He kept touching her as the final few minutes of the drive ticked past. Unable and unwilling to stop. Wanting her as hot for him as he was for her by the time they got home.

Everleigh parked in her garage, hit the button to close it behind them, and turned off the engine. “Grady, we—”

He cupped her cheek in his hand and turned her face toward him, bringing his mouth down on hers to stop whatever she was about to say. Probably something about needing to wait until he was cleared by the doctor.

Screw that.

Her hands flew to his shoulders, lips parting on a soft, tremulous moan as he slid his tongue in to taste her. “Are you sure?” she whispered.

“Try me,” he muttered, giving her one last kiss before reluctantly releasing her and getting out.

They met at the hood. He grabbed her by the hips, pulled her tight to him and resumed the kiss as he backed her toward and through the door into her mudroom.

She clung to him, kissing him back with a tender passion that set him on fire. He was hard and aching for her, the need to possess her fueling every move.

They made it through the kitchen and as far as her living room before he reached his limit. He pushed her down flat on her back on the sofa, paused to peel off his clothes while she did the same, then came down on top of her. She moaned and wrapped around him, pouring herself into another long, hot kiss that left them both breathing hard.

He tore his mouth from hers to lick his way down the side of her throat, then moved to her breasts. Sucked her tight pink nipples until she was mewling and shifting restlessly before sliding a hand between her open thighs and finding the slick, heated flesh waiting there for him.

She moved under him like a wave, eyes heavy-lidded with arousal, lips

parted with each shallow breath. And he couldn't wait. Couldn't stand to not be in her a moment longer.

Holding her in place, he reached between them and settled the head of his cock against her wetness. Braced himself on his forearms, staring down into her eyes. Her hands tightened on his shoulders as the anticipation built.

One heartbeat. Two.

He thrust forward in a single, easy glide that buried him to the hilt. Her head tipped back, mouth opening as her eyes closed, the expression of ecstasy on her face making his heart pound. She'd made it sound before like she hated missionary, but he was going to change her mind.

With one hand he took her right thigh and eased it over his shoulder. Then her left thigh. She braced her hands on his bare chest, stared up at him breathlessly, eyes hazy with need and pleasure.

He rocked into her, setting a steady, firm rhythm, his thumb resting directly over her clit. Adding a bit of pressure as he surged. Working that hidden spot inside her that made her crazy.

"Oh," she moaned, lifting into him. "There. Don't stop. Don't..."

A dozen more thrusts and she came apart beneath him, her cries of release filling him with pure satisfaction. He rocked faster. A little harder. Set his jaw, carving every single detail, every single moment of this into his memory until the pleasure became too much.

He pulled out at the last moment, fisting himself as he came all over her soft, pale belly, shouting his release into the quiet room. He felt her hand on his cheek. Her thumb rubbing across his lips.

Opening his eyes, he kissed her thumb, then bent down to kiss her lips slow and tender. There was no way. No way he could go through life without her. "I love you so much, angel."

"I love you back," she murmured, the soft smile and adoring look in her eyes tying him into knots.

The pain in his knee brought him back to the present. Wincing, he shifted to stand on his good leg, then reached down to scoop up his shirt and clean her up, wiping the traces of him off her skin.

He took her hand, tugged her to her feet and limped into her room where he tossed his shirt in the laundry basket before sliding between the sheets with her and hauling her into his arms. His knee was killing him but so worth it.

This conversation couldn't wait a day longer. He needed to be honest with her and lay it all on the line right here and now. "I've wanted SOST for a long time."

"I know." She snuggled into him, laying her cheek in the hollow of his shoulder, one arm draped across his ribs.

"But if I make the team now, it wouldn't mean anything without you."

She tipped back her head to meet his eyes. "What are you saying?" she whispered.

"I've told you what kind of life the team members and their families have. All the sacrifices they have to make. They're all basically married to the job." Their lives were uncertain. Unpredictable. They were always on call, ready to respond to an emergency or deploy at a moment's notice. Partners had to be okay with being alone for frequent and sometimes long stretches. "You've been through so much. I know you've built a life here now. I won't ask you to leave it for me."

Shadows filled her eyes. "Then you...want to take a break? From us?"

"God, no. No. That's the last thing I want." He cupped the back of her head, heart pounding. "I want to be with you, Ev. And to be there for you. So if that means giving up SOST, I will."

A tremulous smile formed on her lips, a sheen of tears glistening in her eyes. "You'd give it up for me?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

She traced a finger down his cheek, deep in thought. "That means a lot. But I love you too much to let you sacrifice your dream."

He opened his mouth to protest but she put her finger on his lips and continued. "You're right, I do love it here. I love the town and the friends I've made and the life I've started making for myself. But I love you more, and I know how much this chance means to you. You have to try for SOST. I want you to. And if you make it...then we'll work everything else out together after that."

He exhaled in a rush, relief hitting him hard. "Are you sure? I'd be gone a lot, and you'd be alone in a new city while—"

"Then I guess I'll have to make new friends, won't I?" She stroked her fingers through the back of his hair. "And maybe I could come back here and stay with Marley when you're gone for long stretches. I mean, it won't be for forever, right?"

“No. A few years at least. I don’t really know.”

“So we’ll figure it out. I’m in.”

“Ev,” he whispered, overwhelmed. She was so damn incredible. He would give her time to think more about this, make sure this really was what she wanted, but he was so damn grateful for her positive attitude. Her willingness to support him through this. “Okay, then, we’ll figure it out. Together.”

Chapter Thirty

Ten weeks later...

Grady dragged his gear out to the parking lot in the hot September evening air, physically and mentally exhausted on a level he hadn't experienced since way back in Indoc when he'd started on the road to becoming a PJ.

The cool shower he'd taken forty minutes ago hadn't revitalized him at all. He'd struggled to pay attention to what the major was saying to him in their final meeting just now, and as soon as he'd left the building the Alabama humidity instantly put him back in a sweat.

He drove back to the place he was staying at in a daze and didn't remember the trip once he got there. The past few weeks had been every bit as grueling as he'd expected and then some, the punishing schedule pushing him to his limits. For good reason. He'd learned lessons he'd never forget. And his newly healed knee had suffered some minor setbacks along the way, something he'd worried about during the grueling training and selection process.

Now his test was over. He stood poised at a proverbial fork in the road, and both paths led away in completely opposite directions. As he saw it, only one would lead to Everleigh.

Then he lugged his gear up the steps and unlocked the back door, stepping inside to a blast of blessed air-conditioned air and dumped his gear on the floor. He'd deal with it later. After a long shower, food and some sleep.

He stumbled toward his bedroom.

Everleigh suddenly appeared in the doorway in cutoffs that showed the entire length of her bare legs, and a white eyelet top that hugged her breasts and waist. "Hey, stranger."

He stopped dead, wondering for a second if he was hallucinating. "Ev,"

he blurted, staring.

Her smile turned him inside out as he closed the distance between them and grabbed her, confirming she was real. Christ, she was beautiful. “Hi.” She wrapped her arms around him, cuddling in close.

He held on hard, drinking in the feel of her. “God, what are you doing here?” he asked, bewildered. She’d called him this morning just before oh-five-hundred her time prior to his final evaluation shift at the University of Alabama Hospital. “I thought you were still in Crimson Point when we talked.”

“Not quite. I was at Portland Airport, waiting for my flight to Dallas.” She ran a hand up and down his back, her soft curves bringing his whole body to a state of heightened alertness. “Surprise.”

Grinning, he took her face in his hands, eased her head back to study her for a long moment. “I’m so damn glad to see you,” he murmured, and kissed her.

And kissed her, and kissed her, until she giggled.

“Come here,” he said, tugging her toward the bed. He dropped onto it, paused when she squeaked and rolled to her side.

“You didn’t see your present,” she protested.

He sat up, looked down at the bed.

“Don’t look too closely at the seams, it’s my first try.”

He stared at the quilt, looked up at her. “You made this? For me?”

“Yes. Mia and Kerrigan gave me some old pararescue shirts to use.” She tucked her hair behind one ear, expression anxious. “Do you like it?”

He ran a hand over the top of it, touched by all the work she must have put into making this for him. “I love it. I love *you*.” He pulled her down onto his lap, one hand coming up to squeeze the muscles at the back of her neck as he kissed her.

“Oh, that feels like heaven,” she breathed against his lips.

“Heaven’s where I’m taking you as soon as I get you undressed,” he promised.

She laughed and sat back to peer at him with eager blue-gray eyes. “Wait, you haven’t told me how it went yet. Well?” she prompted when he didn’t answer. “Did you hear anything yet?”

“Yeah. About an hour ago.”

She frowned in annoyance when he didn’t say more, poked his shoulder.

“And?”

The exhaustion, her showing up to surprise him, her unrelenting support and belief in him, hit him all at once. His throat closed up. “I made it,” he said in a rough voice. “They offered me a spot.”

Her eyes widened, mouth opening in a joyful cry. “Oh my God, Grady!” She flung her arms around his neck, hugged him hard. “You did it! I knew you would. I just *knew* it.”

He shoved his face into the curve of her neck. Battling the burn of tears while he breathed in her sweet, familiar scent, reeling from the feel of her. Absorbing the warmth of her love until he thought he had control of his voice again. “I turned it down,” he said quietly.

She froze. Pushed back to stare at him incredulously. “What? *Why?*”

“Because.” He drew his fingers through the ends of her hair. “I’d planned all this back when I was single, knowing what it would take to get there. Expecting to stay single and ready to dedicate my life to the job if I made it, because it was just me. But it’s not just me anymore. And during these past few weeks I realized...I missed you way more than I would miss the job if I turned it down.”

“Oh, Grady, you *have* to take it. You’ve worked so hard for this,” she said, watching him with worried eyes. “It’s okay, I’ve already got it all worked out. I’ll move down here. There’s a physio position at a clinic nearby I’m going to apply for—”

“No.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat, overwhelmed by this kind, amazingly strong woman and everything she’d been prepared to give up for him. “Thank you, I appreciate the offer so much, I really do, but no.” He laid a finger across her lips when she opened her mouth to argue. “I already talked to my boss back home. She said they’d keep my spot open in critical care if I still want it. Which I do, along with my military duties.” He tightened his hold on her, dropped his voice. “I want to go home to Crimson Point and start our life together, Ev.”

She searched his eyes, still concerned. “Are you *sure*? You’ve been under a lot of stress. You’re tired and completely worn out. Maybe you should sleep on it, take some time to—”

“I’m sure. This is what I want.” He hugged her close, tucked her face against his shoulder.

“I don’t want you to resent me someday for turning this down,” she said

softly.

“I won’t. I swear.” He sighed, a feeling of peace wrapping around him, mixing with excitement and a sense of certainty he felt all the way to his bones. Everleigh and their life together was the right decision, no question. “What the hell did I ever do to deserve you?” he murmured into her hair.

“By being you,” she said simply, kissing the side of his neck. “I can’t believe I ever thought I could control the way I felt about you. From day one there was no way I wasn’t going to fall in love with you.”

“I’ve loved you even longer than that, angel.”

She tipped her head back to peer up at him. “You have?”

“Yes.” He leaned in to kiss her, tipped her backward onto the bed.

“Are we about to christen your quilt?” Her eyes twinkled up at him.

“We are.” Until she was panting and begging and they both cried out in release while he was buried inside her. Then he would wrap them both up in it and hold her as they slipped into oblivion together.

“Mmm, *good*. Now come here and help me get us both naked.” She dragged him down full length on top of her, moaned as their lips met in a slow, deep kiss.

That possessive part of him roared to life, erasing all traces of exhaustion under a flood of adrenaline and need. *You’re mine, angel*.

Everleigh moaned again, her hands impatiently tugging at his shirt. A secret smile tugged at his mouth as he thought of the ring he had tucked away, ready for the proposal he’d already planned once they got back to Crimson Point. On the beach beneath the lighthouse while the moonlight turned her hair to silver and the waves crashed on the shore behind them.

He was marrying this woman and making her his forever.

—The End—

read Walker and Ivy’s story next in Fatal Fallout!

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Excerpt from
FATAL FALLOUT
Crimson Point Protectors Series
By Kaylea Cross
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Chapter One

Over one hundred innocent Americans dead. Almost three times that many wounded. Every one of them senselessly cut down at an outdoor concert in Washington State two months earlier.

And that was only the latest body count racked up by the monster Walker was about to meet face-to-face for the first time since the interview that had helped lock him away in here. The man might not have been the one to pull the trigger, but he was responsible for those casualties nonetheless.

Walker stared straight ahead as he waited for the automatic steel doors in front of him to open, preparing for the coming confrontation. Throughout his career in intelligence he had interrogated many prisoners behind bars, but never in a place like this. The ADX Florence “supermax” prison was a max security facility unlike anything else in the country.

As he stood there he could feel his former self take over. It had been years since he’d done this. Not since he’d left the intelligence world behind. But life had a funny way of circling back on itself. His background and personal experience with this inmate had landed him here as a consultant for the CIA—along with the tidbits of intel a little birdie had been feeding him behind the scenes.

Desperate times called for desperate measures.

His security credentials had been checked before he’d been admitted through the front gate, followed by a scan for drugs and weapons. The two heavily armed guards flanking him led him through yet another automatic steel door, their footsteps echoing down the empty hall. Dozens of cameras tracked their every move along the corridor, past a guard station into a

different cellblock.

Everything was sterile. Devoid of color and life, the only natural light coming from a few tiny windows embedded in the exterior walls on either end of the hall. The cold, industrial feel and the total silence in every cellblock were almost disorienting.

In here, time had no meaning. Prisoners were completely cut off from the outside world and each other. Once inside, an inmate would never so much as catch a glimpse of the Rocky Mountains that soared into the endless Colorado sky and formed a dramatic backdrop behind the prison.

A series of thick steel doors lined the interior wall. Prisoners sent here—the most violent offenders and most dangerous terrorists in the United States—spent up to twenty-three hours of every day in their cells, in solitary confinement.

There was a reason why this place was called “life after death”. That kind of total isolation got to a man eventually, no matter how tough he thought he was. Including Walker’s old adversary waiting somewhere within this soulless maze.

“In here, sir,” one of the guards said, stepping ahead to slide a key into the lock on the next steel door. Then he swiped an access card into a chip reader, entered a code. A quiet buzz sounded. The door clicked open.

Walker stepped through it into the small windowless room, steeling himself for the sight of the man he’d hoped never to lay eyes on again, and sat in the chair facing a darkened panel on the opposite wall.

“We’ll be right outside the door, sir.”

Walker nodded, staring at that panel as the door shut closed behind him with a quiet steel clang that had a chilling, final ring to it. Being locked up in here must feel a bit like being entombed alive. Yet he questioned whether it was punishment enough for the crimes committed to warrant being sent to this place.

The sound of the second hand on his watch ticking was overly loud in the eerie, total silence as he waited. He wouldn’t be here unless it was absolutely necessary. And even if he walked out of here with nothing, he’d had to come. Had to try.

Because though the man on the other side of that wall had nothing left to lose, in some ways he was still every bit as dangerous as when he’d been a free man.

The dark screen in front of him suddenly came to life. In spite of himself a wave of anger punched through him when he saw the familiar figure framed there.

Elliot Fornam. Now fifty-three years old, wearing a bright orange prison jumpsuit and a plain white T-shirt underneath. His cuffed wrists were anchored to the concrete table he sat behind. Shackled feet bound to the concrete floor.

A violent domestic terrorist with extreme anti-government views responsible for the death of hundreds of innocent American civilians and countless other people around the world due to attacks carried out by his followers.

Recent chatter said another one was coming. Soon. The CIA was desperate enough to stop it to send Walker here in the hopes of getting even the tiniest clue that might help them crack the case.

He kept absolutely still, maintained a passive expression even as the eyes staring back at him sent a wave of revulsion through him. Bright blue. Eerie and otherworldly beneath the glare of the sterile white lights that made Fornam look pale as skim milk.

The supermax effect had already begun to take its toll. Fornam looked gaunt, almost shriveled. Frail, his chest and shoulders sunken beneath the jumpsuit. There were hollows under his cheekbones.

But those eyes. They were as bright and sharp as ever, the malicious, unholy gleam in them still present. And that slight curl to his mouth. That fucking evil, smug smirk Walker still dreamed about wiping off Fornam's ugly face with his fists.

A psychopath's smile. He'd seen many in his time, but Fornam's was the stuff of nightmares.

"So. You finally came to visit," Fornam said, eyeing Walker with interest. Probably thrilled by the prospect of a few minutes' reprieve from the isolated monotony that was now his everyday existence. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

He'd denied having anything to do with the July 2nd attack. Denied knowing anything about his followers planning it. There was no way he should have been involved with the July attack. And yet Walker would bet everything he owned that Fornam had been *intimately* involved.

And that someone within these walls had helped him communicate his

orders to his followers.

He got straight to the point. “Who did you pay off to get word to your network on the outside?” Home Front wasn’t just a homegrown American problem anymore. In the past year Fornam’s poison had spread far beyond this country’s shores, infecting a whole new generation of disaffected people overseas.

Fornam put on a perplexed expression. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Walker leaned forward and folded his forearms on the cold surface of the table, never breaking eye contact. Fornam knew him. Knew how he worked.

He also knew that Walker couldn’t be intimidated. Not by security or military personnel, rich politicians or heads of state. Not even by the most evil terrorists the world could create.

Certainly not by Fornam.

“I realize you’re bored in here,” he went on. “That it doesn’t matter if you get another consecutive life sentence added on for this latest attack, or five. Your cremated ashes will be dumped into the prison compost heap long before the first one is up anyway.”

Walker saw the first indication that he’d gotten under Fornam’s skin. The slight tightening of the skin around the mouth and eyes. The subtle tensing in the jaw and shoulders before Fornam caught himself and relaxed again, sliding his smug smirk back in place. “My memory and the memory of what I’ve done will live on forever,” he said with pride, his expression full of arrogance.

Good to see the time in here hadn’t dulled his arrogance any. Walker used it to his advantage. “Until someone better comes along. You know how it is today with how fast things move in the twenty-four-seven news cycle we live in.”

The arrogant look faded a little.

He held that eerie stare for several long moments before sliding the verbal blade in deeper. “Because you and I both know that eventually someone bigger and badder than you ever were will come along and erase you from memory. And he’s out there right now, Elliot. Maybe you even trained him yourself. Made yourself redundant without realizing it. Wouldn’t that be something? Gotta love the irony there.”

The barb struck home. Fornam’s arrogant smirk turned into a sneer. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know *anything*.”

“So who is he?” Walker pressed, refusing to be baited. Fornam hated this. Hated being caged like an animal and subjected to another interrogation, especially by him. Hated being analyzed, insulted and being put on the defensive. Hated being talked down to and humiliated more than anything.

Jabbing Fornam’s ego was always a good bet. “Hm? Who’s going to replace you and take over everything you built now that you’re trapped in here for the rest of your life?”

His nostrils flared, lips pinching into a thin line. But Walker caught the flicker of unease in those cold blue eyes. Then raw anger. “You think I’m going to tell you?”

“So someone *has* already taken over. Thanks for confirming that.” The intel community had feared another leader had stepped in to fill the void after Fornam was sent here. Now he knew for certain.

Flustered, Fornam consciously relaxed his features, but too late. “How the hell would I know? Like you just said, I’m trapped in here.” The smirk was back. He tsked, shook his head, putting on a pathetic display of false bravado that any rookie interrogator would see through. Already faded to a shadow of what he’d once been.

“True. Still, you know *some* things, don’t you?” He cocked his head. “No? Already that useless to the others?” He tsked.

Fornam’s mouth tightened. “Pretty desperate of you to come down here hoping for answers. You’re the one on the outside with all the networking and high tech resources at your fingertips. And you still can’t figure it out? That’s pretty pathetic, Walker.”

The sound of his name from Fornam’s lips disgusted him but he didn’t allow a single shift in his expression, gaze or posture. Even this place wasn’t punishment enough for this piece of shit. While Fornam would never breathe free air again, he also got protection, three squares a day and medical treatment for the rest of his existence courtesy of the American taxpayers he’d terrorized.

“Anyone who had contact with you here prior to the July 2nd attack at The Gorge are gone now.” He paused, raised his eyebrows. “Having trouble connecting with your network lately?”

A spark of anger flared in Fornam’s eyes, the jab igniting his temper. “Locking me up in here didn’t stop anything. It *won’t* stop anything. Did you really think it would?” He laughed softly. “My organization will continue on

no matter what happens to me. You have no idea what's coming. You can't stop it."

"Yes I can."

The quiet declaration seemed to startle Fornam, who went silent.

"You know I can," Walker continued. "And it's not your organization anymore, as you already confirmed. That's all over. You're nothing now." His quiet words rang with conviction. It was strange, but that had always rattled Fornam. Something about Walker's calm, quiet interrogation method deeply disturbed him. He didn't need to yell or threaten Fornam to get under his skin.

Walker kept staring. Barely even blinked as he let the silence build between them until it was deafening.

Fornam shifted slightly in his chair, betraying his discomfort in spite of his fake bored expression. "I don't know who it is," he finally muttered.

"Yes you do. And he's in the UK, planning an op right now." According to his sources the chatter there was off the charts. Something big was brewing. Walker was doing his part to help stop whatever it was.

Sudden surprise flared in Fornam's eyes. A recognition that confirmed Walker's worst fear. "Who?" he half-whispered. Testing him. Wanting to see if Walker had figured it out. But no one knew for sure except Fornam.

"You know who."

A slow, skin-crawling grin spread across his face. Then he laughed. A soft, chilling sound. "You see? It's already happening. Like I said, you can't stop it." He shifted again, his growing agitation palpable.

Walker recognized the signs of impending shutdown. He'd gotten everything he was going to get from Fornam. This interview was over.

He stood abruptly, the legs of his chair scraping over the concrete floor. "Thanks for the tips. Enjoy the rest of your sentence," he said, turning for the door.

"Walker," Fornam called.

He kept going as a guard outside opening the door.

"Walker!" The frustration and slight note of panic in his voice was balm to Walker's soul. Fornam's little reprieve from the endless monotony and segregation had come to an end and now he would be put back in his cage. "Who is it? Say his name! Say it!"

He stepped out into the hallway. The guards escorted him out of the

maze of doors and corridors and through security to the outer gate where his rental car was parked. He got in, closed his eyes and shoved out a breath, releasing all the pent up tension inside him.

He'd sworn years ago that he'd gotten out of this game for good. Fornam's connection to the July 2nd attack had dragged him back. He wanted to end this as soon as possible and get back to the life he'd rebuilt for himself after Jillian.

He dialed a number as he drove past guarded watchtowers up the long road leading to the turnoff to the prison. Recently "retired" NSA agent Alex Rycroft answered on the second ring, seven hours ahead in London. "Did you see him?" he asked.

They had talked about all of this previously during a joint CIA/NSA brief that Rycroft had been read into. "Just leaving the property now. The new head's one of his. And he's definitely in the UK. Possibly dual US-UK citizenship." It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing and everyone involved could now stop wasting resources chasing their tails here in the States.

"You're sure?"

"Positive." All except the dual citizenship part, but he was pretty certain. At least that narrowed down their list of potential suspects drastically.

"All right. We still on for that pint we talked about?"

"Yeah." In addition to talking about their new suspect, he would finally get answers about the female agent that had been feeding him bits of intel under the radar. "I'll see you Wednesday night."

Walker paused in the act of repacking his suitcase in his bedroom the next afternoon when he heard the side door open and close downstairs. Shae back from class at the local community college.

"Dad?" the most wonderful voice in the entire world called out a moment later.

"Up here." He'd barely stepped into the hallway before Shae appeared at the top of the stairs. He held out his arms.

Her face lit up in a big smile. "Hey," she said, and walked right into his embrace. "Didn't expect you to be home."

He hugged her, kissed the top of her head, all thoughts about Fornam disappearing in an instant. Everything was suddenly right in his world. His

little girl was all grown up but she still needed Dad hugs and it melted him even more now. “Caught an early flight so I could be home in time to have dinner with my best girl.”

“You still flying out to London tomorrow?”

“Yes.” He released her and she stepped back. “You cut your hair.”

She touched the brown chin-length bob, lips curving upward. “Yeah. Anaya went to the salon with me after we did some baby shopping for the nursery she and Donovan are finishing up.”

She adored her new stepmother. “You look like your mom,” he murmured, a pang hitting him. Not nearly as strong and painful as the thought of Jillian had once been. Time had faded it to an ache now whenever he thought of her. Shae had Jillian’s features and Donovan’s green eyes.

“I know. When I saw myself in the mirror at the salon my eyes bugged out.” She leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms, a slight frown tugging at her eyebrows. “How did it go...wherever you were? You get what you needed?”

He’d kept things vague with her about the purpose of his trip, didn’t want her exposed to the darkness of his past work. He’d always done his best to keep his professional and private lives separate, for good reason. “No, but it did my heart good to see this guy locked up tight for the rest of his life.”

Shae nodded, expression sober. “Is the London trip connected?”

“In a way. Nothing for you to worry about, though,” he said to reassure her. “No danger involved for me.” He was glad she didn’t know the things he did. Glad he’d been able to protect her from the darkness he dealt with on a daily basis. She’d had too much trauma and uncertainty in her life already. “Mostly this trip has to do with Ivy.” She had to be an agent. Or a former one. But on paper and in every place he’d looked, she didn’t exist. And Walker didn’t believe in ghosts.

Shae relaxed, a grin spreading across her face. “Oh, man, I can’t wait to find out the details later.”

He chuckled. “Something tells me she’s not gonna make it easy for me to find out much.” He wanted some straight answers from Rycroft about the mysterious, highly-trained woman he had only worked with briefly during an op to rescue Anaya’s sister in Kabul last summer. “You hungry?”

“Yeah, but I don’t feel like cleaning up the kitchen later. Let’s go out.”

Over dinner in town at a place overlooking the ocean they talked about

Shae's classes and her excitement about becoming a big sister. "You should see Donovan right now. It's hilarious," she said, twirling pasta around her fork like a pro. "He's doting on Anaya like mad and it's driving her crazy. And she's still got four months to go. Imagine what he'll be like close to her due date."

Walker smiled. "Love to see it." Donovan had come a long way since Anaya had walked into his life. And Walker had no doubt that this time around he was going to be a great dad from day one.

"Yeah, it's actually pretty awesome, I will admit." She tucked her sleek hair behind her ear and kept chattering as she ate. He stayed quiet, letting her talk, enjoying the conversation and her company. When he'd first moved them to Crimson Point she'd hated it here. Seeing her this happy was everything. She seemed happier than he'd seen her since Jillian died.

This, he thought with sudden clarity. This was why he'd chosen to walk away from his government intelligence work. As soon as they'd received Jillian's diagnosis, he'd quit and walked away for good.

Well, until now.

Shae paused, studying him. "Can I ask you something?" She sounded uncharacteristically hesitant.

"Of course. You can ask me anything." And he'd give her a straight answer as long as it didn't break security protocol.

"Do you ever regret it? Leaving your job for Mom and I."

"Never. Not one single day."

She blinked at his adamant tone. "Really? I know you miss it sometimes."

"No. Really. Zero regrets about that." The few regrets he did have were related to past failures in his career. Namely Fornam. Never with Jillian and Shae, or his decision to uproot her and move them here for his new job with Crimson Point Security. That change had been good for them both.

"When do you think you'll be back from the UK?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe a week or so, just depends on how things go."

"Oh." She visibly relaxed, her shoulders easing. "That's good then."

He didn't want her worrying about him. Ever. "It shouldn't take too long. I—"

"You don't need to explain, Dad. I'll be fine. Just promise me you'll be careful."

“I won’t be in any danger, sweetheart,” he said with a smile. God, he loved her. Had never known he could feel a love this deep until she’d and Jillian had turned his world on its head. He just wanted Shae to be happy. “How’s Finn?” he asked casually.

She stilled, fork poised partway to her mouth, and flushed. “He’s fine,” she said, and didn’t elaborate.

Walker hid a smile and let it go. He wouldn’t pry, but the people-reading skills he’d honed over the years told him there was definitely something more than friendship brewing between her and his boss’s stepson. Finn was a good kid. Walker liked him and was curious to see how this would play out.

But first he had unfinished business to attend to in London—and it included uncovering some of Ivy’s secrets.

End Excerpt

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NY Times and USA Today Bestselling author Kaylea Cross writes edge-of-your-seat military romantic suspense. Her work has won many awards, including the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence, and has been nominated multiple times for the National Readers' Choice Awards. A Registered Massage Therapist by trade, Kaylea is also an avid gardener, artist, Civil War buff, Special Ops aficionado, belly dance enthusiast and former nationally-carded softball pitcher. She lives in Vancouver, BC with her husband and family.

You can visit Kaylea at www.kayleacross.com. If you would like to be notified of future releases, please join her [newsletter](#).

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