



**SHADOW OPS  
TEAM**

**FORD**

*USA Today Bestselling Author*

**Makenna  
Jameison**

Ford

SHADOW OPS TEAM



Makenna Jameison

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# Table of Contents

[About this Book](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

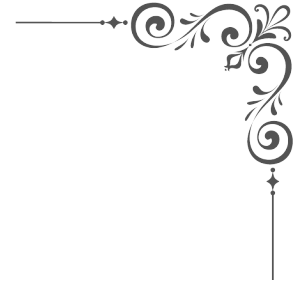
[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books by Makenna Jameison](#)

[About the Author](#)



## About this Book

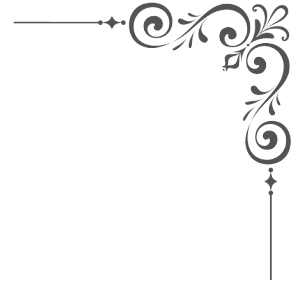
### **HE CAN'T HAVE HER, but he'd die to protect her...**

Former Special Forces soldier Ford Anderson knows the sweet, single mom working at Shadow Security wouldn't look twice at a man like him. She's all that's good in the world, a sharp contrast to his lethal career and hardened ways. Her soft laugh and shy eyes draw his attention, but he watches her only from afar.

Clara Robinson suspects something is amiss at Shadow Security. The late nights and secret meetings indicate the men she works for are more than meets the eye. When she has car trouble one night, she doesn't expect the gruff and reserved Ford to come to her aid. She's far too aware of his broad shoulders and muscular frame, but she knows he'd never be interested in her.

Her car problems on the secluded road are only the start of her troubles. Enemies of Shadow Security have the petite brunette as their next target, and Ford vows to end any man who harms her. Can he convince Clara to give him a chance along the way?

**Ford, a standalone novel, is book two in the Shadow Ops Team series.**





FORD ANDERSON NODDED to the bartender and then tipped back his malt scotch, letting the amber liquid burn down his throat. A rock song thumped over the speakers, and his gaze swept the crowded bar as he forced himself to remain seated. His teammates were working the room together, tracking their target. He was simply keeping watch. Quiet. Unobtrusive. For a large man, he managed to blend in when he wanted. He'd been sitting so still, the people around him finally quit attempting to engage him in conversation, which was damn fine by him. He didn't do small talk, and besides, he was here for a job.

Ford lifted his hand to his earpiece. "Did they find her?" Shadow Ops Team leader Jett Hutchinson asked, his deep voice calm despite the urgency of the matter.

Ford shifted his arm, speaking into his mic. "Roger. We're ready to exit in five."

Another voice came over his earpiece. "I'm outside with the engine running," Nick Dowd said coolly. "Black SUV by the entrance to the alley. The convertible you came in is parked down the street. We'll retrieve it later."

"Roger that," Ford said. "Sam just signaled me. They're ready to roll." Ford watched his teammates move toward the woman. Although they were both wearing mics, neither wanted to tip off their target. Not that she seemed to notice much aside from their muscles, he thought with a smirk.

"Update me when it's done," Jett said. "Over."

A new song came over the speakers, and Ford felt his pulse pound. His teammate Luke Willard grinned at the brunette they'd marked, his blue eyes sparking with interest. Ford had to admit she was beautiful, although a tad too assertive for his tastes. She was practically pawing at Luke's chest, her breasts almost spilling out of the low-cut top she wore. The mini skirt she had on left little to the imagination, and plenty of heads had swiveled her way earlier as she'd sashayed through the crowd.

Sam Jackson moved in behind her, and as she accidentally bumped into him as she stepped back, her flirtatious laughter filled the air.

Sam smiled, his arm snaking around her waist. Anastasia didn't seem to mind the attention of both men, leaning back into Sam's embrace. She'd be in for the shock of her life when they escorted her outside the Boston bar and into the waiting SUV. Then she'd be whisked out of the country on a small

plane, interrogated by Federal agents once she was offshore. Anastasia Petrov, a damn Russian spy, was plotting an attack on Boston and hadn't seemed to realize she'd been watched for weeks. Under constant surveillance. The Feds didn't think she'd cooperate if picked up by them, so they planned to scare her a little and question her off U.S. soil.

This op was quite different than their Army days. Shadow Security worked off the books much of the time, taking jobs the government couldn't. Although they did provide security detail to government officials upon occasion, the Shadow Ops Team ran black ops around the globe. They consisted of the best—former Special Forces soldiers who knew how to get things done.

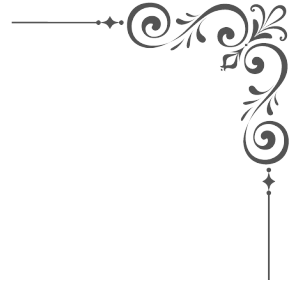
Ford peeled a fifty out of his wallet, leaving it on the bar. Fucking shame he couldn't order another round. That was some damn good whiskey. He smirked as he rose, wondering if Jett would go over the receipts for the night. Ford was happy to play the part.

His gaze flicked toward the back door, watching as both Sam and Luke escorted Anastasia out, her body sandwiched between them. Pity such a beautiful woman had so much evil lurking within.

He moved toward the back, following his teammates.

It was go time.







FORD CLOSED THE DOOR to his large, black truck and crossed the parking lot Monday morning, the winter sun strong on his face. The warmth felt good. He'd never been one for cold weather, preferring sunny skies and sandy beaches. Not that he had either of those in Upstate New York. He'd gone wherever the Army sent him over the years, finally ending up here when he'd left the service, part of the covert Shadow Ops Team. The pay was fantastic, he worked with his former teammates, and he went on missions without the bureaucracy that life in the military had demanded.

Life was fucking good.

Ford rolled his shoulders, moving across the asphalt. No doubt Jett would brief them on Anastasia and what had gone down once the government had taken her into custody. The last he'd seen, she'd been trying to talk Luke and Sam into a threesome before they'd helped her into the waiting SUV. She was already inside the vehicle before she'd shouted and tried to punch Sam in the nuts, realizing what was happening. They wouldn't hurt her, but damn. She wouldn't be happy when they handed her straight to the Feds in handcuffs.

Ford shook his head. Another job done.

A petite woman caught his eye as he got closer to the large, headquarters building of Shadow Security, and he swallowed, slowing his step. He needed to steer clear of the pretty receptionist.

If he was honest with himself, he didn't mind watching her from afar. Clara was gorgeous, with long, dark hair and fair skin. She also had the brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Ford had noticed her the moment she'd been brought onboard months ago. Jett had ordered his men to stay away from her, not that Ford had planned on asking her out. He wasn't about to have a one-night-stand either. His wilder days were behind him, and being alone suited Ford just fine.

Clara was too good for a man like him anyway. Sweet. Innocent. She was also a single mom, and he wouldn't know what to do with a kid if he had one. Ford had been raised in foster care, without anyone in his corner. He'd managed to get out without too many bumps and bruises because of his size. When he'd aged out of the system, the Army had been the best damn thing that had ever happened to him.

He took another step, watching Clara's hips sway in her skirt. Whereas Anastasia had been trying too hard the other night, showing off her sexy body

to every man in the bar, there was something to be said about leaving certain things to the imagination. Clara's clothing might be more conservative, but it perfectly hugged her curves. He didn't want to ogle her, but hell. She was pretty as hell.

She hadn't heard him walking behind her, which made him frown. They were in a secure area, but still. She was a beautiful woman walking by herself. She was also wearing a wool coat that looked too thin for the elements. Ford had on an insulated, waterproof jacket. A wool hat. Plus, he was big. She was so small it looked like a strong wind might knock her over.

Clara shifted her bags just then, shuddering in the cold. He saw her wince as the box of donuts she'd been carrying fell to the ground. It popped open but landed upright, with none falling out onto the sidewalk.

Ford hustled over, calling out, "I got it!" His deep voice made her jump in surprise, and he slowed his pace as he approached. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

She flushed as she looked up at him, the pink in her cheeks intriguing as hell. It could've been from the cold, but he got the sense it was because of him. He was a gruff, no-nonsense type of man, but something about her sweetness appealed to him. She'd always seemed to shy away when he was near. He'd never said much, just hello as he came through the front doors every morning.

Usually, her smile was the brightest part of his day.

A long-forgotten part of him wanted to wrap Clara up in his arms and protect her. Shield her from the world. His baser instincts made him want to take her to bed and see if that pretty flush spread everywhere as he ran his hands over that soft skin, exploring her gorgeous body. Not that anything would happen between them. Jett had told his guys to keep away from her, and hell. She was out of his league anyway.

"It's fine. I should've been paying more attention. I just dropped my daughter off at daycare and have a million things on my mind."

He agreed she should be more aware of her surroundings but didn't comment, instead reaching down to grab the box. "No harm done," he quipped. "Why don't I carry them inside," he suggested, noticing she still was juggling her tote bag, purse, and keys. Her hands were slightly red from the cold, and he had the inexplicable urge to take them in his own to warm them up.

Ford stilled, making sure not to touch her.

“Thank you,” she said, not seeming to notice the stiffness of his posture. She looked rather flustered, almost dropping her keys as she got out her ID badge. “I thought I’d surprise everyone since Anna is officially starting today. Jett told me she had a sweet tooth.”

He resisted the urge to laugh. Anna was a firecracker. Everyone had been shocked as shit when their boss brought a woman home for the weekend a month ago—and she never left. Now Jett and Anna were engaged, and she was the newest employee of Shadow Security. He’d never thought Jett would be the type of man to settle down, but he’d been proven wrong. When he met her, it had been game over.

Wonders never ceased.

“No one around here will complain about donuts. That was nice of you to bring them in.”

Ford held up his badge to the sensor and opened the door, nodding for Clara to go ahead. She moved past him, barely coming up to his shoulder, and he got a whiff of warm caramel as she walked by. It was sweet. Enticing. Had she always smelled like a damn confection? It wasn’t the donuts. He’d shut the box and got a hint of her perfume or lotion as she inadvertently brushed past him. Vanilla, he realized. But nothing too cloying. It was just damn...appealing.

He gripped the box of donuts more tightly than he needed to and followed Clara into the reception area, his eyes on her hips again. Shit. He didn’t need to stare at the woman any more than he already had.

The door snicked shut behind him, and he relaxed a fraction. Although no one could enter Shadow Security property without accessing the front gate, he always took note of his surroundings. Life in the Special Forces had made him constantly alert. Aware.

Right now, all of his senses focused again on the woman in front of him. She set her bags down and took off her coat. The soft sweater she had on hugged her full breasts, and he looked away. Hell would freeze over before he made her uncomfortable by staring. Maybe part of her intrigue was that he knew he could never have her. That didn’t stop the way his blood heated when she was near.

“Just put those anywhere,” she said.

He set the box down on the front desk and shook his head. “Damn. I can’t believe the boss is bringing his woman onboard.”

Clara smiled shyly at him. “Me either, to be honest. I finally met her last week. She’s...something else.”

He chuckled. Ford had spent time with Anna in Seattle. She’d tagged along on a trip with Jett and ended up in the middle of a botched op. She was blonde, beautiful, and feisty as hell. A woman like her would drive him crazy, but Jett didn’t seem to mind the way she kept him on his toes. Anna was a woman who knew what she wanted and wasn’t afraid to say it. Whereas Clara had been kept in the dark as far as the black ops they conducted at Shadow Security, Anna would be brought into the fold. A niggle of worry crossed his mind, but he shoved it aside. There was no need to read Clara in to the dangerous work they conducted.

“Anna will bring a new energy to the place,” he said tactfully.

The laughter that filled the room made him smile. Hell. Clara’s entire face lit up when she laughed like that. Whereas she’d looked stressed moments ago, her countenance was relaxed now, her blue eyes shining. While he had no business standing here continuing to talk to her, he couldn’t make himself leave just yet. Not when the happiness she exuded warmed his entire chest.

“Well, that’s one way to put it. I’m supposed to train her this morning,” Clara admitted. “Jett’s assistant is going to answer the phones while I show Anna the ropes. I’m sure she’ll have a million questions.”

“A million and one knowing her,” he quipped. “She drives me crazy and doesn’t listen to a word I say but is good for Jett. That’s all that matters.”

“How long have you known him?” she asked.

“Jett? Years. All of us go way back from our time together in the service.” He cleared his throat, knowing he shouldn’t reveal too much. Ford pulled off his wool hat, absentmindedly running his hand over his short-cropped hair. He didn’t hate the way Clara’s eyes were on him.

Ford cleared his throat. “Need help with anything before I head in?” he asked, nodding toward the secure doors behind the receptionist’s desk.

“No, just tell the others I brought donuts if they’re in the back already.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he quipped.

“Don’t call me ma’am,” she protested. “That makes me think of my mother.” Her face was flushed again, and he had to force himself to remain where he was, not move any closer to her, because damn. She was cute as hell.

“Noted,” he said, his lips quirked. “Can I snag one of those before I go?”

“Oh, of course,” she said, looking flustered again as she slid the box of donuts toward him. “I should’ve offered you one right away.”

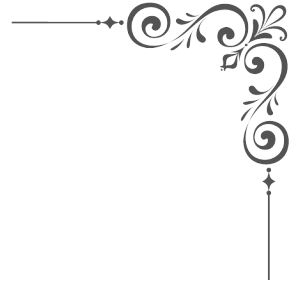
“It’s fine,” he said with a low chuckle. Damn. Ford wasn’t a man that laughed easily, but it felt natural with her. Something about the lightness that emanated from Clara made him feel more settled. Alive. He’d been with Anna in Seattle, protecting her, but their conversations were nothing like this. It didn’t have anything to do with the fact that Anna was Jett’s either. He was drawn to Clara in a way that surprised him.

She was a busy, single mom though and wouldn’t want a hardened man like him. Her gentleness was in sharp contrast to his life. They were the good guys, but that didn’t mean she’d understand his world.

Ford snagged a donut, nodding his thanks. “Don’t forget to save one for yourself,” he advised.

“Good call. They’ll be gone in no time, I’m sure.”

The front door opened as more people began to arrive, and he moved toward the doors heading to the secure area. They had to brief with Jett this morning about the Russian spy, Anna’s start date be damned. He swiped his badge again, heading into the secure area. Duty called, even though they weren’t enlisted men anymore.





CLARA LOOKED UP FROM her computer, watching Anna laugh with Jett's assistant for a moment. Lena was putting her phone into her designer purse, getting ready to leave. She was always coming and going, doing various tasks. Jett was a busy man. Clara couldn't even imagine what it would be like having someone available to run errands for her day in and day out. She was barely holding it together as a single mom, and he had an entire business to run.

Her gaze landed on the framed photo of Eloise that sat on her desk.

It had been worth it to move here six months ago, if only for her daughter. The pay was good. The benefits were great. Everyone seemed nice enough but rather busy. Her mind wandered for a moment as the other women continued talking. The fences surrounding the property of Shadow Security and areas of the building that required badges to access seemed...excessive. Did people needing bodyguards really require that much secrecy? The buff, former military men that worked here certainly were suited for protecting people, but she sensed an undercurrent of danger around them. Although she had access to some areas, she tended to stay out front. Whatever meetings were being held behind closed doors didn't pertain to her, and she got the sense that she wasn't supposed to know everything that was going on anyway.

"Oh stop, Lena!" Anna said with a laugh, brushing her blonde hair back. Bracelets jangled on her arm, and the layered necklaces she wore glinted in the sunlight. "You know you're irreplaceable. Jett probably wouldn't trust me with half of the things you do."

Lena murmured a response and flashed Anna a knowing look.

"You are a godsend, and you know it," Anna continued.

Inexplicably, Clara felt left out. The two women acted like they were in on a secret she knew nothing about. She was used to Lena knowing the details of Jett's life, but with Anna here, too, now she really felt like an outsider.

A rumble of low voices had her looking toward the doors. A group of men were coming out from the secure area, frowning. She spotted Ford in the back but quickly looked away. She certainly didn't need to be caught staring at the man. Jett's mood lightened as he spotted Anna, and he strode over to his fiancée, kissing her despite the fact they were surrounded by other people.



Then again, he owned Shadow Security. He could do what he wanted. He kissed Anna once more before handing something to his assistant as she left.

Jett was a little intimidating, although he'd gone out of his way to make sure Clara felt comfortable here. She understood perfectly well why clients would hire his team for protection. All of the guys who worked for Jett were former military. Big. Strong. They came in every morning, said hello, and passed by her to move on with their day. Jett sometimes stopped to chat a few minutes, but the others were never overly friendly.

Except for this morning.

She flushed, recalling Ford's help earlier. That was probably the most he'd ever spoken to her. He generally seemed to avoid Clara, whether because they had little in common or he just wasn't one for idle chatter. Still, there was something about the gruff man that drew her attention and made her feel safe. She was all too aware of him—his large hands, muscles, and brawn. He was always attuned to his surroundings—alert. He was quiet but self-assured, and she felt flustered anytime she was near him.

She knew the men who worked here trained extensively. There was an arsenal downstairs. A full gym. They'd frequently spar with one another during their training. What must Ford think of her, dropping a box of donuts while she juggled her other bags? They protected their clients from danger and were highly-trained by the military, and she'd fumbled with a small box just walking in from the parking lot.

Her gaze slid to the now-empty box in the trash can. At least they'd been appreciated.

"How's everything going this morning?" Jett asked as he walked over. Although he had on a polo shirt and khakis, they did little to conceal his strength. He was slightly older than the men who worked for him but still in good shape, with dark, shortly cropped hair and piercing dark eyes. Jett was intimidating, to be sure, but always professional. "Hopefully Anna isn't causing too much trouble out here."

"Of course, I'm not!" Anna called out. She winked at Clara, who shook her head in amusement. Anna was entertaining, to say the least. Although she'd be working more closely with her husband and whatever went on behind closed doors, Clara would show her the basics.

"She's doing great," Clara said smoothly. "And it will be nice to have someone else who can run things out front if needed."

“I should’ve brought someone else on board sooner,” Jett admitted. “We’re growing, and it’s too much for one person to do alone.”

“That’s why I’m here!” Anna declared, walking over and throwing her arms around Jett. Some of the men off to the side chuckled in amusement as she kissed his cheek. Jett seemed nonplussed. Surely, he was used to Anna’s exuberance. “And Clara, I feel so bad,” Anna continued. “I didn’t even know a thing about your daughter until today. She sounds adorable.”

“She’s spirited, that’s for sure,” Clara admitted.

“How old is she now?” Jett asked. Anna was still plastered to his side, but his focus was on Clara. He was intense, but she appreciated that he didn’t get distracted. Jett was the type of man who paid attention when he spoke to someone.

“She just turned five, so she’s still in daycare. Next year, she’ll be starting Kindergarten. I can hardly believe it.”

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be asking for kid advice soon,” Anna said in a hushed voice, her eyes twinkling.

Clara looked between the two of them, understanding suddenly dawning. “Wait—you’re—”

“Pregnant? Yep,” Anna said with a giggle. “I mean, maybe it’s not the best timing since I just started a new job, but I am sleeping with the boss.”

“Anna,” Jett muttered.

Anna glanced over at the men talking off to the side and then confided in Clara. “We haven’t announced it to everyone yet.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say anything,” she assured the other woman.

“I know. Us girls have to stick together, right? Of course, now Jett is going to be even more protective and insistent that I stay in the office and out of trouble.”

“I want you safe. That’s understandable,” he said firmly.

“Well, Seattle sounded like an adventure,” Clara hedged. She didn’t know much about Jett’s trip aside from the fact that things had gone sideways. And Ford had been there, somehow involved in protecting Anna. She almost didn’t know what to make of that. The man was more than capable, but she was used to seeing him in the office, doing routine things. Clara couldn’t even imagine what it looked like when they were on duty, protecting their clients. Did he carry a gun? Weapons?

She resisted the urge to shudder.

“We’re heading downstairs to inventory some equipment, and then we have additional meetings this afternoon,” Jett said. “Don’t forget to take a break for lunch.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Anna said sweetly.

“I’ll always worry about you,” he countered.

Clara picked up the phone that began ringing, taking the call as Anna snuggled against Jett another moment. Clara grabbed a pen, jotting down some notes as she spoke with the caller. She couldn’t even imagine a relationship like theirs—having someone she could depend on. Even when she was with her ex, it felt like she was on her own. Alone.

They began moving toward a second set of doors that led to the basement, and she watched them as she listened to the woman on the phone. At the last moment, Ford glanced over. His dark eyes caught hers, and he nodded, not saying a word as he left.



FORD FOLLOWED HIS TEAMMATES down the stairs, their footsteps silent in the stairwell. The men had grown used to quietly moving undetected over the years, and old habits died hard. There was another conference room in the basement as well as a gun range, but the men would be checking their equipment and weapons. Ford needed to focus on the task at hand, not wonder what was going through Clara’s mind. She’d seen him watching her just now. Funny she hadn’t seemed to notice in the past, but he’d always been careful to keep his distance. The men had been in the reception area longer than usual today waiting for Jett. She and Anna were like night and day, but he much preferred the calm that Clara exuded to the impulsiveness that guided Anna’s every move.

“That update this morning was bullshit,” Luke said, falling in step beside him. Ford eyed his teammate, his mind shifting back to the task at hand.

“Yeah. I’m not too surprised. The Feds wanted Anastasia offshore because they knew she’d be uncooperative. They couldn’t really have thought she’d tell them everything about the planned terror attack the moment we delivered her to them.”

“I’m sure the FBI is pissed. This entire maneuver was meant to speed things along.”

Ford lifted a shoulder. “We completed our part of the assignment. Now she just needs to play nice.”

“No shit,” Sam said as he jogged down the stairs behind them. “She was mighty cooperative until we got her into the SUV.”

“Wonder what she wanted?” Ford asked mildly.

“Aside from fucking us?” Sam asked with a chuckle. Luke elbowed him as Sam continued. “She probably figured we were military. She was all over Luke until I came along. Then she wanted to take both of us back to her hotel.”

Nick snorted behind them. “And what—exchange sexual favors for intel? Damn. The whack-jobs we deal with now almost makes me miss our Army days.”

“Right. Nothing like getting shot at and nearly blown up in the Afghan desert to make you miss the old times,” Ford muttered.

“The chicks weren’t as crazy though,” Nick said. “Sure, they’d happily blow us up, but not demand to blow us first.”

Ford choked back his laughter as the other men howled around him. “God damn,” Sam said. “You call it like it is.”

Nick shrugged, a smirk playing about his lips. “I’ve always been a straight shooter. You know that.”

Jesus.

This was exactly why someone innocent like Clara didn’t need to know the extent of what went on here. Not that Ford or his buddies were out sleeping with women for secrets. They ran ops and did jobs the government didn’t want to touch. Still, Clara would no doubt be shocked at the very idea of half the shit they dealt with. Ford and his teammates were former Delta Force. They’d deployed on counterterrorism, hostage rescue, and reconnaissance missions. After their last op went south, with a soldier taken hostage, they’d gotten out of the military. The secretive life he led now suited him. Ford didn’t need fanfare or glory. He didn’t need the military brass standing in his way. Their mission was their country, the people they rescued, and the terrorists they stopped. He didn’t need to bring the pretty receptionist into the fray. Sure, he was drawn to her, but some things were better left alone.

Ford was already swiping his badge and pushing open the door to the armory as his buddies continued joking behind him. He could hear Jett talking with Gray Pierce, the newest Shadow Ops Team member, as they followed the others downstairs. The guys had shown him around, but their next op would be his first out of the military.

Ford's gaze swept the room. Kevlar vests, helmets, backpacks, and comms devices lined the shelves. Their weapons and ammo were in secure lockers.

"What supplies should we go through?" Sam asked as the men gathered inside.

Jett scrubbed a hand over his jaw as he sauntered in, nodding at Nick to close the door behind him. "Check the satellite phones and other gear suited for the jungle. We probably need to order more. Anna's going to help me track specialized equipment in the future. She doesn't know much about this business but is highly organized. I could use her help in managing the administrative side of things down here."

"She worked in finance before, right?" Luke asked.

Jett nodded. "She helped run an office in Manhattan. We're in a different line of work, but she's efficient and discrete. As you all know, I had to fill her in during the disaster that was Seattle."

"Is she doing okay?" Sam asked with a frown. "She looked happy just now, but she's obviously not used to dealing with the types of things that we do."

"She took it in stride, which bodes well for us. She'll be doing more and more here," he said firmly.

"Understood, boss," Luke said.

"And Clara?" Gray asked, crinkling his brow.

"She doesn't know," Ford said, his voice gruff. "She is under the impression we're strictly bodyguards for government officials. She knows nothing about the Shadow Ops Team."

"Got it," he replied.

"Which brings us full circle," Jett said. "Remember the dossier I picked up in Seattle from my contact? We're a go. Sam and Nick will be heading down to South America to assess the situation in a few days. The rest of the team will fly down if necessary but otherwise will be monitoring everything from here."

"We're getting the women," Sam said.

"Affirmative," Jett replied, his gaze sliding toward them. "I was planning to brief everyone this morning but got sidetracked with the Anastasia situation and my own Anna starting today."

Luke grinned. "She seemed happy to see you when we came out front."

Jett muttered under his breath. "Don't I know it."

Ford bit back his own laughter, already used to Anna's over-the-top behavior. Briefly, Ford wondered how she'd get on with Clara. The women seemed completely different. Hopefully Anna's outgoing personality wouldn't overshadow the quieter receptionist. Not that Clara was his to worry about. Briefly, he wondered what her story was. Jett had told them she was a single mom. Was she divorced? Was the guy in the picture at all?

He swiped a hand over his face. Wondering about her would get him nowhere.

"We'll do a full briefing this afternoon on South America," Jett continued, "but let's go through our supplies first. If we need additional equipment, we've got to move quickly for me to procure it."

Gray crossed his arms, letting out a low whistle as his gaze scanned the room. "I got the quick tour the other day, but holy fuck. You weren't kidding that you have everything here."

Jett's bark of laughter filled the room. "Now you realize why I wanted you to come on board. We do everything we did in the Army, without the chain of command and bureaucracy slowing us down. I have to admit all my contacts from over the years have come in handy though."

"I'll bet," Gray said.

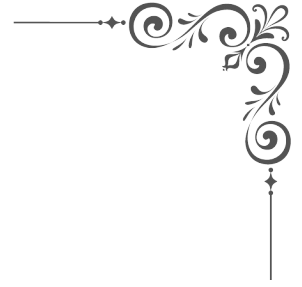
Ford eyed their teammate. Gray had bounced around at odd jobs over the past few years, dealing with his own nightmares. Their botched op that ended with Gray being held hostage was what led them all to leave the service. The military had left him there, insisting the rest of the team complete their mission. Three days of torture had changed their friend. He was harder now. Rougher. Ford knew Gray would be an asset to their team, but he wasn't the same man he'd once been.

"All right. Show me what to do," Gray said, his gaze landing back on their boss.

Jett walked over to talk with him, and the other men spread out, each heading to various sections of the room. Weapons and ammo were always carefully tracked, but the gear needed for different climates needed to be checked to ensure they had everything the mission required. A stint to Seattle was hardly the same as running an op in the jungle.

Ford scrubbed a hand over his jaw, wondering what Clara would make of all this. Had Jett even brought her downstairs? He doubted it. With Anna working for Shadow Security, however, things would be different. He

couldn't put his finger on it, but Ford had the inkling that something big was coming.







CLARA FROWNED AT THE darkening sky as the crisp, smoky air bit into her through her thin wool coat the following evening. She hurried across the parking lot and climbed into her old sedan, pulling the door shut behind her. In the driver's seat, she rubbed her hands together, wondering where she'd left her gloves. The past two days had been a whirlwind of activity and training with Anna starting, and she was eager to get home to her daughter.

She turned the key in the ignition, tensing for a moment before the vehicle finally came to life. She needed a new something or other. The mechanic had told her last week, and she had it written down on a slip of paper. She'd planned to call around and see who could complete the work for the lowest price. At the moment, however, her car was running. That was all that mattered.

Her phone buzzed, and she glanced down at the screen to see a text from her next-door-neighbor.

*I just fed Eloise dinner. She was fine with my picking her up from daycare. See you when you get here.*

Clara blew out a sigh and thumbed a response.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you!*

She'd have to somehow repay her neighbor for watching her daughter again. This was the second night she'd stayed late in a week. Although they didn't expect anything, the couple next door were empty-nesters who'd recently downsized to an apartment. Clara felt like she was constantly crashing into their peaceful life with her own slightly chaotic one.

Normally, she kept regular hours, but things had been busy recently. She couldn't complain. The least she could do was stay late the few times she was needed. Besides, the overtime pay didn't hurt. It would take time to get completely back on her feet, she thought with regret. Her ex had stolen ten thousand dollars from her before he'd split. She wanted to cry over all the ways she could've used her hard-earned money. Car repairs. Rent. Necessities for her daughter. Shoot, even a warmer coat for herself. Clara was building her savings again, stashing money aside in case of an emergency. If her car could just make it a little longer, maybe she could sleep more peacefully at night.

A man crossed the parking lot, glancing in her direction. From the distance, she wasn't sure who it was in the waning light. Still, Clara gave him a small nod in case he could see her before cranking up the heat. The building

and property were surrounded by a large fence and cameras. The nice thing about working late was that she always felt safe here. The only people around were those who were supposed to be.

Her phone began ringing, and she saw her neighbor Michelle's name on the screen. Clara frowned, sensing something was wrong. They'd texted just minutes ago. "Hi, is everything okay?" Clara asked. "Thank you so much for watching Eloise again tonight."

"Eloise just said that her stomach hurts. I don't mind watching her but wanted to touch base and see when you'd be home."

"I'm in my car right now, ready to leave. Want me to talk to her?"

"No, she's watching TV and resting on the couch. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Hopefully it's not a stomach bug. My kids were always catching those when they were little."

"Ugh, those are the worst. Thanks for letting me know. I'll be there in half an hour or less."

"No problem. Drive safely. She's okay here with us," Michelle assured her.

Clara blew out a breath after she said goodbye, frowning at the noise her car made as she backed out of the parking space. It had been giving her trouble starting lately, but was she imagining the way it slightly shook as she backed up? Muttering to herself, she drove across the parking lot toward the gates. There were no guards, but anyone who was supposed to be here had a remote in their vehicle to gain entry. After they passed through the first gate, there was a keypad where employees had to enter their pin. Anyone else arriving had to buzz the intercom.

She pulled onto the road that wound through the dense forest. The building was tucked away on a large parcel of wooded land. It was an hour north of New York City, and this job afforded her what she never could've found if she'd stayed in New Jersey. It was in a safe area. Peaceful, even. It paid well, and besides that, Eloise loved it here.

Her mind tracked over what she had tucked away in the medicine cabinet at home. If Eloise was getting sick, she might need to pick up some anti-nausea medicine. Crackers. Chicken broth or plain soup. She could do some work from home tomorrow if necessary but wouldn't be able to answer phones. Clara's car wobbled again, and she gripped the steering wheel more tightly. This definitely wasn't her imagination. She vaguely recalled thinking it drove different this morning, but whatever was wrong seemed worse now.

She continued for several minutes, going well below the speed limit as anxiety washed over her. Now she really would need a mechanic. Before, she'd assumed someone could jumpstart her car if necessary, but this was urgent. She couldn't drive Eloise around in a vehicle that was shaking like this.

Clara slowed at a curve in the road, her headlights shining on the trees in front of her. What had felt peaceful as she'd driven into work this morning now just seemed secluded. It would be completely dark soon, and she didn't want to be stranded. Pulling out from the curve, her car shook even worse than before, and she struggled to control it as she veered to the side of the road, coming to a stop at a sharp angle. Her palms were sweating and heart racing as she idled there, her foot still on the brake pedal. Clara quietly cursed as she realized she was holding the steering wheel in a death grip.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down as she shifted her car into park. She had her cell phone. She could call someone for help.

Clara jumped in her seat as headlights suddenly reflected off her rearview mirror. She chastised herself for being silly. No doubt it was probably someone she worked with. Who else would have driven all the way down this isolated road? She remained in her vehicle as a large truck came to a stop behind her. Clara clutched her cell phone in her hand, the edge of it biting into her skin. Better to be safe than sorry.

She double-checked to make sure her doors were locked and turned down the radio. A car door shut, and she saw the silhouette of a man walking toward her. The truck driver had left his headlights on for visibility.

Her pulse pounded as he got closer. She was safe. It was just someone she worked with. If not, well, her car was still on. She'd drive away and call 911, the shaking of her vehicle be damned.

A large man stopped a foot from her door and ducked slightly to glance through the window. "Are you okay?" a deep voice called out.

She cracked her window an inch, the cold air seeping in. "Something's wrong with my car," she said, hating the way her voice wobbled.

A flashlight from a cell phone came on, illuminating his face. "Clara? It's Ford. I just came around the corner and saw your car."

She momentarily froze in surprise before a sense of relief washed over her. It was almost like she felt her entire body slowly relaxing fraction by fraction, the tension seeping from her muscles. She hadn't realized just how scared she was until Ford had said it was him. Clara shut off her car and

opened the door, one foot landing on the hard ground. Ford's large hand was already reaching in to help her step out.

Shock coursed through her as his warm hand enveloped her own. She hadn't expected him to assist her at all. God knows her ex never acted chivalrously like that. But it was the touch of his skin against her own that truly threw her. She almost felt like she'd been zapped by an electric current.

"Damn. Your hands are cold," he muttered.

"I couldn't find my gloves."

He frowned, not seeming to like her response, but released her as she stood. Heat radiated off his large frame, even standing here in the cold. She was already shivering, and he looked unfazed by the weather. "You're having car trouble?" he asked, his assessing gaze looking over her sedan. He'd barely even glanced at her, not that that was a surprise. Ford was always polite but distant the other morning notwithstanding. She felt silly feeling any sort of attraction to this man.

"My car was making a weird noise when I backed out of the parking space but then started shaking almost uncontrollably at the turn back there." He nodded, aiming the light from his phone at her car as he walked around it. The sky had quickly become dark. The air felt colder than it had ten minutes ago, and she shivered. Dried leaves crunched under Ford's feet, and she couldn't even express how relieved she was that he'd stopped to help her. She'd been moments away from panicking, unsure what to do.

"Shoot. I need to text my neighbor," she suddenly remembered. "She's watching Eloise."

Clara pulled her phone from her pocket, her cold fingers swiping the screen as she sent Michelle a quick note.

Ford continued circling her car, then made a sound in the back of his throat and crouched down. She stood there awkwardly, wondering if she should offer to help—not that she knew what to do. Clara felt clueless and somewhat out of sorts. While some men might pretend to know what was wrong with her car and how to fix it, she had a feeling he actually might. The men who worked for Shadow Security seemed to know about all sorts of things she didn't.

Clara walked to the front of her vehicle, looking at him on the passenger side. He stood to his full height, then walked toward her. "Someone loosened the lug nuts on your wheel."

"What?"

“The hubcap is missing. Looks like someone was tampering with your vehicle, probably before you drove in this morning. We would’ve seen them on the surveillance cameras if it had happened at work, not that they could’ve accessed the compound. The lug nuts are so loose, the tire almost came off. That’s what was causing your car to shake. It’s flat now, too.”

“But...how could that happen? The hubcap wouldn’t just fall off.”

“That’s unlikely. Even if it did, you’d need a lug wrench to loosen the lug nuts. It looks like this was intentional—either random vandalism or someone targeted you.”

“Someone did this to me on purpose?” she asked, bewilderment coursing through her. She looked down at her car in surprise as Ford aimed the flashlight toward the wheel. Sure enough, the hubcap was gone. The tire itself now looked damaged beyond repair.

“Have you gotten any threats lately?” he asked, looking down at her with a frown.

“Well, no. I can’t even imagine who would do this. I’ve got...well....” She trailed off, suddenly feeling embarrassed. Ford was former Special Forces. She felt a little foolish letting her ex get away with stealing money from her. Not many people would even try to cross a man like Ford. What would he think of her not pressing charges against her ex, just leaving with her daughter to move on with her life?

“What is it?” he asked gently.

Clara cleared her throat. “My ex is in New Jersey, or he used to be. We broke up a year ago. He signed over his parental rights.”

“What a dick,” Ford said.

She huffed out a laugh despite herself. “It’s better that I don’t have to deal with him. He wasn’t too involved in raising Eloise. When we were close to breaking up for the second time, he stole a lot of money from me.” She shivered again in the cold, suddenly feeling even more foolish.

Ford looked irritated, but not at her. It felt good knowing he was mad on her behalf. His face softened as she shuddered again. “You’re freezing. Why don’t you come sit in my truck while I change the tire for you. I left it running, and the heat is still on. You can tell me more about this ex of yours and if you think he’d target you for any reason.”

Feeling numb, Clara nodded and let Ford guide her toward his truck. She wasn’t even sure why he was helping her aside from the fact that he was just a good guy. He opened the passenger door and took her arm, helping her up.

It was high off the ground but effortless for a big guy like him. She caught a whiff of his faint woody scent as he shifted. She hadn't noticed it before, but she'd never been this close to him either. His gaze locked with hers. "I'll come around and sit here a minute while you explain everything. Then I'll change the tire," he said, cocking his head toward her car.

"Okay."

He shut the truck door for her. As he rounded his vehicle, she realized again how relieved she was that Ford was here. Not a single other car had come by. Even if she'd called for help, she'd probably still be here waiting and all alone.

Her phone buzzed, and she saw a text from Michelle.

*Oh no! Glad your coworker is there. Eloise might have a fever. She's still resting.*

Clara let out a breath. She needed to deal with her car at the moment, but at least her daughter was safe. She'd handle whatever else was going on later.

"Everything okay?" Ford asked as he climbed in. She was still clutching onto her phone.

"Oh. Yeah. My neighbor is watching my daughter since I worked a little later than usual. Eloise might be sick though. Anyway," she said, shaking her head. "You don't want to hear about that." She looked across the cab of his truck, realizing how big Ford was. His broad shoulders filled out his jacket. With it unzipped, she could see the wide expanse of his chest beneath. Sure, he had a shirt on, but it didn't conceal his muscles and strength. She wasn't scared of him though. If anything, he made her feel safe. She didn't know him very well at all, but he was a familiar face. All of the men who worked at Shadow Security seemed scarily capable. They rolled with the punches, so to speak. She wasn't even sure where they went most of the time, but they took their assignments and were in and out, off protecting others. Her ex would get stressed and frazzled over every little thing. Being around the men here was a refreshing change.

"How old's your daughter?" he asked.

Clara blinked, looking at him in surprise. "She just turned five."

"I don't know much about kids," he admitted. "I grew up in foster care, bouncing around between homes."

It was the most he'd ever told her about himself, and it took her a moment to respond. It felt strangely intimate to be sitting here together in the cab of his truck. Clara was under the impression he didn't talk about himself much.

He'd certainly never said more than a few words to her. "Wow, I'm sorry. I'm sure that was hard moving around all the time."

Ford lifted a shoulder. "Yes and no. It made moving around in the Army a hell of a lot easier. I was used to not having any roots."

"It was just you? No siblings or anything?"

He shook his head. "Just me. I don't actually remember my parents too much. There were other foster kids, but I got shuffled from place to place a lot. What about you? Do you have any family?"

"No. I'm an only child, and my parents were older. They had me later in life but were in a car accident before Eloise was born—killed instantly."

"I'm sorry," he murmured, his deep voice seeping inside her. She understood the look in his eyes. It wasn't fake sympathy; Ford actually knew what it was like to be without family. She wondered what had happened to his own parents but couldn't bring herself to ask.

She looked away for a moment before meeting his intense gaze again. "Now it's just Eloise and me."

"And your ex," he pointed out.

"Right. I said I'd tell you about that situation. So, we weren't living together or anything when Eloise was born. He was around some of the time, but we broke up. We eventually got back together, and things were good for a while. He moved in to my apartment, and we were both working. He had a gambling problem. Even though we weren't married, I added him to my bank account. It was stupid."

"So what happened?" Ford asked. He'd tensed slightly, and she knew he'd already figured out the answer.

"He wiped it clean. Took everything when I was at work one day and moved out. I should've gone to the police or something. I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered. He was on the account, too, so...." She wrung her hands together, taking a breath. "He agreed to sign away his parental rights if I didn't go after him for taking the money. It sucked big time, and I really struggled to make ends meet until I moved here."

Her eyes watered, and Ford shifted his hand slightly, almost like he wanted to reach out and touch her.

"It's probably better this way. Eloise doesn't need a man like him in her life."

"Does he know you're here?"

“No. I didn’t tell him I was moving. It wasn’t a secret though. I told my old neighbors and Eloise’s daycare.”

“So, it wouldn’t have been hard for him to find out where you are.”

“Not at all.”

Ford looked thoughtful. “I’ll get his name from you later on. Maybe I can do a little digging. In the meantime, I know you’ve got your daughter to get home to. Why don’t I go ahead and change your tire. You’ve got a spare?”

“Just the donut tire or whatever it’s called.”

“That should get you home just fine. I’ll give you my cell number in case you have trouble. Actually, I’ll follow you just to make sure.”

“Oh, you don’t have to—” She cut off as he leveled her with a look. Of course he wasn’t the type of man who’d let her go off alone and potentially get stranded on the side of the road again. Ford and his teammates solved problems. Protected people. She was flattered that he was concerned about her, but that was also just his personality. It was engrained in the Shadow Security guys to watch out for others.

Ford cleared his throat. “Now, if it isn’t your ex that’s causing problems, then that’s an entirely separate issue we’ll need to look into. Do you have a security camera at your place?”

“Well, no, but I’m in an apartment complex. I don’t have a doorbell camera or anything, but the complex itself has surveillance. I know there are cameras in the parking lot.”

“Good. We might need to talk with them.”

“We?”

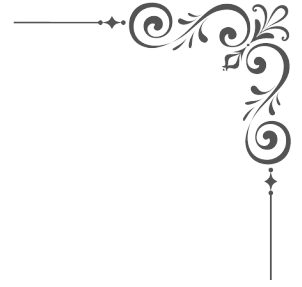
“If you think I’m going to ignore the fact that someone intentionally tampered with your vehicle, causing you to lose control of your car, then you’re mistaken.” Heat flooded her cheeks, but a warmth filled her as well. “We’ll figure this out, Clara. I’ll get you back on the road tonight, but this isn’t over. I want to get to the bottom of this. Are we good?”

He was waiting for a response, and she swallowed. Ford was an intense man but not in a negative way. He was moving forward with fixing the problem—easy as that. Even if just in this one aspect of her life, she wasn’t alone. At least not for the moment. It felt good to know that he cared and would help her.

“We’re good,” she said softly. “I don’t know how to change a tire, but I can hold a flashlight or something.”



He watched her a moment, not saying anything. She'd love to know what exactly he was thinking as those dark eyes studied hers. "I've got some equipment in the back of my truck," he finally said. "I'll set up a light, change the tire, and get you on your way. Stay put," he ordered. "You can wait here while I take care of it." And then Ford was climbing out and closing the door, leaving her alone. His woodsy scent filled the air around her, and the first thought that came to mind was *safe*. She was safe with him.





FORD WALKED TO THE back of his truck, lowering the hatch as the cold air bit into his skin. He reached into the locked metal box, removing some of his own tools. He had a flashlight and jack. Flares. Lug wrench. Clara might have some supplies in her car's trunk, but he liked working with his own gear. Plus, he needed a moment to get his head on straight. She'd looked so damn sweet and vulnerable sitting there in the passenger seat of his truck, for a moment, it was almost like he couldn't fucking breathe.

He didn't know what specifically it was that drew him to her. She was petite. Beautiful. Smart and organized. She kept things running smoothly at the office and had a child to care for at home. Something about the pretty blush in her cheeks when she looked at him stirred his baser instincts. He wanted to both whisk her off somewhere safe to protect her and also kiss the hell out of her. It was quite the dichotomy. Running a hand over his short-cropped hair, he muttered to himself. Clara wasn't his to worry over, but that wouldn't stop him from doing just that. The fact that someone had messed with her car had his hackles rising. She didn't know half of what went down at Shadow Security, and he didn't like the idea that she was vulnerable or potentially a target.

Pulling his cellphone from his pocket, he texted Sam and Jett, knowing the two men were still in the office. His phone buzzed a few seconds later, with Jett's name flashing on the screen.

"Tell me what's going on," his boss demanded.

"Someone intentionally loosened the lug nuts on the wheel of Clara's car," Ford said in a low voice. "Clara said her car was shaking so much at the curve in the road, she couldn't control it. Luckily, she was able to pull to the side shortly before I came along. The wheel almost fell entirely off."

"God damn it," Jett muttered. "That doesn't sound accidental."

"It wasn't," Ford said. "I'm concerned she was targeted. She does have an ex, but he lives in Jersey. My hunch is that someone might know she works for you. They could've watched or followed her. God knows we've made all kinds of enemies over the years." His hand clenched into a fist as he spoke, and he was glad for the cover of night. Clara was still sitting in his truck, and he didn't want her to see how pissed off he was. The thought of someone targeting an innocent woman made him see red. What would've happened if she had gotten hurt or if someone other than him had come along? There were men who'd take advantage of a woman scared and alone in the dark.

“All right, but we need to cover all our bases. When I hired her, she did mention an ex-boyfriend of hers. I got the impression he wanted nothing to do with Clara or her daughter.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Clara said he stole money from her when they broke up. I got the feeling it wasn’t a small amount.”

“Hell. This was before she moved here?”

“Yep. I’ll get his name later on and do some digging. I don’t know. My gut says it’s not him. Running her off the road and intentionally harming her isn’t going to enable her to give him more money. How could she send him any if she was in the hospital? Besides, they’re not in contact with one another.”

Jett let out a curse. “We’ll check him out and look into other possibilities as well. We’ve run a lot of jobs lately, and we’ve no doubt pissed off a lot of people. Like we need another fucking problem around here.”

“I’ll handle it,” Ford told him.

“How is she?” Jett asked, sounding concerned. “It’s dark out, and she has a young daughter. I’m sure she was shaken up.”

“Yep. She was scared when I pulled up but is holding herself together pretty well. Apparently, the kid is sick, so Clara is worried about that as well. I’ll change her tire and make sure she gets home safe. I’m going to look into the ex tonight.”

“Appreciate it,” Jett said.

They ended the call, and Ford moved toward Clara’s car. Briefly, he wondered if she knew how to change a tire. He’d have to show her sometime just in case she ever had another emergency. The side of the road in the dark wasn’t exactly the ideal time to show her how to change a tire, however. Maybe one weekend he could stop by and run her through the basics.

Shaking his head, he opened her car door and popped the trunk. When he’d decided she was his to watch over, he wasn’t sure. He’d spent the past few months having minimal contact with the woman. If someone was after her though? All bets were off. Ford would make sure she was safe.

Fifteen minutes later, he was lowering the jack. Ford brushed himself off as he stood, gathering up his tools. The donut would get her home at any rate, not that he planned to let her drive there alone. Clara was already climbing out of his truck, and he cursed under his breath. “I would’ve helped you,” he said as she jumped down. The door slammed shut.

Watching her walk toward him in the dark shouldn't have been appealing, but something about the way his headlights silhouetted her body made him take notice. Even with her wool coat on, he could appreciate her womanly figure. She was petite but perfect, with curves exactly in the right places.

"I'm fine. I can't thank you enough for changing my tire," she said. She wasn't shaking from the cold like she'd been earlier, but she looked exhausted as she got closer. "How far is it safe to drive with this?"

Ford raised his eyebrows.

"I need to stop by the store. My neighbor texted again, and Eloise is sick. She has a fever and started throwing up. I just need to grab a few things since I'll have to be home with her tomorrow. Single mom life," she said with a shrug.

He looked at her in disbelief. Her child was sick, and she thought he'd leave her to fend for herself? "Tell me what you need," he said. "I'll follow you to your neighbor's. You can get your daughter, and I'll drop off some stuff for you."

She looked at him like he'd grown two heads. "You want to pick up some things for me? Why?"

Unable to stop himself, Ford burst into laughter. "Why the hell not? You need help. It'll take twenty minutes to grab whatever you need and swing by your house. I don't mind."

"But..." She trailed off, still looking at him in disbelief.

"But what?" he couldn't help but ask.

She shook her head, clearly trying to gather her thoughts. "My ex never did anything like that—Eloise's dad," she clarified, although he'd already figured out exactly who she was talking about. "When she was a baby, I was one hundred percent on my own. We were together then, but he did zero of the shopping or childcare. We didn't live together yet, but even when we did, he wasn't—never mind. I'm rambling, and it doesn't matter. I can't let you do that."

He lifted a shoulder. "I insist." Ford pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "Tell me your number. I'll shoot you a text, and then you can send me a quick list. I'll follow you back into town," he said, nodding toward the dark road. The entire time they'd been out here, not another car had come by. He was relieved as hell that he'd come along when he did. "You can get your daughter. I'll grab a few things and drop them off."

"Um..."

“Clara,” he said gently. “I already told you I grew up in foster care, without a mom or a dad. I’d have killed to have someone worry about me the way you do about your daughter. Let me do this.”

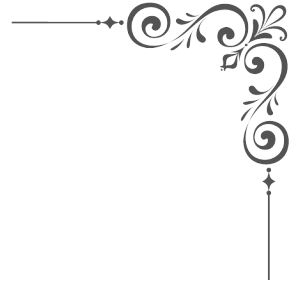
She looked momentarily startled but then slowly nodded, not protesting any further. “Okay. But I’ll pay you back for the favor—bring in donuts every day for a week or something.”

His lips quirked. “That’s not necessary. How about if you ever do bring them in again, I get first dibs. Those other guys are savages.”

She giggled, and the light sound made his chest swell. He put her contact info into his phone and then sent her a quick text. “Go on,” he said with a nod. “I’ll be right behind you. You can text me the list when we make it to your apartment complex.”

Clara smiled shyly but agreed. “Okay. Thank you, Ford.”

He shouldn’t have loved the sound of his name on her lips, but hell. Something about her voice saying it was appealing as hell. As was helping her. Ford couldn’t deny he wanted to keep her safe. She turned and walked toward her car, Ford not moving until she was safe inside of it. He had a feeling he was already in way too deep.





TWO DAYS LATER, CLARA sighed as she stood in her living room. She was still home caring for her sick daughter, and she'd been so distracted worrying about Eloise, she'd almost forgotten about her car troubles. Almost. Because she still needed to get a new tire and fix whatever other problems there were.

"Mommy, can I have some juice?" Eloise called out, looking up from the cartoon she was watching.

"Sure baby," Clara said, her hand landing on her daughter's forehead before she headed into the kitchen. Eloise was still warm, but at least her fever had broken overnight. Clara felt like a frazzled mess herself in sweatpants and a tank top, her hair up in a messy bun. Come to think of it, shouldn't she have been colder without a sweatshirt on? It was winter.

She walked barefoot into the kitchen and pulled open the fridge door to grab a juice box, swaying slightly on her feet. "Damn it," she whispered. She'd been taking care of Eloise for two days, so of course she'd catch whatever virus it was as well. She grabbed a bottled water for herself, twisting off the cap and downing the contents. Maybe drinking enough water would stave off whatever virus it was.

"Mommy, where's my juice? I'm hungry, too! Can I have a snack?"

"Yes! Just a minute, sweetie."

She opened the cupboard and grabbed a box of crackers. Had she eaten much herself today? Clara hadn't been too hungry earlier, only having a piece of toast at breakfast. No wonder she felt light-headed. She'd been stressed thinking about the other night, too. Although she'd given Ford her ex's name, she hadn't heard anything from him since then. Not that she expected to. She didn't doubt he'd look into it, but the men all had their own work to do and assignments. Clara's own problems weren't his concern or priority. He'd let her know if he found out something, but it was what it was. She was used to fending for herself. As it was, he'd already done more than enough the other night, dropping off some medicine and groceries the evening he'd changed her tire.

Her cheeks heated as she recalled him showing up at her door after she'd gotten Eloise settled. Some women might want flowers, but she'd almost swooned over Ford standing there holding a plastic grocery bag.

Shaking her head, she looked around her kitchen. He'd done her a favor just to be nice. There was no need to act like it meant something more.



Clara carried some crackers and juice back into the living room, watching her phone buzz on the coffee table. She set the food down and grabbed her cell, swiping the screen. “Hello?” she said, not recognizing the number.

“Hi! It’s Anna. How are you feeling? Jett told me you were sick the past few days. Actually, no, he said your daughter was sick. I tried to pump Ford for information about how you were both doing, but he’s hopeless. How could the man not have checked up on you?”

Clara sank down onto the sofa, feeling bewildered. “Anna?”

“Yeah. I got your cell number from Jett.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, Lena and I have things covered here. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. The guys here didn’t know anything—typical, right?”

Her lips quirked slightly. No, none of the men at Shadow Security were really the touchy-feely type. Brawn and muscle? That they had. “I think I caught whatever Eloise has,” she admitted.

“Oh no. Do you need anything?”

“No. I’ll just rest up while Eloise gets better. Hopefully I won’t have it as bad as her and I’ll get over it quickly.” She shifted on the sofa, suddenly feeling slightly nauseous. She definitely shouldn’t have drunk all that cold water at once.

“Ford told me a little bit about what happened with your car the other night. That must’ve been terrifying.”

“Yeah, it was. I had no idea what was going on. Thankfully, Eloise was at my neighbor’s house. I probably would’ve panicked even more if she’d been with me.”

“Oh yeah, I totally get it. I’m hopeless with stuff like that. Jett’s really the practical one,” she said with a laugh. “But I was also calling because Ford asked if you got a new tire for your car yet.”

Clara blinked, surprise washing over her. Of course, he’d ask something like that. He was practical just like Jett. Briefly, she wondered why he hadn’t just texted himself. Maybe he didn’t want to bother her? Clara shifted on the sofa, still feeling queasy. Her daughter’s cartoon was playing in the background, and she was so engrossed in it, she hadn’t had the crackers or juice box yet. “No, not yet,” she said. “I’ve been home taking care of Eloise. I’ll have to figure something out.”

Anna’s voice was muffled on the other end of the line, then got louder. “Yeah, I figured you didn’t have a chance to get a new tire yet. How could

you with a sick kid at home? Anyway, don't worry about it. I'll have one of the guys come by."

"What? No, I can—"

"No way. You're sick, and Ford's pacing around here like a caged animal. I told him just to call you already."

Clara heard Ford muttering in the background, surprise washing over her. He'd been worried? He'd been concerned the other night when she'd been stuck on the side of the road, but that was different. Being stranded on the side of the road at night wasn't the same as being safe at home. She assumed his help the other evening was the end of it. Anna was still talking, and suddenly Clara broke out in a cold sweat. "Shoot. Anna? I think I'm going to be sick. I've got to go."

Ending the call, Clara ran to the bathroom. Eloise was calling out to her, but she couldn't even answer. She gripped the sink, splashing cold water on her face before rinsing her mouth out. Yuck. A couple of minutes later, after she was feeling slightly steadier, she came back out.

"Eloise?" she croaked.

"What Mommy?"

"I'm going to lie down in my bedroom a couple of minutes. Come get me if you need something."

"Okay, Mommy!"

She felt worse as she walked down the hall, but if she could just rest for a minute, she'd get her second wind. Maybe then the room wouldn't feel like it was spinning. Luckily, her daughter wasn't a toddler. She could eat her crackers and watch the cartoon without Clara worrying too much.

Her entire body felt weak as she gingerly laid down in her bed. Too late, she realized she should've grabbed a bucket or trash can in case she was sick again. At the moment, she was too tired to care. Clara closed her eyes, the sweet relief of sleep washing over her.



FORD BRISTLED AS ANNA ended the call, setting her cell phone on the desk. She always did what she wanted, consequences be damned. He'd asked if she'd spoken to Clara, but he hadn't thought she'd call her right then and there. Anna could tell she'd rattled him, which just made it that much more irritating. "I could've called her myself," he muttered.

“But you didn’t,” she said sweetly. “And you’ve asked about her a couple of days in a row. I’m just moving things along.”

He bit back a curse. “I just wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“She caught whatever Eloise has—some stomach bug. We were talking, and she had to quickly end the call.”

“Shit. Is her daughter better at least?”

Anna shrugged. “I think. I doubt she’ll be in tomorrow if she caught it though. Maybe I should drop off some food later. If she’s sick, she won’t be able to cook dinner. I doubt she’d want to eat much with a stomach bug.”

“And she still needs new tires.”

“I thought only one was flat?”

“You can’t replace only one tire. She’ll need at least two. Maybe all four. The treads looked rather worn down, not that I got a great look at her tires in the dark.”

“Well, I don’t know much about all that, to be honest. I lived in Manhattan, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

“Oh, don’t be grumpy about Seattle.”

“Grumpy? You were kidnapped because you wouldn’t listen to Jett or me. Mistakes like that can cost lives, Anna.”

“What’s done is done,” Anna said smoothly, brushing her long blonde hair back. She had on a lot of makeup, and once again, Ford noticed how he preferred Clara’s more laid-back looks and personality. She was naturally pretty, not that he had any business of thinking about her like that. “I’m going to order some food and have it sent over,” Anna continued. “She told me she didn’t need anything, but—”

“There’s no need,” Ford interrupted. “I’m going to stop by there. I need to go speak with the rental office at her apartment complex about the surveillance cameras in the parking lot. I called the other day, but they still haven’t given me the footage. We’re wasting time on this.”

Anna grew serious. “You really think someone intentionally tampered with her car?”

Ford nodded. “Something like that isn’t an accident. Loosening the lug nuts takes a little time and knowledge. Normally, I’d expect some dumb prank to involve slashed tires or broken windows. Spray paint.”

“This wasn’t vandalism.”

“I doubt it. If she was targeted, we might want to involve the police. Not that we’re not capable of handling things on our own,” he added darkly.

Anna visibly shuddered. Good. It was about time she began to take the work they did here seriously. She’d seen firsthand the dangerous people the Shadow Ops Team dealt with when she’d been kidnapped. Worry churned through him regarding Clara. It had killed him not to text her the past few days just to check on her, but he didn’t want to give anyone the wrong idea—especially her. Ford was the type of man better off alone. He’d steered clear of her for this long and couldn’t change course now.

The tampering with her vehicle, however? That wasn’t something he could ignore. Ford just needed to make sure she was safe. If he saw her today because of it, so be it. He’d take care of matters and then move on with other business. There were no shortages of ops to run. Before long, things at the office would be back to normal. He’d say hello to Clara when he walked in every morning and just...ignore the warmth and goodness that radiated from her.

Jett strode into the reception area just then, looking irritated.

“What’s wrong, boss?” Ford asked.

“I just heard from Sam. Their flight down to South America was delayed in Dallas. That’s what we get for flying commercial.”

Ford snorted. Although they did charter flights from time to time, it was expensive. The team tended to fly commercial when they could. It’s not like they could use military planes anymore—not when all of the men were vets, no longer active duty. It was one downside to the way they ran things now—not that he’d change a fucking thing.

“They’ll get there,” Ford said unnecessarily. “I’m heading over to Clara’s place. They still haven’t gotten back to me on the surveillance footage from the other night.”

“And the ex is still in New Jersey,” Jett said.

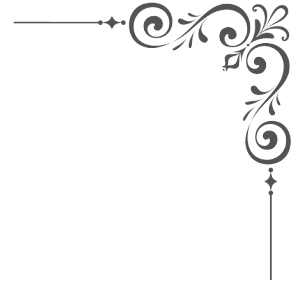
“I don’t think it was him,” Ford said simply.

“Understood. Get what you need to from them. If the rental office isn’t cooperative, I’ll have the IT guys work their magic. One way or another, we’re getting to the bottom of this. I don’t like the idea that one of our own was targeted. I want to know who was prowling around the parking lot by Clara’s vehicle.”

“I’ll get the footage,” he said, his voice hard.

Jett's gaze met Ford's, and he nodded. Without even saying goodbye, Ford moved toward the front door. He was itching to speak with Clara. He'd text her when he got to his truck, letting her know he'd stop by. What he'd do about her tires, he wasn't sure. He could run the car into the shop himself if she gave him her keys. Ford had a feeling she wouldn't like that. She was on the quiet side but always seemed independent. If she was sick, though, there wasn't much she could do about it. She'd need a working vehicle.

The cold air blasted him as he got outside, and he remembered the thin wool coat she had on the other day. Hopefully her daughter had something warmer than that. If her ex had stolen money from her, maybe she didn't have much extra. He'd buy the damn tires himself if it meant she had a safe vehicle to use. Hell. Climbing into his truck, he pulled the door shut harder than he'd intended. The entire incident pissed him off. He was already feeling better, however, knowing he'd see her soon. Just having eyes on Clara, brief as it was, would make him feel better. She was like sunshine to his storm mood. He'd take care of things this afternoon. And after that? Things would have to go back to normal.





THE KNOCKING ON CLARA'S front door jarred her out of a deep sleep. Blinking, she looked at the alarm clock on her nightstand. Four p.m. Had she really fallen asleep for over an hour?

Eloise.

Pushing herself up, Clara sat on the bed for a moment, realizing she was still feeling lightheaded. At least the worst of the nausea had subsided. Maybe she wouldn't have it as bad as her daughter. Rubbing her eyes, she stood up and shivered. Had she taken any medicine earlier to reduce her fever? She didn't think so. Quickly grabbing a soft cardigan, she pulled it on over her tank top. She walked down the hallway and let out a sigh of relief as she spotted Eloise asleep on the sofa. Poor sweetie. She didn't nap much at all these days but had been while she was sick. At least she'd had the crackers and juice.

Her phone buzzed on the coffee table, right where she'd left it earlier. Shocked, she saw several messages from Ford.

*I'm heading over to your apartment complex to check on the surveillance footage.*

*All finished up. Are you home?*

*I'm at your front door.*

She heard knocking again, her gaze moving toward the television. No doubt he heard the TV and realized she was at home. Plus, he knew what her car looked like. He knew her daughter was sick, and they'd been staying home. Nervously running her hands over her rumpled clothes, she decided the hell with it. He'd see her looking like a disheveled mess, and that would be that. She wasn't going to date the man. They worked together. Maybe he saw something on the footage and she'd finally learn what had happened to her vehicle.

Crossing her apartment, Clara realized she was still barefoot. The purple polish on her toenails stood out against the cream carpet, and she pulled her cardigan more tightly around herself. A quick glance in the foyer mirror showed her face was flushed from her fever, her messy bun half falling out. She closed her eyes for a beat, then turned and peered through the peephole, seeing it was indeed Ford standing there.

She undid the chain and turned the knob, then froze for a moment as she opened the door, taking in his broad shoulders and muscular physique. He wasn't even wearing a coat today, just a hoodie over his clothes. And he was

tall. So damn tall. Wondering why she suddenly felt so nervous, Clara swallowed. She saw him every day. He seemed bigger than he had the other night, his biceps stretching the fabric of his hoodie, his jeans clinging to his muscular thighs.

Damn.

She'd never been much into muscles or the bodybuilder look on a guy but had to admit it suited him. He was athletic and powerful. Virile. Strong. And those deep brown eyes were staring right into hers.

"Hey," he said in a low voice.

"Hi. Eloise is sleeping," she said quietly.

His astute gaze scanned over her face, and then he looked above her head into the living room. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Anna said that you were sick, too. You didn't answer my texts."

"Sorry. I fell asleep. I caught whatever Eloise has, so you probably shouldn't come in. It's a stomach bug."

He nodded but didn't move from her doorway. The expression on his face was unreadable, and briefly, she wondered what he was doing here. Not at the apartment complex, but literally here at her front door. "I just saw your text. You stopped by the rental office?"

Ford cleared his throat. "I did. They weren't too willing to let me look through their surveillance footage from a couple of nights ago. It took a little convincing, but they're going to send the files over to me. We'll go through them and see if we get any leads."

"Wow. I wonder why they didn't want you to look at the surveillance footage?" she mused.

"It's a good question." He frowned, and she resisted the urge to shudder. It wasn't the most expensive place around, but it wasn't a dump either. Her neighbors were empty nesters, not drug dealers or something. Still, she hated to think she might have moved her daughter somewhere that was potentially unsafe. "Hopefully they just hadn't bothered getting the footage for me yet. The area doesn't seem unsafe," he said, noticing her worry.

"Thanks for following up on it," she said softly.

Ford cocked his head toward the parking lot. "I saw you still have the donut tire I put on. Why don't I take your car in to get new tires? That way, when you and your daughter are better, you won't have to worry about it."

"I was going to shop around and get the best price," she admitted. "It needed some other work done, too."



“I’ll take care of it.”

“Ford, I don’t think....” She swayed slightly on her feet before she could utter anything else, and he cursed. Before she knew it, Ford had moved inside and closed the door, lifting her into his arms. She was too shocked to protest and too dizzy to really care. “You might get sick, too,” she finally said as he carried her toward the living room.

“I’ll be fine. I never get sick.” He set her down on the sofa, tugging a blanket up and around her, as she looked up at him. His dark eyes looked concerned.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a low voice.

“Just a little dizzy. I was sick earlier and probably just need some liquids.”

His gaze tracked over to her sleeping daughter. “She looks like you,” he said quietly, his gaze moving from Eloise back to Clara.

She smiled, not sure if the flush on her cheeks was from the fever or Ford. Maybe both. She’d been so lightheaded a moment ago, she hadn’t even been able to enjoy those strong arms holding her. Pity. She’d certainly never be close to him like that again.

“I’ll get you some water,” he said, heading toward her kitchen like he owned the place. Maybe she should feel uncomfortable with a man she barely knew moving around her apartment, but it felt good knowing that he was taking care of her. Instinctively, she knew Ford wouldn’t hurt her.

She heard the faucet turn on and water filling a glass. Clara was already yawning when he came back. She noticed he had the box of crackers with him as well.

He set them down softly, his gaze flicking from her sleeping daughter to her. When had she ever had someone caring for her like this? Even if it was just water and crackers, she felt grateful that he was here.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

Ford nodded, seemingly uncomfortable with her thanking him. “Make sure you drink some of that. Are those your keys?” he asked, nodding toward the coffee table. Of course they were. He was just being polite, but she didn’t doubt he’d take her car in anyway even if she protested. He’d come here a man on a mission. When Anna had told her she’d send one of the guys by, Clara had thought she was simply saying that to be nice. Being woken up from her sleep by Ford at her front door was just about the last thing she’d expected.

“They are, but you really don’t have to get new tires put on my car. I’ll figure something out.”

“Just rest while I’m gone,” he said, his look brokering no argument. “Do you need anything else?”

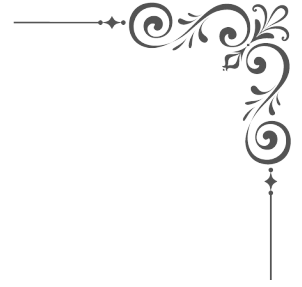
“No, but—”

“I’ll wait with your car and be back later. I’ll grab some carryout, too. Just something plain. I’ll shoot you a text when I’m headed back here.”

He was already grabbing her keys and striding toward the door. For a moment, she wondered what auto shop would start on a car this late in the day. Didn’t those places close at five? What did she know? Ford’s broad shoulders filled the doorframe, and she closed her eyes, exhausted. Clara heard her door shut and Ford testing the knob to make sure it had locked behind him. God knew her ex never had remembered any such thing, and it had always bothered her. He was careless with his money, careless in regard to her and her daughter. She’d been foolish to ever be with him.

She’d have to figure out a way to repay Ford. No doubt the cost of the new tires would probably drain her bank account. Anger washed over her as she recalled all the money she should have—money her ex had stolen. Blowing out a frustrated sigh, she squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn’t going to cry over this. Crying wouldn’t change anything. She had nowhere to go but forward.

Snuggling into the sofa, she was too exhausted to fight sleep any longer. With Eloise napping, she should rest, too. Clara closed her eyes, instantly falling into a deep slumber.





FORD'S GAZE SWEEPED ACROSS the parking lot as he strode back toward Clara's apartment two hours later, his breath fogging in the cold winter air. The temperature had dropped even further now that it was dark, but he was a big guy. He barely felt the cold, although he had grabbed his coat from his truck earlier. It was parked exactly where he'd left it.

His eyes landed on one of the surveillance cameras as he walked to her building. Grabbing his cell phone from his pocket, he swiped the screen to check his emails. Nope. Still nothing from the rental office. They better send that damn footage over soon. He was beginning to lose patience.

Pausing on the sidewalk, he did a quick survey of the area from this vantage point. There were bushes surrounding the perimeter, which would easily conceal anyone who wanted to hide. A copse of trees in the distance. Cars. Trucks. Nothing too flashy but nothing too old and beat up either. It was a modest apartment complex. The parking lot had lights, but it wasn't as bright as he would've liked for safety reasons.

He'd have to tell Clara to park near the front of the building, not the edges of the lot.

His gaze landed on her car, which he'd parked alongside his truck. He felt the tug of something in his chest as he looked at their vehicles together. He'd never had another person to watch out for—never had a serious girlfriend. He was just helping out a colleague though, so that line of thinking was somewhat surprising.

Clara wasn't his.

His phone buzzed in his hand, and he swiped the screen. "Hey boss."

"Any luck with the footage? Anna told me you were still over at Clara's."

"I'm just bringing her car back now. They still haven't sent me the surveillance videos, and the rental office is closed for the night. I've got the manager's number though, so I'll give him a quick call in a minute to push things along. We've waited long enough."

"You handled the tires?"

"Affirmative. I had four new tires put on her car. Her others were pretty damn worn. I'll have to tell her a different amount than I paid though. She seemed concerned about the cost." His gaze swept the lot again as he stood there. A guy coming home from work had walked by. A woman with two little boys. Nothing seemed suspicious, and he got the sense that whoever had

targeted her several days ago wasn't around at the moment. He'd know if he was being watched.

"Expense it to the company," Jett ordered.

"Roger that."

"I had West Renken pull some footage from our front gates. If someone did target Clara because she's an employee with Shadow Security, then someone was monitoring our employees coming and going. The IT guys are going through it now. We'll see what they pick up."

Ford let out a breath. "I don't like this. Clara's parking lot isn't the easiest for someone to tamper with a vehicle. There are lights on and people around. Cameras. It's not just one building, but several smaller garden-style apartment buildings."

"Lots of eyes on the lot then?" Jett asked.

"Yep. I'm assuming this happened in the dead of night, but even so. It's not a dark, secluded lot out back where few people were likely to witness it."

"Get that footage," Jett said. "We'll question the neighbors as well if we have to. I want to know who was messing with her vehicle."

"I'll get the video." Clutching the bag of carryout in his hand, he jogged up the steps as he said goodbye. It bothered Ford that Clara lived in an older, garden-style apartment building. It would've been more secure to be in an enclosed structure where visitors needed to be buzzed in. He slowed his pace as he headed to her door, just remembering he'd promised to text first. Too late now. Ford's brow crinkled as he saw the bags of groceries sitting there. Anna. He'd told her not to send food over, but the woman did as she wanted.

Knocking lightly on Clara's door, he heard soft footsteps and then the chain being unlatched. The door swung open, and then Clara was looking up at him, so damn small it made his chest hurt. Her cheeks were flushed again, but she seemed more alert than she had earlier.

"Did you get some rest?" he asked.

"Yeah. I slept for over an hour. Eloise is still out," she said, nodding toward her daughter on the sofa. "I have a feeling she's down for the night."

His lips twisted. "Is she okay? That seems like a lot of sleep, even for a kid."

"Yeah. She didn't get much rest the past few nights since she had the stomach bug. I was up with her at all hours. I'll take her back to her bedroom soon."

"But you're feeling okay?"

“You carried me to the sofa earlier,” she said without answering his question, looking embarrassed.

“You almost fainted. I'm not going to let you pass out right in front of me, sweetheart.” The endearment slipped past his lips, but there it was. “And you didn't answer my question,” he said, his lips quirking. “Are you feeling okay now?”

“Yeah, um, I was just sick once earlier in the day before you came over, but it didn't seem to hit me as hard as Eloise. Thank goodness.”

Clara looked down for the first time, noticing the bags. “Did you bring all these groceries?”

“No, but I'm guessing Anna sent them over. I did pick up some soup,” he said, lifting the small carryout bag he was holding. “Why don't you take this, and I'll bring the groceries inside before I go. I've got to head back to the office.”

Clara took the bag of soup and stepped back, watching as he grabbed all the grocery bags. It was a lot of food for one woman and a little kid. Hopefully Anna had picked stuff that wouldn't spoil. Ford walked to the kitchen as Clara closed her apartment door. He set everything on the counter, watching as Clara padded in behind him. She was barefoot, which just made her seem all that much smaller than he was. His gaze inadvertently ran up her body, and he glanced away, realizing she wasn't wearing a bra beneath her tank top. The loose cardigan hung open, and her nipples had pebbled in the cold air.

Ford cleared his throat, pretending to adjust the groceries on the counter. Hell, the woman was gorgeous. Soft skin. Nice breasts. And sweet as hell to boot. He needed to get out of here before he did something he'd regret, like pull her close. He'd already held her in his arms earlier. Carrying her into the living room, tucking the blanket around her on the sofa like she was his—damn. If he stayed here too long, he'd be wishing for all kinds of things he didn't deserve.

“I got four news tires for your car,” he said as he turned back around.

Clara's mouth parted in surprise. “Ford, that's probably way too expensive,” she protested. “I wish you would've called me first.”

“Your old tires were pretty worn,” he explained, trying not to get lost in her blue eyes. Even from across the room he felt drawn to her. Hell. He was such a goner. She probably wouldn't normally look twice at a guy like him. He felt rough around the edges compared to her. Big. Overbearing. She could

use a man like him to protect her—keep her safe from the world. Ford had no business thinking that. Her ex had clearly been a dick, however, and if the guy ever showed up here, Ford would have no trouble putting him in his place.

“I know, but I lost a lot of money when I broke up—”

“I know. Your ex sounds like a jackass for taking advantage of you like that. I’m just glad you’re safe,” he said seriously. “Situations like that can end a lot differently. He never...hurt you?” he could hardly get the words out. He’d seen his share of shit in foster care—dads that beat on their wives and kids. Families that were hanging together by a thread.

She bit her lip but shook her head. “No. He was never violent.”

“Good.” His voice was harsher than he’d intended, and Ford tried to rein in his anger. She hadn’t been hurt physically by the guy. “I talked with Jett a few minutes ago, and he said to expense your tires to the company.”

“What? I couldn’t accept that.”

“Well, you can take it up with him.”

Clara let out a small laugh. “I’m sure he’ll insist, especially now that Anna is involved in everything. Gah. I’ll talk to them. But thank you. I appreciate you taking care of that for me.”

His lips quirked as she rambled on. It was cute as hell when she got a bit flustered. He nodded toward the bag on the counter. “It’s chicken noodle. I figured that was safe since you weren’t feeling well. There are two to-go containers in there from the local deli. If your daughter wakes up, there’s enough for you both.”

“Okay, I’ll pay you—”

“Nope,” he interrupted. “It’s on me. I do have to get back to the office though.”

“Did you ever get the footage?” she asked as she followed him to her front door.

“Not yet. That’s what I want to check on,” he said in a hushed tone so as not to wake her daughter. “I’ll let you know if I find anything out. In the meantime, be careful. I know you’ve been home, but it wouldn’t hurt to be extra vigilant when you do leave until we determine who was behind this.”

Ford hated the sudden fear that filled her eyes, but she nodded. “I will.”

He watched her for a moment. “You’ve got my number if you need me. Goodnight,” he finally murmured before turning to open her door. “Make sure you lock up behind me.”

And then he was striding out, forcing himself not to look back. He felt Clara's eyes on him for a moment, and then the door shut behind him. She was safe for now. And as to who had sabotaged her vehicle? He wanted to get to the bottom of it tonight.



FORD SAT AT THE LAPTOP in the conference room late that evening, reviewing the footage from Clara's apartment complex once more. He blinked as he stared at the screen, convinced his mind was playing tricks on him. He moved the cursor and watched it again, pausing the footage on the woman's face as she inadvertently turned toward the camera. That couldn't be....

"Any luck?" Gray asked, sauntering in. He was in sweaty workout gear and had spent the past hour sparring with Luke in the onsite gym. Twisting the cap off his water bottle, he chugged it.

"Where's Luke?" Ford asked. "I want him to see this, too."

"Just nursing his wounds," Gray joked. "Nah. He's coming."

Ford did a double take, surprised to hear his buddy joking around. Gray had been a changed man after their last op, and this might've been the first time Ford had seen a genuine damn smile from his old friend.

Gray caught the expression on his face. "Yeah, yeah. I can still joke some of the time."

"Not to get all sappy and shit, but I'm glad," Ford said. "Working here will be good for you." Gray nodded as a moment passed between the two men. Jett had spent months trying to convince Gray to come onboard, and just being around his old teammates seemed to have shifted something inside him. They all knew he'd drifted since leaving the service. Ford had to admit it felt good having the last member of their team here as well. They worked better together, and that was just a fact.

Ford spun the laptop around so Gray could see the screen. "Remind you of anyone we know?"

"No fucking way," Gray said as he walked closer. "Is that Anastasia?"

Ford clenched his jaw. "It looks like her. Except this footage is from several days after she was detained. The feds shouldn't have released her that quickly, if at all. They had more than enough to hold her after questioning. Even if they did let her go, what are the chances she'd go after Clara? She



saw the rest of us, but Clara didn't have a thing to do with that op. This makes no damn sense."

"Did she know she was made?" Gray asked, scrubbing a hand over his short-cropped beard.

"Don't think so. We'd been tailing her for a couple of days, waiting to move in. The Feds were watching her longer than that. She didn't alter her routine one iota. They had intercepted communications—texts and encrypted emails. She even made the dead drop for her handler. I don't think she had a fucking clue. Plus, she sashayed out of that bar like that cat that got the canary."

"Even as well-trained as she was by Russia, I doubt she'd have left with Sam and Luke if she knew who they were," Gray agreed with a frown. "I still think she believed they were military and was trying to collect info from them."

"What's up boys?" Luke asked as he walked in. He was still in workout clothes as well, a towel slung around his shoulders. "Your text said it was urgent. You find something?"

"Take a look at this," Ford said in a low voice.

Luke frowned as he looked at the screen while Ford replayed the video. "Is that Anastasia? What the hell? When was this footage taken?"

"Two nights ago. If that's her, then she was the one tampering with Clara's car."

"While in federal custody?" Luke asked in disbelief. "It doesn't add up. Has Jett seen this yet?" he asked, pulling his phone from his pocket.

"Nope."

Luke shot off a text to their boss, grabbing a seat at the conference room table to watch the footage again closer.

"It sure as shit looks like her," Gray said. "Was this the only surveillance footage they gave you?"

"Yep. It took a hell of a lot to convince Clara's apartment to release this. They wanted me to go to the police first and said she should've already filed a report. They finally agreed to send it over when I threatened to get lawyers involved. There's got to be other cameras around the complex, but this is all I have right now."

"We need to see all of it," Luke said.

"Agreed. I'll swing by there again tomorrow to put on the pressure," Ford said.

Jett came storming into the conference room, a frown on his face as he slid his cell phone into his pocket. “Thought you left for the day, boss,” Ford said.

“Negative. I was talking with Sam and Nick about South America and have been on calls for an hour. Plus, Anna is still all worked up over Clara being sick. I had to convince her not to send more groceries over.”

Ford’s lips quirked. “More groceries? There were already several bags there when I stopped back over with her car. It was plenty for a woman and child.”

“Yep. That’s Anna.” Jett nodded at the other men, but his gaze landed back on Ford. “How’s Clara feeling?”

“She’s sick, but I dropped off some soup when I brought her car back. It’s some stomach bug.”

“And you told her the car was taken care of?”

“I did. She’ll probably argue that she needs to pay for the tires, but I told her she’d have to take it up with you.”

“Good. Now what’s on this footage that I need to see? I just got Luke’s text.”

Ford dutifully played the video again, and Jett was muttering a string of curses by the end. “I need to call my contact at the Bureau. I can’t imagine why the hell she’d be let go from federal custody. And how did she know to target Clara? She must’ve had eyes on headquarters.” Pulling his phone from his pocket, Jett immediately made the call as the other men looked at one another.

“Something feels off about this,” Luke said.

“Agreed. We’re missing something big here. After all the secrecy with detaining Anastasia, I don’t think for a second they’d release her so quickly,” Ford said.

Gray frowned, looking at the laptop. “And we’re sure the timestamp is correct?”

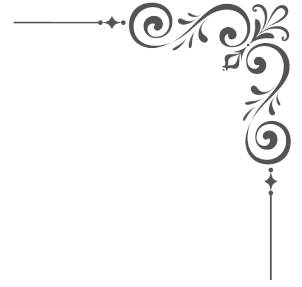
Ford huffed out a breath. “Her wheel was pretty damn loose. If her car had been tampered with days earlier, she would’ve had trouble before that night. I’m not sure why the apartment complex would mess around with modifying a video anyway. I doubt they even have that capability.”

“It doesn’t check out,” Luke said. “I think the time was right, and it was either Anastasia or someone that looks a hell of a lot like her.”

“We’ll run facial recognition software to confirm,” Ford said. “It should be simple enough for IT to run it right away.”

Jett ended his call and moved back over. “She’s still in custody. I spoke with the Special Agent in charge myself. There’s no way in hell she could’ve been at Clara’s apartment complex.”

The men’s eyes all landed on the video as it began to replay once again. If Anastasia was in custody, then who the hell was that?





CLARA DROPPED HER DAUGHTER off at daycare on Friday morning and headed in early to catch up on work. She was embarrassed as hell that Ford had seen her the other day at her worst. After she'd woken up a second time right when he'd brought her car back, she'd realized with embarrassment that she wasn't even wearing a bra under her tank top. Yes, she'd thrown on a cardigan, but her nipples had been evident through the thin material. He hadn't said anything or made her feel uncomfortable, but heat still washed over her at the memory. She'd been a disheveled mess while he once again looked hot as hell, both confident and capable.

She closed her eyes for a moment. He'd picked up food for her, carried in the groceries from Anna, and handled her car troubles, making sure she was situated before saying he needed to get back to work. Aside from a brief text the following morning to check on her, she hadn't heard from him again. If they had the footage, what wasn't he telling her? Did they still have no idea who had tampered with her car?

"Good morning!" Anna called out cheerfully as she strode in the front door, jarring Clara from her thoughts. The same email she'd opened five minutes ago was still on her screen while she'd been distracted, thinking about Ford. Although she'd gotten here early to catch up, she had little to show for her effort.

"Morning. Thank you again for the groceries and sending Ford over."

"I didn't send him," Anna said with a wave of her hand. "Like I mentioned the other day, he was pacing the office driving me crazy. The guy was worried about you."

"Oh." She cocked her head as she listened to Anna, somewhat surprised by this new piece of information. She'd just assumed Anna or maybe even Jett had insisted he come by. She wasn't sure what to make of his attentiveness. Speaking with the office about the cameras in the parking lot was one thing, but going out of his way to fix her car and pick up some food?

She shook her head. Ford was just being nice. He'd never seemed too interested in her before this week.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better," Anna continued. "If you see me run to the bathroom, it's just morning sickness. Oh my gosh, wait, are you—"

"Pregnant?" Clara asked with a laugh. "Far from it. Just the standard stomach bug. Plus, my five-year-old was sick. One thing about being a mom means that whatever your child catches, you'll end up with."

“Right,” Anna giggled. “I forgot she’d been sick, too. Is it too soon to blame pregnancy brain?”

“I don’t know,” Clara admitted. “Fatigue can start pretty early and affect your thinking. At least in my case. I wanted to be in bed by eight o’clock during the first trimester.”

“Yeah, Jett’s had to wake me up a couple of times when I’ve fallen asleep on the sofa. I’ll probably be asking you tons of questions during my pregnancy. Hope that’s okay. I need to run this stuff down to Jett’s office,” she said, nodding toward the papers she was holding. “He’s got some things for me to do back there and came in super early this morning.”

Clara said goodbye, watching the other woman hurry off. It made sense that Anna would be working more closely with her fiancé. After all, she’d been brought on supposedly to help Jett stay organized. Clara mostly remained out front, keeping things running.

“Shadow Security,” she said automatically as she answered the ringing phone.

The caller asked about their services, and Clara ran through a brief spiel about the protection that Jett and his men provided as bodyguards, taking down the potential client’s information.

A couple of the men—Sam and Nick—were in South America this week for work. Again, she wondered what she was missing. If government officials needed protection, wouldn’t the Secret Service or some other agency be tasked with that, especially outside of the United States? Yet somehow Shadow Security was involved. She’d been working here long enough to realize everything wasn’t as it seemed.

The front door opened, and her heart returned to its normal beat as she realized it was Gray. He was intimidating in some ways, but it was the thought of seeing Ford this morning that had her on high alert. It was silly. He’d helped her out because she was a colleague. That was all.

“Morning,” Gray said with a nod as he stopped by her desk. “Did Ford talk to you yet?”

“No. I haven’t seen him. Why, what’s up?”

Gray cleared his throat. “He wanted to speak with you himself. It’s about the surveillance footage.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Wait, he found something? I figured he would’ve mentioned it if anything came from that. Were they vandalizing other cars or just mine?”

He shifted, looking uncomfortable for a moment. “Just yours. Ford or Jett will want to fill you in.”

“But—”

“Just trust me.” Gray turned and headed into the secure area in the back, leaving her feeling bewildered. While he might be the newest employee, he’d worked with the other men in the military. She had a feeling he knew way more about things here than she did. Glancing out the windows, she looked at the front lot. A couple of cars were arriving for the day, but she didn’t see Ford’s big truck yet. Standing up, she smoothed her blouse and then headed to the restroom. She’d only been here an hour and was already restless. Normally, she got right to work, and today she just couldn’t concentrate at all.

Several minutes later, her breath caught as she walked back out into the reception area. Not only had Ford arrived during the few minutes she was gone, but he appeared to be waiting for her. “Good morning,” he said in a deep voice, his lips quirking. She tried to stare only at his face and not his muscular frame. The long-sleeved tee shirt he had on was snug, hugging his chest and biceps. He wore his jeans well, too, with the material stretching over muscular thighs. She swallowed.

Ford wasn’t like any other man she’d dated or knew. While he looked tough and was no doubt in top physical condition, he was also gentler than she’d expected. Considerate. Even as far as being colleagues went, he’d gone out of his way to make sure she felt comfortable with him. Some men were overly aggressive and take charge. Although he certainly got things done, he didn’t go about it in a pushy way. She liked that about him.

And as for the unexplainable attraction she felt toward him and the way she was all too aware of his presence? Well, she’d just have to ignore that.

“Hi,” she said, her face heating as she walked closer. He seemed even taller today—larger than life. He also stood perfectly still as she approached him, seemingly not wanting to frighten her. Something warm flooded through her at the thought. As always, she just felt...safe. “Thank you again for your help the other day. I wasn’t feeling well and can’t even remember if I thanked you properly.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, his eyes warm as he looked at her. It felt oddly intimate standing here alone talking, maybe because he’d been inside her home. Plus, there was the little incident where he’d literally picked her up in those muscular arms and carried her to the sofa. That certainly went above

and beyond standard coworker behavior, didn't it? No doubt Ford would help someone who needed it, but it felt like it meant something. Something she didn't want to examine too closely. "And like I said the other day, don't worry about the cost. I talked to Jett, and he said to expense it to the company."

"Are you sure?" she asked in disbelief. "I can pay you back. There's no reason for Shadow Security to repay me for an act of vandalism."

Ford frowned, studying her. "Can we talk a minute? It's about the surveillance footage, and that somewhat relates to the tire issue. We can head back to one of the conference rooms, and I'll show you what we discovered."

"Oh. Sure," she said, suddenly feeling nervous. "Gray asked if I'd talked to you yet."

What did Ford have to say that he couldn't out here? He could've just emailed the video to her if she needed to see it. Something had to be wrong. "Let me just set the phones up for while I'm gone."

He nodded, patiently waiting as she set them to go straight to voicemail. A moment later, they were swiping their badges and heading into the back. She'd never walked here alone with Ford before, she realized. Clara only came up to his shoulder, but he matched his stride to her pace. His woodsy scent surrounded her, and she was surprised at how appealing she found it. It wasn't heavy cologne, just his soap. Pure man.

She couldn't believe he'd literally carried her across her apartment the other day. Part of her wanted to be embarrassed that she'd swayed on her feet, and a tiny part of her hoped it meant something more. Would he have held anyone else in his arms so carefully?

Anna's laughter trailed through the air as they walked down the hall, intermixed with Jett's deeper tone. A second voice joined in, and she wondered if it was Gray.

"Hey boss," Ford said, briefly poking his head into Jett's office. "I was planning to show Clara the footage right now."

Jett nodded. "Get started. I'll be in shortly."

"What's this about?" Clara asked nervously as they went into the conference room next door. "It wasn't my ex, was it?"

"No, nothing like that," Ford said, his voice deep and husky. He cleared his throat. "I want to show you this footage to see if you recognize the person involved. It's not to frighten you, okay? It's problematic that someone came after you though," he said gently.



“You’re scaring me,” she admitted.

“I’m not trying to make you nervous,” he said. “We’ll keep you safe. As you may or may not be aware, we’ve made enemies over the years in our line of work. We’re all former Delta. You know what that is, right?”

She looked up at him, feeling overwhelmed. “Sort of like Navy SEALs, except with the Army. Jett mentioned that all of you worked together on the same team when you were in the military. He started the company and brought you onboard. Now you protect people as bodyguards.”

“Yes and no,” he said vaguely.

Clara wrinkled her brow, watching as he logged into a laptop sitting on the table.

“What does that even mean?” she asked.

“Jett wants to explain a few things in a minute,” Ford said. She frowned, watching as he clicked through some electronic files. His large hands moved over the laptop keyboard, and for a flash, she wondered what they’d feel like moving over her skin. He was so big, he’d overwhelm her in the best of ways.

Ford pulled up the grainy surveillance footage. Her car was in plain sight of the camera, and after a few moments, a lone person walked over. She gasped in surprise as they took her hubcap off and then produced some sort of tool to tamper with the wheel. The person managed to keep their face out of view of the cameras until they stood up and accidentally dropped something. They bent down to retrieve it, and Ford paused the video as a woman’s face came into view.

“A woman did this?” Clara asked in surprise.

Ford nodded. “Do you recognize her?”

“No. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before. Why would she specifically come to my car? I was expecting some teenagers to be out causing trouble, to be honest.”

“I hoped it was just something like that. The best-case scenario would’ve been that you were the target of some random vandalism. This woman only went to your vehicle though and was prepared to loosen the lug nuts. She had the proper tools with her. It was a premeditated event.”

“You think she did this to me on purpose?” Clara asked.

“It looks that way. She didn’t hit any other cars in the parking lot. Jett’s going to come speak with you in a minute.”

“Can’t you just tell me?” she asked, her anxiety growing. “I nearly ran off the road the other day because this woman loosened the tire. You already told me that you have enemies. Is she one of them?”

There was silence in the conference room as he studied her, clearly deciding what to say. “Yes. In a manner of speaking, this woman is one of our enemies. Except she was taken into Federal custody two days before this incident,” he said.

Clara blinked, feeling bewildered. “Then how is she here on the surveillance cameras if she’s been in custody?”

“That’s what we want to know,” he said, his voice grim.



AN HOUR LATER, CLARA looked even paler than when she’d been sick. Jett had come in and briefly spoken with her about some of the goings-on at Shadow Security. Without mentioning specifics, he’d told her the types of missions his team did, with Clara looking more and more perplexed as each minute ticked by. She swallowed, and Ford sensed her fear. Even her body language had changed, with Clara wrapping her arms around herself as if to protect her from whatever other bad news they had.

It was a lot to take in. The woman had been hired to answer phones, keep the office running, and schedule flights. She’d had no clue as to the danger lurking all around them as they’d discussed ops behind closed doors.

Jett continued talking, seemingly gauging her response. “The secrecy, and our jobs here, are of the utmost importance. Many operations that we take involve national security. The fewer people who know about our missions, the better. It was my decision not to loop everyone in that we’re involved with more than simply guarding clients.”

“Who else knows?” she asked, her voice weak.

Jett cleared his throat. “Most of the staff. The men who work directly with me run missions. We have extensive IT support, and they’re privy to everything we’re involved in. When you’ve booked flights, sometimes they’ve been for ops. We’ve been running our business like this for years, simply keeping the classified details under wraps.”

“I just—I never imagined,” she said. “I thought you were a standard security service, bodyguards and such.”

Ford exchanged a glance with his boss. “Yes and no. Our cover company is Shadow Security.”

“Is this...illegal?” she asked. Ford’s gut clenched. He hated the worry that was now etched across her face. All of this was a shock to her. Part of him wondered if she’d up and quit, but clearly, Clara needed the money. The selfish part of him wanted her to stay.

“No,” Jett assured her. “It’s not illegal. The missions we run are sanctioned by the U.S. Government. They’ve authorized us to complete these ops. In essence, they pay the bills. They’d never directly admit to tasking us for operations for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the government doesn’t want to get their hands dirty working in an official capacity on things. That’s where we step in.”

“And you’re former soldiers. Is that all true?”

“One hundred percent,” Jett assured her. “We served in the Army together. We were in the Special Forces. Now we work together conducting similar missions without following a military chain of command.”

Clara was looking back and forth between Ford and Jett in disbelief. He hated the uncertainty that crossed her face. He’d kept away from her because their worlds were so different. Now that she knew some of the truth, he wasn’t so certain it had been the right decision. What if she’d been hurt because her vehicle was tampered with? He’d never forgive himself for playing along and keeping her in the dark if he could have done something differently and kept her safe.

“You said these are secret missions. How did you know it was okay to hire me? I’m not former military or anything special.”

“We run background checks on our employees,” Jett said. “Much of it is standard. Those with access to classified information have clearances. That’s a requirement from the government.”

“That’s why there are so many locked doors and areas that require badges to access,” she said, the realization washing over her. “I feel so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Ford quickly reassured her. He shifted from where he’d been leaning against the table, looking intently at her. “No one else who lives around here knows what we do.”

“But I work here. I feel like I turned a blind eye to things I didn’t understand,” she said, her voice wobbling. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

It was Jett who answered. “The plan was always to keep some of the staff uninformed about the entirety of our operations here. If you knew details of our missions, that would potentially put you in danger. The same held true

when we were in the military. We could never share classified information with our families or friends. However, despite your lack of knowledge about the Shadow Ops Team, you were still targeted.”

“And all of you knew this,” she said softly, her gaze landing on Ford. “Everyone knew to keep me in the dark.”

Uneasiness churned in his stomach. She looked almost wounded, like he’d purposefully lied to her. Perhaps he had. She’d come and gone into the office for months without knowledge of the work that went on here. They hadn’t spoken much before this week, but he hadn’t brought it up then either.

“That was my decision,” Jett said. “The men knew not to say anything about it to you.”

“Anna knows,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Ford met Clara’s watery gaze. “That’s partly why things went wrong in Seattle. She didn’t know what we were dealing with at the time and put herself in extreme danger.”

“She knows now,” Jett said simply.

“Wow.” Clara let out a shaky breath. “You must all think I’m completely naïve. I’m fielding all the calls that come through the main line but am clueless about what’s really happening here.”

“Not at all,” Ford said, his voice harsher than he’d intended. “And we do act as bodyguards for some jobs. That’s part of our cover, and it’s important to maintain that.”

“I insisted that you remain unaware of the Shadow Ops Team,” Jett said. “That’s on me. The reason for telling you all of this now is because you were targeted. That changes things. A woman we were tracking—a Russian named Anastasia—must have followed you from work and seen where you live.”

“She knew we’d marked her,” Ford muttered. “She found our office and watched us—or had us watched.”

“It appears that way. She gave no indication of such in the days leading up to her arrest, but here we are. Somehow, she found Clara. West ran the still shot from the surveillance footage through facial recognition software. It checks out, even though that seems impossible.”

“Ford said she was arrested,” Clara said.

Jett stood and began pacing the conference room, looking slightly agitated. “Yes. It’s been confirmed that she’s in custody, and yet we have her on surveillance footage at your apartment complex.”

“Is it someone that looks like her?” Clara asked.

“We’re investigating all possibilities,” Jett said. “It’s taking longer than I want to get to the bottom of this. There’s more though. Ford showed you the footage from the night your tire was tampered with. I had my IT staff hack into the system and obtain additional surveillance from the past week. Someone’s been lurking in the outskirts of the parking lot, watching your building.”

Clara looked at him in surprise. “But I’m fine. My car is fine.”

Jett exchanged a glance with Ford. “The team and I were keeping watch,” Ford explained. “I took the first night, and Gray and Luke each took one as well.”

“You were outside my apartment?” she asked, looking shocked.

Ford nodded, watching her process this new piece of information. “We started after we got the initial video back and realized the extent of it.”

“Anastasia is extremely dangerous,” Jett continued. “She’s been arrested for plotting a terror attack. We don’t know who was there the past several nights, but the bottom line is someone knows where you work and live. Someone is watching you.”

Clara shuddered, and Ford reached over and briefly rested his hand on her arm. It was a small offering of comfort, but she leaned toward him anyway, letting out a tiny sigh of relief.

“We’ll figure this out, Clara,” he reassured her, giving her arm a brief squeeze before letting go. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Regardless of who exactly was there, either Anastasia or someone who looks like her, this is no coincidence. You were targeted because you work for Shadow Security. I want Ford to stay with you until we bring these people in.”

“What?” Clara asked, looking over at Jett in surprise.

“You live alone with your daughter. It’s my fault you were put in danger in the first place. Your other option is to temporarily come stay with Anna and me. My property is secure. You and your daughter would have your own rooms and space. You’d be safe there.”

“No,” she quickly said. “I don’t want to leave my apartment. I just moved Eloise here six months ago. She’s happy. I don’t want to uproot her again, even if it’s temporary.”

Jett eyed the two of them. “Then Ford can crash on your sofa for a couple of days while we figure this out. I’m going to loop in the Feds on this as well. I’ve got my IT staff reviewing the videos, searching for other possibilities.

Let's find out who this is and get them locked up. If it escalates further in the meantime, you won't be there unprotected."

"Understood, boss," Ford said. His gaze shifted to Clara, and she looked alternately scared and angry.

"So, I don't get a choice in the matter," she muttered.

"The offer still stands to stay at my home."

Ford watched as she bit her lip, hesitating. "Can I talk with Ford a minute alone?"

"Absolutely," Jett said as he stood. "I've got to get back to my office anyway to take a phone call. Let me know either way what you decide."

The room was silent as Jett closed the door, and Clara's frightened eyes shifted to Ford's. "Do you really think this is necessary?" she asked. "You think whoever this is on camera would come to my home?"

"We just don't know," Ford said. "If you'd be uncomfortable with my staying there, I'm sure you'd be fine over at Jett's house. Anna is...Anna, but they have space for you both."

"This seems so crazy," she murmured. Tears smarted her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Ford soothed. He itched to lean closer, but they were in a conference room. They were coworkers. He had no business touching her even though every part of him wanted to. She looked over at him helplessly.

"Who is this person anyway?" she asked. "This Anastasia."

"A Russian spy," Ford said. "She was in the U.S. feeding intel back to Russia. Her downfall was planning an attack on U.S. soil. She might have gone undetected if not for her efforts to plan an attack in Boston."

"And how does Shadow Security even play into this?"

Ford cleared his throat. "I can't go into details. Jett can fill you in if he decides that's safe. It's for your own protection, Clara. The less you know, the better. Believe me when I say she's extremely dangerous. It bothers me that she was outside your home. Why don't I plan to crash on your sofa tonight. If it's too much, then you can stay with Jett instead until we determine who exactly is behind this."

"Why tonight?" Clara asked. "You got this footage a few days ago. Wasn't I in danger then?"

Ford nodded. "Yes, and that's why we had a guy out in the parking lot each night. I'd feel better if we were inside though. You're still being watched."

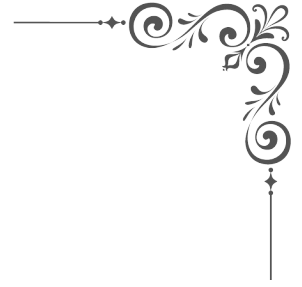
"The situation is that dangerous."

“Unfortunately, yes. Who’s to say she wouldn’t try breaching your apartment next? We’re used to retaliation from the types of missions we do, but I don’t like that the blowback from this involves you. It’s an active investigation. I’ll stay with you until we have definitive answers and know that you and your daughter will be safe.”

Clara bit her lip, thinking, and for a moment, he thought she’d tell him not to come over. He’d respect her wishes if that was what she wanted. She certainly hadn’t asked to be involved in any of this. He’d stay outside in his truck, ensuring her safety, but he wouldn’t come inside if she told him no.

“Okay, let’s do it,” she said softly.

Ford nodded, meeting her gaze. “You’re safe with me, Clara. Both you and your daughter.”







CLARA JUMPED AT THE soft knock on her front door that evening, even though she knew it was Ford. Another one of the men, Gray, had followed her home and was waiting in the parking lot until Ford got there. He'd swung by his own place to pack a bag of his things, and then he would just...stay here for the weekend. Shadow her. Swallowing nervously, she crossed her apartment, glancing over at her daughter. "This is the man who's coming to stay with us, sweetie."

"And he works with you, so he's not a bad guy," Eloise chimed in.

"Right. Otherwise, we never open the door for strangers."

Suddenly, Clara felt underdressed, which was silly. She'd changed into soft, comfy joggers and a sweatshirt. She didn't need to wear her work clothes in her own apartment just because Ford was here for a couple days. Hopefully just a couple of days.

"Hi," she said as she opened the door. Her breath caught. Anytime Ford was nearby, it sent her nerves skittering with awareness. His gaze tracked over her, and her lips parted. Did he feel it, too? Whatever electricity it was that always arced between them?

"Gray just left," he said before coming inside. "I've got a camera in my truck aimed at the front of your building. It's not fool proof, because the battery could die, but it'll help me monitor things from in here just in case."

"Okay," she said quietly.

"How are you doing?" he asked, his voice serious.

"I'm kind of freaking out. The tire thing was scary enough, but now to know someone's been at the apartment complex? I don't like it."

He frowned. "The guys and I were watching your building. We would've kept you safe."

"It could've been her."

He clenched his jaw and nodded. "We just don't know. Whoever was out there could've seen us watching your building and left. They haven't attempted anything since the tire incident. I can take you to Jett's if you'd rather stay there."

Clara bit her lip with worry. "Do you think that's necessary?"

Ford shook his head. "Not at all. I told you earlier, I'll keep you safe, Clara. You don't have to worry when you're with me."

"Okay. I believe you."

He held her gaze for a moment then looked over her head, spotting Eloise inside. “She’s awake this time,” he said with a wry smile. “I’m not too good with kids.”

“You’ll be fine,” she said, gesturing for him to come in. Her hand landed on his forearm as she guided him inside, and Ford stiffened. She was shocked by the hardness of his muscle and the electricity that coursed through her at the innocent touch. She stepped back, flustered. “Sorry. It’s a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment. If you want, I could sleep on the sofa so you could use the bed.”

“Not a chance,” he said as she shut the door. “It’s safer if I’m near the door, and anyway, I wouldn’t kick a woman out of her own bed.”

She flushed, her body heating. The idea of Ford sleeping in her bed did something funny to her insides. She hadn’t been with a man in over a year, and her ex wasn’t anything spectacular. Not that she’d be bringing this man to bed with her. The chemistry between them, however, seemed stronger than ever. How was she supposed to survive all weekend with him in her apartment? Even simply standing here, she was all too aware of his presence.

Clara brushed her hands nervously over her joggers, then heard a gentle *thunk* as Ford set his duffle bag down. “You’re sure this is okay?” he asked, sensing her unease. “I can crash in my truck tonight if you prefer.”

She met his concerned gaze. “Don’t be silly. You’re doing us a favor by staying here. It’ll be fine. Eloise,” she said, turning away and crossing toward her daughter. “I’d like for you to meet someone.”

He’d remained near the doorway as she turned back around, and his gaze slid back up to her eyes. Had he been checking out her ass? She wanted to giggle at the thought. Ford acted like nothing fazed him, but it was amusing to imagine he’d been looking at her that closely. A small part of her was flattered that he wasn’t entirely unaffected being here.

“This is Eloise,” she said. “Eloise, this is my friend Ford.”

Ford smiled. “Hi there. I guess your mom told you I’ll be staying here a few days?”

“Yes. Why don’t you have your own house?” her daughter asked. “Do you have to move like we did? Are you on vacation? Oh, do you like Barbies? I’ll show you my Barbie house if you want.”

Ford’s lips quirked, and he ducked down to his knee as they walked over so he could look at Eloise from her own height. “I do have a house, and no,

I'm not moving. Maybe you'll get to see it sometime. I don't have any Barbies though."

"Do you have any kids?" she asked hopefully.

"No."

"Aw, man."

He chuckled. "I would like to see your Barbies later on."

Clara smiled as Eloise ran off to play. She didn't miss the sparkle of amusement in his eyes as he stood back up. "I'm sorry," Clara said. "She's always full of questions."

"Don't be," he said. "I'm glad she feels comfortable with me here."

She studied him a moment, realizing that was true. Kids always had a good instinct about people. She'd just thought earlier that she didn't know Ford that well despite working in the same building with him for months. But no, that wasn't true at all. She knew he was dedicated and loyal. Persistent when something needed to be done. And so damn careful around her, it made her feel safe in a way she couldn't explain.

"Is your car driving okay with the new tires?" he asked. "I didn't get a chance to ask you at work earlier."

"Yeah, it's driving perfectly. And it starts better now, too. Did they do some additional work?"

Ford shrugged. "Maybe, but don't worry about it. I told my buddy to take care of whatever needed to be done."

She opened her mouth to say something, when the oven buzzed from the kitchen. "Oh, the oven is ready. I promised Eloise we'd have homemade pizza tonight. I hope that's okay. She wasn't eating much all week when she was sick and it's her favorite."

"Pizza sounds great," he said.

Ten minutes later, she got the surprise of her life as Ford stood there spreading out pizza dough with her daughter. She'd figured they'd feed him since he was here keeping watch, but having him help in preparing the meal? That she did not see coming.

Ford had moved around her kitchen with ease, one large hand resting on the small of her back as he'd grabbed a dish from the top shelf, their bodies casually brushing against one another as they worked. Every time they'd touched, she'd felt a spark of electricity shoot right through her. He'd noticed it too, those dark eyes far too observant.

His hands were covered in flour now, as were Eloise's, and she was surprised to see the way her daughter had taken to him. For a guy that had been somewhat distant from the moment they'd met, this week she'd seen an entirely different side of him.

"Mommy, I don't think he's doing a good job," Eloise said, looking worried.

Clara tried not to giggle as she watched Ford pretend not to know what to do. "Are you sure this is how you do it?" Ford asked. "This looks like we're getting ready to make cookies."

"It's not cookie dough, it's pizza dough!" Eloise shrieked with laughter.

Shaking her head, Clara helped Eloise wash the flour from her hands a few minutes later. Her daughter went to the fridge to get the mozzarella cheese, and Clara's breath caught as Ford stepped behind her at the sink. "Do you need to wash your hands, too?" she asked lightly. She felt trapped by him, her hands still in the water and Ford's muscular frame behind her.

"Ladies first," he said, his voice husky. Her face heated, even though she didn't think he'd meant it the way it sounded. Just because her mind had immediately gone to the gutter didn't mean Ford's had. She finished washing her hands and stepped back, inadvertently bumping into his solid chest. Goosebumps spread over her skin, and Ford cleared his throat.

"You smell like vanilla," he murmured. She looked up at him in surprise. Their eyes locked for a beat, and then Eloise came running back over, breaking the spell between them. She quickly stepped away, and they finished making the pizzas, Clara feeling his eyes on her the entire time.

She set the oven timer for ten minutes as her daughter ran off to play. The pizzas were in the oven, and now she just needed to clean up, pretending Ford wasn't standing there in her kitchen, looking hotter than any man had a right to. Clara carried the dirty bowls to the sink and fumbled with them, almost dropping everything as the dishes clattered together.

Ford moved closer as she set them down with a shaky breath. "You're nervous," he said, his voice soft.

She hesitated a moment and then turned to face him. "Well, yeah."

"Don't be nervous around me," he said, the corner of his mouth hitching up in a smile. "We've known each other for months, right?" Her breath caught as she looked at him. Normally he was so gruff and serious with his teammates, she almost didn't know what to make of the different man he was around her.

“I can’t help it,” she said with a shrug. “You’re you, and I’m just me.”

His lips quirked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just what it sounds like. I’m clumsy and dropping stuff whenever you’re around, I’ve got all these random problems to deal with, and you guys protect people and run around saving the world.”

“Not the entire world,” he quipped, moving another step closer. “And I’m only here with you right now.”

“Ford,” she breathed.

“You don’t need to worry when you’re with me, sweetheart.”

She flushed as she backed up, her body pressing against the kitchen counter and lips parting. She didn’t miss the heat in his brown eyes as he gazed down at her. It felt like she was going to melt into a puddle right here in the kitchen. Ford’s attention was flattering. Unnerving. And he was so damn close. “Jett told you to stay here with me.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be, Clara. Before, I thought maybe we were too different and that I should stay away from you,” he said quietly.

“And now?”

“When you look at me like that, I don’t think I can fight it anymore.”

The air was thick between them, and he was waiting, always so damn patient with her. Her breath hitched. “Don’t fight it,” she pleaded. His hands landed on either side of her hips, effectively caging her in. The heat from his body surrounded her, and his woodsy, masculine scent was intoxicating.

“Don’t be nervous,” he said, leaning in. His lips found the side of her neck as she gasped.

“I’m scared of getting hurt.” Another soft kiss on her tender skin. Another whimper from her. God. Her daughter could run in at any moment, but she couldn’t bring herself to tell Ford to stop, not when his touch felt so good.

“What if I promise not to hurt you?” he asked huskily, the whiskers on his jaw rubbing against her neck. He kissed her again, smiling as she tilted her head back, giving him better access.

“That’s a lot to promise,” she said breathily.

His hands moved to her head, holding her in place as their breaths intermingled. “I’m a man of my word, sweetheart. I never go back on my promises.” And then his lips were on hers. Soft. Hungry. One hand cupped the back of her head, but the other slid to her neck, his thumb lightly caressing her throat. She felt consumed by him, like she might go up in flames just from a single kiss. Her heart raced as her hands clutched his shirt,

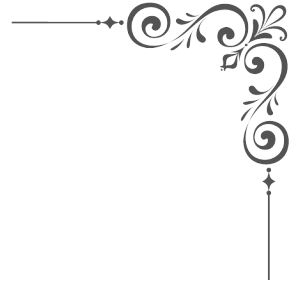
feeling the hard muscles beneath. He kissed her again, more deeply, and they both jumped as the oven timer began buzzing.

“I’ll get the pizza out,” he said as he stepped back, Clara still clutching onto him.

“Okay,” she said shakily.

“Mommy, dinner’s ready!” Eloise yelled. They heard footsteps as she came running.

Ford ducked and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “That vanilla scent is killing me, sweetheart.”





SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Ford looked up as Clara quietly closed her daughter's door and walked back down the hallway. They'd had dinner and dessert with Eloise, and true to her word, she'd showed him some of her toys. Clara had shot him shy looks throughout the meal, and his memory tracked back to kissing her in the kitchen earlier. Her body had been so soft pressed against his, her tiny gasps making his dick twitch.

As for right now? Her hips swayed from side to side, her breasts bounced lightly as she moved, and she was so damn pretty it almost hurt to look at her. Even in the joggers and sweatshirt she wore, he could see she was all woman. Curves in the right places, with delicate hands and feet. The purple nail polish on her toes made him smile. She wasn't overly fussy with her appearance, but the feminine touches were intriguing.

He was relaxing on the sofa now, his long legs stretched out in front of him. Surprisingly, he didn't feel uncomfortable here. Aside from his friends' homes, he usually felt ill-at-ease somewhere new. Maybe because he'd never had a steady home growing up. Never had that comfort.

But at Clara's?

It was like something clicked, and suddenly he had something he'd never realized he needed. Ford had helped her briefly the other night but been in and out quickly. Tonight was surprising. He'd never wanted a relationship, but he felt a stirring in his gut anytime she was near. Something told him not to let her go.

"Come here," he said before she could sit at the opposite end of the sofa. She hesitated for just a moment but then snuggled against him, Ford wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "I'm going to walk around outside in a little while, survey the area."

She stilled, and Ford pressed a kiss to her head. "I'm not telling you that to scare you, but I do need to check things out before bed."

"I know," she said with a sigh. "What if someone is there tonight?"

"I'll be right here listening. If they're in the parking lot, we'll get them on camera. If they try to come into your apartment, they'll regret that quickly."

Clara shivered, and he hated the worry she now carried. "Is Eloise asleep?" he asked, hoping to get her mind off their troubles.

"Yeah. I'm lucky she's always been good about going to bed."

"Kids are a lot of work," he observed.



She smiled wryly. “Isn’t that the truth. It’s easier now that she’s a bit older. The baby and toddler years were—whew! I’m not sure I want to relive that.”

He chuckled. “The last foster home I was in had some little kids. It wasn’t too bad, actually, compared to some of the other places I’d been. I’m thirty-five now, so it was a while ago. Almost feels like another lifetime.”

“That sounds like a hard way to grow up, always moving around.”

“Yeah. The Army felt pretty stable after that. They fed me and housed me. Some guys thought the food sucked, but when you’re used to going without...” He lifted a shoulder.

“And then you ended up in the Special Forces.”

Ford nodded. “I did. Those guys are like my brothers—the family I never had. We served together for years and get to work together now.”

“Why’d you get out of the military anyway?” she asked, turning slightly to look at him. His eyes ran over her face, taking in her blue eyes and delicate features. Clara probably had no idea about much of the darkness in the world—darkness he wanted to shield her from.

Ford ran a hand over his jaw. “A bad mission,” he said darkly. “Maybe I’ll tell you about it someday. There’s enough going on now though that you don’t need to hear more horror stories.”

She bit her lip, worried. “Hey,” he said, sensing her unease. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Most of the stuff we did I can’t talk about anyway. It’s too highly classified.”

“Like the work you do now.”

“Yeah. I know you’ve had a rough day just learning about all of this and the existence of the Shadow Ops Team, but I promise that you’re safe with me here. We’ll figure this out and make sure no one can hurt you.”

“Why do you think someone came after me specifically?” she asked.

“Revenge,” he said. “We thwarted their plans. Anastasia picked someone weaker to target first. Not that I think you’re weak—”

“Ford, come on,” she said, letting out a small laugh. “You guys are former Special Forces. Of course, I don’t have the training and know-how that you do. In their eyes, I’m definitely the weakest link.”

“I won’t let anyone hurt you,” he said, looking at her once more. Her lips parted slightly at the intensity of his gaze, and unable to resist, he ducked down, kissing her. Clara submitted to him with a soft sigh, letting Ford take control of their kiss. His heart thudded in his chest as adrenaline pumped

through his veins. She was so damn sweet it hurt, and he wanted to kiss her everywhere, peeling off her clothes and exploring all those gorgeous curves.

Although their kiss started out soft and slow, exploratory, it quickly grew more heated. He ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth, encouraging her to open to him. Her lips parted, and his tongue delved inside. She tasted of the ice cream they'd had for dessert but also something more feminine and sweet. His hands slid through her hair as he deepened their kiss, needing more. Clara gasped and clung to him, and he leaned her back so she was lying on the sofa, his body hovering over hers. Even through her clothes he could feel her softness and curves, the complete opposite of his strength. Her legs parted as she took some of his weight, and his body fit perfectly between them, his erection pressing against her core.

"Ford," she whimpered, biting her lip. He bucked against her gently, letting her feel him.

"We'll take this slow, honey," he said, nipping at her neck. "I've been wanting you for months and don't want to rush things."

"I need you."

He kissed her neck again, loving the feel of her writhing beneath him. The TV played softly in the background, but he couldn't even be bothered to turn it off. His focus was solely on this woman. His tongue swiped at her collarbone, tasting her delicate skin. The damn vanilla perfume she wore was intoxicating. His cock was hard as a rock against the confines of his jeans, but he'd take things at her pace. One hand slid beneath her sweatshirt, feeling her soft, warm skin, and she whimpered as he trailed his fingers up and then cupped one breast. It filled his large hand, and the silky bra she had on felt delicate and fragile, just like the woman wearing it. He tugged the cup down, his thumb grazing her nipple as she cried out.

"I want to taste you," he murmured. Then he was pulling her sweatshirt off, leaving her half-dressed beneath him. Ford tugged the other cup of her bra down, watching as her full breasts spilled over the top. Clara's eyes were hazy with arousal, and she lightly bucked against him, demanding more. He didn't waste any time, just ducked down and licked one pink nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

She cried out, and his dick twitched. She was soft and sweet, with womanly curves in exactly the right places. Clara clutched onto his head as he laved at one breast. He could die a happy man feasting on them. They were full and plump, just begging for his attention. Clara was squirming and

panting as he moved to her other breast, and he lightly bit down, listening to her small gasp. He palmed the other one, his thumb running back and forth over her peaked nipple.

“I want you to come for me, sweetheart,” he said, his voice deeper than before. “I want to hear you crying out my name.”

Ford removed her bra and kissed his way down to her stomach, his eyes on Clara’s face as he watched her reaction. She was biting her lip but flushed. Beautiful. His fingers slid beneath the waistband of her joggers, and he tugged them off along with her panties, spreading her legs apart.

“Ford,” she pleaded.

“I’ve got you, honey.” Part of him wanted to spend hours worshiping the woman in front of him, but she was so tempting, he needed to see her come undone. Her pink pussy was swollen, arousal coating her folds. She was waxed bare, and he couldn’t wait to have the taste of her on his tongue. He ran his fingers through her softness, her silken arousal glistening on his fingertips. Ford bent her legs as he spread them further apart, wrapping his arms around them to hold her still. She was pinned in place by his muscular arms, lying on the sofa, but it was Ford who felt like he was at her mercy.

He ducked lower, inhaling the scent of her excitement, and then he kissed her smooth lower lips, listening to Clara murmur his name. “That’s it, baby. I love when you say my name.”

“Ford,” she pleaded again, breathless.

He turned and nipped at her thigh, teasing her. Her skin was so damn soft. Silky. He could spend all night getting lost in her body, touching and pleasuring her.

“Please,” she begged.

He kissed his way up her inner thigh, teasing and nipping at the tender skin. His whiskers had to be abrading her tender flesh, but Clara wasn’t complaining. Her breasts were rising up and down, her eyes wide, and she was trembling as he once again reached her core. He licked up her slit, ignoring the swollen bud at the top. She cried out in anguish as he chuckled. “I’ll get there, baby.”

He licked her again, teasing her and tasting the sweet honey of her folds. She was clutching onto his head, pleading, and he finally gave her the attention she needed, sucking her swollen bud between his lips. Clara moaned, the sound making his cock harden even more. He teased her clit with the tip of his tongue, holding her in place as he drove her higher and

higher. Her fingernails dug into his head, her body desperately trying to buck up against him. He didn't let up, just continued swiping his tongue over her until the tiny sounds she made grew louder, and she exploded.

Clara collapsed back on the sofa as he kissed her sex, slowly bringing her back down to reality. She was panting and gasping, and male pride coursed through him. Clara was flushed and sated, and he was dying to see how quickly he could bring her to the precipice once more.

He kissed her inner thigh, keeping her pussy exposed to him. She was wet, pink, perfect—

The sudden buzzing of his phone caused him to pause.

He gently released Clara's legs, reaching over to grab his cell phone from the coffee table. Luke's name flashed on the screen, and Ford snagged Clara's panties and joggers from where they'd fallen on the floor. She was blushing as she adjusted her bra, tugging her sweatshirt back over her head. He answered as she finished righting herself, hating that he could no longer look at all that exposed, smooth skin.

"What's up, buddy?" he grunted.

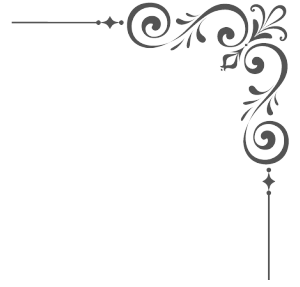
His erection was pressing uncomfortably against his jeans, and he shifted awkwardly. Clara looked like she'd been thoroughly pleased, with her hair tousled and cheeks rosy. He pulled her toward him with one arm, holding her close as she caught her breath.

"I'm in the parking lot and need to talk to you both," Luke said.

His gaze narrowed. "That's Luke," he told Clara. "Is it okay if he comes up?"

"Yeah, of course," Clara said, looking flustered. "Is something wrong?"

Luke answered over the phone. "Tell her we found out who's in the surveillance video."





CLARA LOOKED WORRIEDLY at Ford as he rose from the sofa, phone still at his ear. She ran a hand through her hair, shakily standing up. Ford had just stripped her bare and gone down on her, making her come right here in her living room. She was sure her face was beet red as she followed him to the front door.

Would Luke guess what they'd just been doing?

She wasn't sure she'd ever forget the feeling of Ford's big hands undressing her, of his mouth and tongue on her sensitive folds. For such a large man, he was surprisingly careful with her. He'd practically growled in approval when he'd made her come apart, and her heart was still racing. He was packing a pretty impressive erection, and she'd watched him adjust himself as he stood up. Ford had to be uncomfortable, but he was all business, looking both silently and deadly.

What had Luke told him?

Taking a quick peek down the hallway where Eloise's door was shut, she followed Ford into her foyer. He'd already cracked the front door open, waiting for his teammate. A moment later, Luke came jogging up the stairs and walked inside, quickly saying hello to them both.

"What's going on?" Ford asked. "You have new information?"

"You're not going to believe this shit," Luke said.

She stopped in the foyer next to Ford, noticing again how she only came up to his shoulder. He was big and broad, frowning as he stared at his teammate. All traces of the softer man from moments ago were gone. Instinctively, she shifted closer to him, bracing for bad news.

"We've been digging for more information on Anastasia since we got the video. IT has been working nonstop, running the image through various databases. We were relying on the Feds for information before," he explained, his gaze landing on Clara.

"What did they find?" Ford asked.

"It turns out Anastasia has a sister."

"What?" His voice was hard. Deadly.

"They're not twins but are only a year apart, their appearances strikingly similar. They were raised in different orphanages in Russia, which is why their familial ties didn't come up in background checks on Anastasia. Most of what is known about her is from her teenage to adult years. It wasn't her at Clara's car the other night. It was her sister Natalia."

Ford clenched his fists, his face hardening. “The Feds fucking missed this?” he asked in disbelief.

“At some point during their teenage years they connected while still living in Russia and became radicalized. Natalia is here in the U.S. under a different name, married to an American. She and her husband live outside of Boston.”

“The same damn place Anastasia was plotting an attack. How the hell did our IT guys figure this out when the FBI couldn’t? Federal Bureau of Investigation my ass,” Ford muttered.

Luke glanced between them. “They enhanced the image on the surveillance and ran it through more databases. Anastasia had been flagged, so it came up right away as a match. We know she’s in federal custody, however. On a hunch, they ran the image through some local databases—DMV and the like. One other possibility popped up.”

“Natalia,” Ford seethed. “Who’s she married to?”

“A man named Nicholas Valentine. He works in Boston. They’ve mostly flown under the radar. They were very careful not to have the two women linked in any way. No social media connections. No emails or phone calls. They weren’t involved in any of the same illegal operations either.”

Ford raised his eyebrows.

“Crime runs in the family. Here’s the real kicker—Natalia’s husband Nicholas was inadvertently involved in a case we took on last year. Remember the missing girls we rescued that were being trucked over the Canadian border?”

“Yeah. How could I forget?”

“He’s the one that called it in, tipping off the Feds. We ended up raiding the warehouse they were held in and rescuing thirteen girls and women. It turns out, Nicholas was part of that entire trafficking ring. He wasn’t the hero. He’d orchestrated the entire thing but ratted out his partner.”

“Why the hell did he tip off the police?”

“His partner did him dirty. He lost a hell of a lot of money and turned him over to the authorities. The call last year, however, was an anonymous tip. The partner committed suicide and never ratted out Nicholas, so the connection was never made. The FBI is running traces on all of his accounts now. We think some of the money was being funneled to Anastasia for the terror attack she was plotting.”

“So Nicholas and Natalia have reason for seeking revenge against Shadow Security because we rescued the women, and now Anastasia does, too, since she was arrested. You think they targeted Clara because they’re in the business of trafficking women?”

Icy cold dread raced down her spine. “They wanted to kidnap me?” she asked in shock.

Ford wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. Rather than feeling comforted though, she just felt trapped. His entire world was nothing but threats and danger, with Ford and his teammates inadvertently bringing it right to her door.

Luke looked between them both, but he didn’t comment on Ford’s arm around her. “I’m afraid that’s what it seems like,” he told Clara. “If you had car trouble on a secluded road, they might have been hoping to grab you. The forest is dark and isolated. Maybe they had eyes on you as you left that night.”

“Jesus,” Ford bit out. “That’s a hell of a lot of trouble to go through.”

Luke lifted a shoulder. “They want revenge and some of their money back. They kidnap women and sell them.”

Clara felt bile rising in the back of her throat. They wanted to take her and just...sell her? She wasn’t exactly some young teenager. In an instant, she could’ve vanished. Her entire world would have ended. What would’ve happened to her daughter? Who would’ve cared for Eloise if something had happened to Clara?

Luke was still talking, and she was having trouble paying complete attention to the conversation. Panic shot through her as her heart raced, and Clara felt her palms begin to sweat.

“Even though Nicholas tipped off the police last year, he was furious we rescued those girls,” Luke continued. “IT has done a lot of digging, and we’ve got encrypted emails from him. He’s basically incriminated himself. Ironically, we wouldn’t have even been looking at Nicholas or Natalia without her name popping up during our search on the surveillance footage. The fact that she looks almost fucking identical to Anastasia made it easy to make the connection and dig deeper.”

“And they’ve been in touch all this time, selling girls and women to fund a fucking terrorist plot,” Ford seethed.

“The FBI thought Anastasia had an offshore account but never could find it. Turns out the accounts were in Natalia’s name. I’m going to hang in the



parking lot tonight and see if anyone shows up again. We don't have the face of whoever was here in the shadows the past couple of nights, but my gut says it was Nicholas or Natalia."

"They're not bringing them in?" Ford asked.

"You know how slow the government rolls. They need to get search warrants for their home. FISA covers the electronic intercepts, but the Bureau wants every box checked. Give them twenty-four hours."

"They could be long gone by then. You're still in danger," Ford said, looking down at Clara.

She nodded, feeling somewhat lightheaded.

"Do you feel okay?" he asked, seeming to pay closer attention for the first time during their entire conversation.

"Yeah. I just need to go lie down. You guys talk a minute or whatever." In a daze, she wandered back down the hallway toward her daughter's room, the sound of their low voices trailing behind her. Eloise was sleeping, but she slipped inside the door anyway, enjoying the darkness and silence. The peace of being close to her daughter. Nothing about this past week made any sense. Clara felt like her entire life wasn't what it seemed. Her car had been vandalized. They'd possibly wanted to kidnap—traffic—her. The company she worked for wasn't simply guarding clients, they were running black ops for the government.

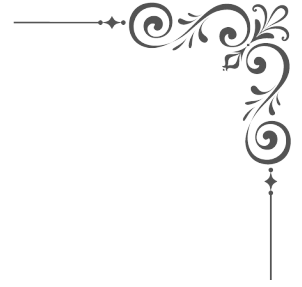
And Ford?

Tears smarted her eyes. She didn't even know what to think. Did she really want to be a part of his dangerous world? He'd said he'd kept away from her because they were too different, and maybe he was right. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined people she knew were involved in thwarting terrorist attacks on the United States or rescuing sex-trafficking victims. She knew they were former military but thought they'd left that part of their lives behind them. He really did live in an entirely different world than her.

What if Ford hadn't come along the other evening when she almost ran off the road? Was someone waiting there in the darkness for her? Would she ever have seen Eloise again?

Clara sank to the ground, leaning against her daughter's closet door as the room began to spin. Tears smarted her eyes. She raised a fist to her mouth, trying to stop herself from gasping. To stop the tears from spilling over.

For the first time in months, she gave up on trying to be strong. Her head fell onto her knees as she whimpered, and then she just let herself cry.





FORD SCRUBBED A HAND over his jaw the following morning, looking at the text on his phone.

Luke: *No one showed last night. They must've seen our trucks.*

Ford: *Damn it.*

Ford: *We might've been here to keep Clara safe, but I wanted to nab those mofos.*

Luke: *Same.*

Ford: *Thanks for keeping watch.*

Luke: *Sure thing, brother.*

Ford groaned, his back stiff from sleeping on Clara's sofa, as he rested his phone on his chest and looked over at the morning sun coming in through the blinds. Clara had gone back to her bedroom while he'd been talking to Luke, and he hadn't seen her since their brief conversation afterwards. Her face had been tear-stained when he'd lightly knocked on her door, and when he'd tried to comfort her, she'd told him she needed some time alone.

His gut had churned at her pushing him away, but he could respect her wishes. She'd had a hell of a week, with one thing piling on top of another. Flat tire. Sick daughter. Learning that the company she worked for actually ran black ops. And then he'd kissed her and stripped her bare on the sofa, moving over her like a man starved. To top it all off, Clara learned she might've been the target of a kidnapping.

Ford muttered a curse.

Worry coursed through him as he sat up. She'd been pale as Luke had explained things last night, but afterwards? She'd looked devastated. It had fucking killed him to lay out here on the sofa knowing she was probably scared and crying alone in her bed. He ran a hand over his face, wondering what he should've done. Gone in anyway? Tried knocking on her door again later? He'd wanted nothing more than to hold her close, assuring her that she was safe.

Crossing toward his duffle bag, Ford grabbed a change of clothes and went to the hall bathroom. Eloise's things were in there, and despite the pit in his stomach, he smiled. She was a cute kid, and it was obvious how much both Clara and Eloise loved one another.

He quickly showered and dressed. Glancing at the stubble on his jaw in the mirror, he decided to skip a shave today. He brushed his teeth and then headed out into the kitchen, rolling his shoulders to relieve some of the

tension. A sofa like that wasn't made for a man his size, but he'd camp out there for weeks if it meant keeping her safe.

Grabbing his phone, he sent Jett a text.

Ford: *Any word on when the perps will be arrested?*

Jett: *Negative. Feds are still waiting on a search warrant.*

"Fuck," Ford muttered. If Natalia and Nicholas suspected something was amiss, there was a good chance they'd disappear. He wanted to go hunt them down himself, the FBI be damned. The only thing that mattered right now was Clara's safety. How the hell had the Feds completely missed the connection between Anastasia and Natalia? Even though she'd been flying under the radar, it was their goddamn job to dig deeper and make connections. If a more thorough investigation had been conducted last year, maybe Nicholas would've been smoked out, without the entire trafficking operation being pinned on his now-deceased partner.

Ford walked into Clara's kitchen, running a hand over the stubble on his jaw. Making pizza together last night in here felt like a million years ago. He'd actually stood there laughing with Eloise—Ford, a man who thought he didn't know how to act around little kids. A guy who'd assumed he never wanted them.

Opening the fridge, he pulled out some eggs and bacon. The least he could do was make breakfast for his girls. His girls. The thought startled him. He'd never wanted anything of the sort before. At any rate, that was just damn wishful thinking, because she hadn't even wanted his comfort last night. The food was sizzling on the stove as his phone buzzed, and he saw Jett's name on the screen.

"What's up, boss?"

"Luke said they didn't show last night."

"Negative. All was quiet."

"How'd Clara take everything?"

Ford's gaze flicked down the hall to her closed door. "Not well. She'd been surprised enough to begin with, but when Luke told us that Anastasia's relatives were trafficking women? It's like she just shut down. Clara spent the night in her room crying and didn't want to talk to me," he muttered.

"Welcome to life with a woman," Jett quipped.

Ford cleared his throat. "I'm here to keep her safe, but she's not mine," he said in a low voice.

“We’ve known each other for a long time. I know that you care for her. It’s got to be overwhelming for Clara learning that Shadow Security wasn’t what it seemed. Anna had difficulties, too.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ford muttered. He’d been the one left to guard Anna while she’d been seething over Jett not telling her everything. They’d rescued her when she’d put herself in danger, but hell. He didn’t want the same situation befalling Clara.

“Just give Clara some time,” Jett advised. “I know you’ll protect her. The Feds should bring in Nicholas and Natalia this weekend.”

“Unless they disappear.”

“The situation changed quickly yesterday afternoon when we made the connection,” Jett said. “Our IT guys are the best. Give the Bureau a day to play catch up. You know we work faster than them.”

“I don’t like that they’re out there,” Ford said, his voice low.

“Me either. But you’ll stay with Clara this weekend. Bring her over if you all need a breather. My property is secure.”

“All right. Will do.”

He ended the call and looked up, surprised to see Clara standing there. For a guy that was always aware of his surroundings, he was shocked that she’d snuck up on him. His gaze raked over her, and his heart caught in his throat as he took in the look on her face. Her eyes were swollen and puffy, and her hurt expression was impossible to ignore.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

“Who was that?” she asked, nodding toward the phone in his hand.

“Jett. He wanted to know how things went last night. No one suspicious showed up in the parking lot. Luke stayed out there all night. We’ll see what happens over the next twenty-four hours. Best-case scenario is the Feds arrest them and we can put this all behind us.”

Clara nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Jett invited us over if we want to get out of your apartment this weekend.”

“Because it’s not safe to go anywhere.”

Ford lifted a shoulder. “You heard what Luke said yesterday. Nicholas Valentine is extremely dangerous. As is Natalia. He managed to operate his business behind the scenes and let his partner take the fall, but I don’t believe for a second that he’s abandoned trafficking women.”

“And that other woman—Anastasia?”

“She benefitted from their dirty deals. They sold women, and she used some of the profits for plotting a terror attack.”

Clara studied him. “What sort of attack?”

He leveled her with a gaze. “I can’t reveal all the specifics, but essentially, she’s been obtaining weapons and explosives. She’s hired mercenaries. They were planning to detonate simultaneous bombs around Boston, killing hundreds if not thousands.”

If it was possible, Clara paled even more. “And you guys do this kind of stuff all the time—just stop terrorist attacks and go after people. Get the bad guys.”

Ford pressed his lips together and nodded.

Tears smarted her eyes. “I can’t believe no one told me any of this. Basically, I was in danger this entire time just from working there. My daughter was in danger.”

“Clara,” he said, taking a step closer.

She held up a hand to stop him. He didn’t miss the way it slightly trembled. “And last night? You kissed me and—”

“I’m sorry about that,” Ford said, guilt and remorse flooding through him. “Not for kissing you, but for rushing things. I can’t deny that I’m attracted to you or that I care about you. Hell. I waited for months to get closer, but I should’ve waited until this blew over. I should have taken you out on a proper date, bought you flowers, all of it.”

“Mommy!” Eloise yelled. The sound of little feet running down the hallway caught him off guard. Ford was used to quiet in his home—silence. Of course, that came along with loneliness. Clara and her daughter had already showed him how different his life could be, and he’d only been here a day.

“Hi sweetie,” she said, turning to hug her daughter.

Eloise didn’t seem to notice anything was amiss, just ran into the kitchen announcing she was hungry.

“I made breakfast,” Ford said, his eyes briefly landing on Clara again. “Bacon and scrambled eggs.”

“Can we have pancakes, too?” she asked excitedly.

“We can make those if you check with your mom first.”

Clara relented, and he watched her carefully as he gathered the ingredients. She just looked...defeated. She was also far too quiet. Eloise kept up a steady chatter, asking him questions and giggling, but Clara pulled away

any time he was close. Regret churned through him. She was vulnerable and scared, and he'd kissed her on the sofa last night and caressed her gorgeous body like she was his.

She barely ate and then finally stood, carrying her plate to the sink. Eloise's face was covered in sticky syrup, and Ford watched as Clara wiped her daughter up without a word. He moved behind her as Eloise ran to get her Barbies, and Clara stiffened as his hand landed on her hip.

"Ford."

She didn't turn around to look at him, just stared at the dirty dishes and glasses on the kitchen counter. The silky robe she had on over her pajamas did little to conceal her soft curves, and he wrapped his arm across her chest, pulling her close. He could feel her breasts pillowing against his forearm and the way her breath caught. She stiffened, and it was all he could do to hold still, not duck down and kiss her like he wanted, feeling her melt against him like yesterday.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"You don't need to apologize."

"I rushed things when I shouldn't have."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. "It's not even that. I just feel like I can't really trust you. I thought one thing all along about who you guys were, and it was just an illusion. I don't know anything about you!"

He hesitated, trying to gather his thoughts. "We're the good guys, Clara, but we take on evil men. And women," he added as an afterthought. "I know it's a lot to take in, but I'm the same man I've always been. That hasn't changed."

"Maybe. But there were all these secrets at Shadow Security that were hidden from me, and now I'm in danger. How did Anna ever deal with this?"

She was crying now, and he turned her in his arms, tucking her against him. She relaxed for just a moment, her body melding perfectly with his, but then pushed him away. "I think I do want to go over to Jett's."

"Okay. I'll take you both there when you're ready. We can stay for a while and—"

"No. I want to stay there. Just Eloise and me."

The meaning of her words clicked into place. She didn't want him here. She felt safer at Jett's home than with Ford crashing on her sofa. And just like all the foster homes he'd been in as a kid, who let him stay for a short time but not permanently, she was rejecting him.



It stung more than he wanted to admit.

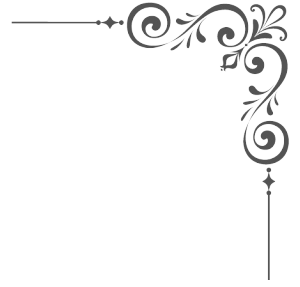
“Clara,” he said, trying to gather his thoughts.

“No. I thought about it last night, and it’ll be too hard having you stay here. I know you can keep us safe, Ford. It’s not that. I just don’t trust myself around you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything. I know that I rushed things between us, but I care about you.”

She looked up, and the fresh tears falling down her cheeks slayed him. He moved closer, crowding into her space. His fingers threaded through her hair, and his gaze dropped for just a moment, scanning over her lips before he watched her breasts rise and fall beneath her camisole. She was affected by him, too. “Ford,” she pleaded, her body trembling. Clara was panicking, closing in on herself. “It’s better this way,” she said.

He held her in place for a moment as he searched her gaze and nodded before backing away. Letting her go. If she wanted to stay at Jett’s, he’d take her there, no matter how much it burned him up inside.





CLARA WALKED AROUND Jett's property on Saturday afternoon, watching her daughter run around in the sunshine. They were bundled up against the cold, but it was a gorgeous day. It was bittersweet to see how happy Eloise was. Clara had only ever been able to afford an apartment. Her daughter clearly loved the big yard here and was shrieking with happiness as she played. Fences surrounded the perimeter, much like at Shadow Security, and Clara knew there were hidden cameras as well. Although she'd decided to come here because she needed to process everything that had happened over the past week, she had to admit that she did feel safe.

Ford had been quiet as he drove them over, carrying Clara's suitcase inside despite her protests. He'd shot her a look of disbelief, and she realized that was just the type of man he was. He watched out for others, even if she'd told him she needed some space.

They'd decided to leave Clara's car at her apartment complex. If Nicholas, Natalia, or anyone else was in fact looking for her this weekend, it would only further serve to throw them off. The IT guys were watching the surveillance cams they'd hacked into. If anyone tampered with her vehicle, they'd be alerted immediately.

The expression on Ford's face had been unreadable as he said goodbye. She'd see him in the office on Monday, and he'd made her promise to call if she needed something. Her cheeks had flamed as he'd looked at her from across Jett's foyer, the heat in his eyes nearly sending her up in flames. She was worried her boss and Anna would realize something had happened between the two of them. Her cheeks still pinkened as she recalled Ford slowly undressing her, his mouth and lips everywhere, her body alighting under his touch.

After the hellish week she'd had, the last thing she needed was some office gossip. Jett was the type of man who was discreet, but Anna? Clara had a feeling if she got wind of anything between Ford and Clara, everyone else would know in a heartbeat.

Moving toward her daughter, she felt her chest tighten. All that mattered was that Eloise was safe. Anything and everything else, she could handle.

"Hi!" Anna called out from the back deck.

Clara looked over her shoulder, seeing Anna standing there in a white parka, skinny jeans, and high-heeled boots. Anna grinned as she walked over to them. "I figured I should wear my cute clothes before I outgrow them. I

know they make maternity jeans, but I want to enjoy my regular things while I still can.”

“I get it,” Clara said with a smile. “It’s hard to find anything that fits right when you’re pregnant.”

Anna walked closer, her large hoop earrings gleaming in the sunlight. She looked put together and fashionable, if not a tad overdressed for an afternoon at home. “Are you heading out?”

“No, I just wanted to come out and talk.” She brushed some of her blonde hair back, leaning closer to confide in Clara. “Jett told me a little about what’s going on. He said they told you about the Shadow Ops Team yesterday. I’ll admit I was shocked to learn the extent of their operations when I was in Seattle.”

“Shocked would be an understatement,” Clara said softly. “I’ve been working here for months. I’ll admit I wondered some about the extensive security, but they’re a security firm. I figured they were overly cautious. It turns out, everyone else knew what was going on except for me.”

Anna nodded. “I bet that stings. Jett didn’t want the entire staff to know about the team.”

Clara shrugged. “Yeah, well, surprise. Now I’ve got some lunatics looking for me. I never did find out how they picked me. I’m assuming they were watching the front gate and saw me coming and going.”

“You’re young and beautiful. And let’s face it—those guys are former Deltas. You and I are easier to target than them.”

“What happened in Seattle?” Clara asked. Her gaze darted to Eloise playing for a moment, then landed back on Anna.

“Well, it sucked to be honest. Jett had a work trip—a meeting. I tagged along so we could sight-see. By happenstance, some of the guys were out there on a mission. Except Jett hadn’t told me anything about that. He ended up needing to step in and help, so Ford came to babysit.”

Clara smiled despite herself. “I’m sure you loved that.”

“Right? I’d just called my best friend Ashleigh to tell her how I was away for the weekend. The next thing I know, I’m being left in the hotel room. I was livid. Jett wouldn’t even tell me what he was doing. Then Ford got involved, and I insisted on going with him. The guy they were looking for eluded them, and he ended up kidnapping me and the driver of the cab.”

Clara gasped in shock. “Oh my God.”

“I texted Jett that I needed help. Apparently, he was a man crazed trying to find me.”

“He really loves you,” Clara said. “He was always somewhat gruff and abrupt. I get it, he’s a busy guy running his company. But he’s been different since he met you.”

Anna raised her eyebrows. “I might say the same about you. I saw Ford looking at you earlier. What did you do to the guy?” she asked with a giggle.

Clara flushed, protesting. “Nothing.”

“Jett told me that Ford stayed at your apartment last night.”

“He slept on the sofa.”

“I bet that’s not where he wanted to be,” Anna teased. “With the way he was looking at you earlier? Honey, that is a man who’d do anything for you.”

“Ford? He’s protective. I’m sure he’s the type of man who’d watch over anyone who needed his protection.”

“Look, he did follow me around Seattle,” Anna confided. “But not once did he look at me the way that he was looking at you earlier. I don’t know what happened that made you want to come over here without him, but damn. Even I could feel the heat between you two earlier.”

Clara looked at her daughter playing.

“Ford’s a good guy,” Anna said softly.

Clara bit her lip and nodded. “He kind of overwhelms me. Whenever he’s close...it’s like I can’t think of anything else when he’s near me.”

“Yep, like I said. I felt it, too, in the foyer. I bet he’s amazing in bed,” Anna said dreamily. “Those big, broody guys are intense and make amazing lovers.” Clara burst into laughter, certain she was turning red. “I’m telling you—Jett is something else. And all of those guys are cut from the same cloth.”

“I really don’t know that much about him. He was raised in foster care and moved around a lot. I think his teammates are his family.”

“Just trust him, okay? I might not have known any of them that long, but I know that Ford would never do anything to put you in danger.”

Clara blew out a sigh, and Anna leaned closer. “He cares about you. He’d probably never admit it to me, but I can see it. I heard him talking to Jett about your car as well. He was furious that you were put in any danger.”

“Mommy!” Eloise yelled, running over. “Can we walk that way? I think I saw a red bird! I want to go find it.”

“A cardinal? All right, lead the way.”

“I’m going to head back in,” Anna said. “I’m not really dressed for walking around in these boots.”

“You look like a Barbie,” Eloise declared.

“Great,” Anna murmured. She smiled at Eloise though. “Thank you, sweetie. I like your pink coat and purple boots.”

“Pink is my favorite color. Come on, Mommy, let’s go find the bird. Come on!”

Clara said goodbye to Anna, watching the other woman walk toward the large house. It was a looming presence, much like the man who owned it: big and secure, and no doubt filled with secrets.

Her phone buzzed, and she was surprised to see a text from Ford.

Ford: *Just wanted to make sure that you’re okay.*

A feeling of warmth washed over her. Even though she was still completely in over her head with everything that had transpired, she had to admit it was sweet that he was checking up on her. She followed her daughter across the large expanse of lawn and couldn’t help the soft sigh that escaped her lips as she reread his text. She hadn’t exactly been pushing Ford away last night. If anything, she’d almost begged him to continue. Clara didn’t even know what had gotten into her. Things had been off and on with her ex before they finally broke up, but she’d never felt the all-consuming passion like she did around Ford. She was comfortable with him, she realized. Certainly, she was attracted to him, but she’d never have let him move so fast if she didn’t feel safe.

He was dangerous, though. Maybe not to her, because she knew that the men who worked for Jett would never harm an innocent person. He lived a secret life though. And besides, just because they were attracted to one another didn’t mean he was looking for a relationship.

She continued walking with Eloise for another half an hour before finally convincing her daughter to head back to the house. It was colder in the shadows of the trees, and she was ready to sit down inside with a cup of tea for herself and hot chocolate for Eloise. Hopefully Jett had something like that here. If not, no doubt Anna would insist on finding some.

The man himself was coming out of the house by the time she and her daughter walked back.

“Oh good, I was just coming to look for you,” he said, his gaze intense. He was a handsome man, to be sure, but she’d always been somewhat intimidated by him. He had to be at least fifteen years older than her. Anna

didn't seem to mind their age difference or the hardened warrior in him. They were complete opposites but somehow perfectly fit together. "Anna said you and your daughter went for a walk."

"We did. She absolutely loves it here," Clara said.

"Maybe Ford will show you his place sometime," Jett said, surprising her. "His backyard has a big treehouse, or so I hear."

"A treehouse?" Eloise asked excitedly.

"A treehouse?" Clara echoed in confusion.

"It was there when he moved in," Jett explained. "The guys offered to help him tear it down, but he decided to keep it in case he ever had a family."

Clara slowed her step, a new awareness washing over her. She'd always assumed a man like him wouldn't want children. He was so—big. Gruff. Serious. Then again, he'd been a natural with Eloise. Even if nothing further ever happened between them, she wasn't sure she could get the image of Ford and her daughter with the pizza dough out of her head.

"I'm surprised," she said lightly. "I didn't really take him as a family type guy."

Jett lifted a shoulder. "Me either, to be honest. He was raised in foster care. Ford told me once that we were his family."

"Yeah, he said something like that to me."

Jett eyed her, seeming surprised. The look was gone in an instant. "Personally, I thought we should use it like a hunter's tree stand since his property backs up to the woods," Jett added with a chuckle. "Ford vetoed that idea pretty quickly. He was worried his neighbor would complain."

"Is that even allowed?" Clara asked in disbelief.

"I doubt it," Jett said, looking unconcerned. "He's over at headquarters today with Luke and Gray. We're trying to run down more information on the people he told you about. I don't like to speak in the open," he said, nodding toward the fences in the distance. She followed his gaze. Was he worried about some type of surveillance devices around his property? Hidden cameras and microphones to record his conversations?

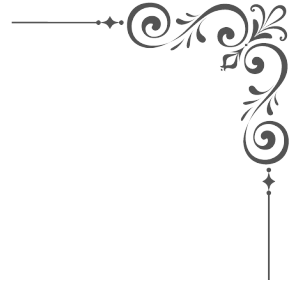
She shook her head. These guys really did live in a different world.

"I'd be there myself helping out but am dealing with the operation Sam and Nick are away on. I invited the team over for dinner," he added. "Lena is going to prepare one of her specialties. It's safe to speak freely inside my home, so they'll give us an update then, too."

"Everyone is coming?" Clara asked in surprise.

“Ford, Luke, and Gray. Unless something urgent develops. We’ll talk more inside. The men should be here in two hours.”







FORD GLANCED IN HIS rearview mirror as he headed toward Jett's house, making sure he wasn't being followed. He'd been on edge ever since learning about Natalia and Nicholas last night, and the research they'd done today hadn't helped matters. They were dangerous and deadly. Although Anastasia and Natalia had arrived in the U.S. separately, eighteen months apart, they'd trained together in Russia. Natalia's marriage to Nicholas had been arranged, but they'd operated together seamlessly. Although Nicholas himself was American, his parents had both come from Moscow. When he'd married Natalia, she'd helped lure women for the trafficking ring he was running, all the while funneling money from the sale of girls to her offshore accounts.

It was a big fucking mess, the operation more extensive than anyone had ever imagined. Anastasia's arrest was the tip of the iceberg, and Ford knew there would be trouble before the rest of their crime empire collapsed.

"Thanks for the ride, man," Luke said as they left Clara's apartment complex behind them.

"Yep."

"Leaving my truck at Clara's will throw them off if they show tonight."

"Maybe. Maybe not. West has two of his IT guys monitoring the camera feeds though. If we catch them snooping around, we'll forward it to the Feds. I just still can't get over the FBI missing an entire chunk of Anastasia's background."

"She was under deep cover," Luke pointed out. "Both Natalia and Anastasia were very well-trained. They knew how to operate without tipping off the authorities. No doubt they'll be looking into many of the recent sex-trafficking cases more thoroughly now. Multiple other women could have been trafficked over the Canadian border right under our noses. That shit burns me up," he muttered.

"I'm worried they'll come after Clara again. It's personal to them now. Their entire family has a vendetta against Shadow Security."

"Commit the crime, do the time," Luke quipped. "They were good. I'll give them that. We're better though. I heard Anastasia has started to crack."

Ford's gaze swung to his buddy before returning to the road.

"Yep. Now that we know of Natalia's existence, they're playing that against her."

"Smart."

“The Feds told her that Natalia is in custody, too. At first, she wouldn’t admit to knowing her, but now she’s begging to see her.”

“Jesus. I’d like to see her, too. I’ve got a list of questions a mile long. Who else is involved in this? How long have they had eyes on Clara? They were in her parking lot multiple nights this week because they’re still plotting something. They won’t give up.”

“They will if they’re arrested.”

“God damn the Bureau,” Ford said. “If they’d moved in last night, they could’ve arrested them both.”

“You know how the government moves—at a fucking snail’s pace.”

“West said Nicholas and Natalia still haven’t returned to their home outside of Boston, which means they’re either still prowling around here or already on the run. Either way, I won’t feel comfortable with Clara being alone until they’re brought in.”

Ford flipped on his turn signal, turning right to head down the secluded road toward Jett’s home. It was really more like a mansion, surrounded by expansive, wooded acres. There was a lake out back. A hot tub on his deck. Plenty of grass and greenery. Ford had purchased his own humble home a year ago, and he enjoyed having a small yard and a place to call his own.

“Did you hear what I said?” Luke asked, drawing him out of his thoughts.

“What was that?” Ford asked.

“I asked if you needed some time alone with Clara tonight. I’ll have Anna watch the kid or something.”

Ford couldn’t help but chuckle. “Anna with a kid? She’d probably be more hopeless than me. Eloise is cute as hell though.”

“Huh. You want kids?”

Ford lifted a shoulder. “I never thought about it much. I mean, yeah, hopefully someday I’ll find a woman to settle down with me. I always figured it’d be way off in the future, but who the hell knows.”

“Hey, if the boss can do it, so can you. Did you ever in a million years think you’d see Shadow head over heels about a woman?” Luke asked with a chuckle, referring to Jett by his old military code name.

“Hell no,” Ford agreed.

“Clara’s sweet,” Luke said.

“And?”

“And I can tell you like her. Don’t deny it,” he said, his low laughter filling the cab of the truck. “I think she’d be good for you. And I didn’t miss

the way you wrapped your arm around her the other night. You've got it bad, buddy."

"Yeah, well, she wanted to go over to Jett's, didn't she?"

"Which is why I asked if you needed some alone time. She's scared. It's been a hell of a week."

Ford let out a breath. "We'll see."

"No worries. I got your back, buddy."

"What was up with Gray? I thought for sure he'd want to come and be in on the action tonight," Ford said. "He seemed more like his old self the other day."

"Don't know. He said he had something to do. Sometimes I think he still prefers his solitude."

Ford pulled up to the gate at Jett's house, punching in the entry code. The men could all access Jett's property and home if needed. The sky was darkening now, and he hadn't seen another vehicle the entire time they'd been driving down the secluded road. Worry etched through him anyway. Just because they didn't have eyes on a tango didn't mean they weren't being watched themselves.



CLARA WAS QUIET AFTER Ford and Luke arrived, listening to Anna and Eloise laughing together over her dolls. Lena had arrived with groceries to cook dinner for everyone, and briefly, she wondered if there was anything the woman couldn't do. The men had disappeared into Jett's home office to discuss the case, leaving her feeling anxious all over again. Ford had given her only the briefest of updates when he arrived, letting her know that both Nicholas and Natalia were still at large.

"Are you doing okay?" Anna asked sympathetically. Eloise had wandered off to the side and was quietly playing with her Barbie dolls on the floor in front of the coffee table.

"Yeah. I just don't understand why they wouldn't have been arrested already if they're that dangerous."

Anna shrugged. "It's a good question. They're probably just making sure they have all the paperwork they need. I'm not sure how it all works, but to go in their home they need a warrant. I can only assume if there's a long list of charges, they need to get everything in order first. I worked on Wall Street before. It's different, obviously, but for financial crimes there'd be crazy

amounts of documentation and warrants necessary before any arrests were ever made.”

“They have her on surveillance vandalizing my car.”

“I know. I bet they’re planning to arrest both of them at the same time. Jett only told me a little, but it sounds like Nicholas has been operating under their radar. They want all their boxes checked so it’ll be a clean case. I’d give it another day or two, then you can go home and not have to worry anymore.”

“Easier said than done,” Clara replied.

Low voices came from down the hallway, and Clara looked up to see the men walking into the large family room. Her eyes briefly scanned over them, and she realized that Ford was already watching her. She quickly averted her gaze.

“Perfect timing!” Lena said as she came out from the kitchen. “Dinner’s just about ready. Why doesn’t everyone go get seated.”

Anna stood up, smiling. “Great! Let me show everyone your seats. The food smells amazing, Lena. I swear you are a wizard in the kitchen. Don’t tell Jett, but the only reason I moved in here so quickly is because of your fantastic cooking.”

“Anna,” Jett muttered as she giggled. He took her hand as she walked over to him, kissing the back of it. The men didn’t even flinch, clearly used to Anna’s exuberance and Jett’s easy affection toward her.

Clara was quiet throughout dinner, letting the others carry most of the conversation. Anna had made sure that she was seated beside Ford, and it made Clara all the more jittery. Ford had changed clothes at some point from when she’d seen him in the morning. His long-sleeved shirt and jeans hugged his muscular body, and the stubble on his jaw made him seem even gruffer than usual. He was quiet, content to listen to the others as well. Fortunately, she’d had her daughter to tend to, but she hadn’t been able to ignore the way her senses once again kicked into high-alert now that he was near.

“Can you pass the bread?” Anna asked.

Clara reached for the basket at the same time as Ford, pulling her hand back as their fingers brushed. He stiffened, feeling it, too. It almost felt like his touch had burned her, the heat emanating off his frame making her all too aware of every part of him. He swallowed and passed the bread basket, murmuring something to Anna. Clara shifted in her seat, feeling Ford’s eyes on her. His muscular hand gripped his fork. Even doing such an ordinary

thing, she sensed his tightly-leashed strength. He looked like he was ready to jump up and fight the enemy, annihilating any threat.

Did he think they were in danger here?

“Eloise, do you want to help me with the dessert?” Anna asked, drawing Clara’s attention away from the intense man at her side. “I’ve got some cookies that really need frosting and sprinkles before we serve them.”

“Oh, can I help, Mommy?” her daughter asked. “Please?”

“Sure, sweetie.” Clara said, excusing her. Eloise ran from the table into the kitchen, and they could hear Anna’s laughter as she hurried behind. Nervously, Clara took a sip of her Merlot. Jett was saying something to the men, but the building tension between her and Ford was driving her crazy.

“Excuse me,” she said, heading down the hallway toward the bathroom as she let out a shaky breath. She closed the door and took longer than necessary to relieve herself and then wash her hands and gather her thoughts. Finally, she unlocked the door and stepped back out. Shock coursed through her as she saw Ford waiting in the hallway, leaning against a doorframe. The stubble on his jaw made him look even more masculine than usual, and the intensity of his gaze nearly made her stumble.

“Hi. Can we talk?” he asked, his voice low.

She paused, only a few feet away from him. Part of her wanted to take a step back, to put more distance between them. It felt like every nerve-ending in her body was igniting, aware of his strength and presence. His dark eyes raked over her, and she felt her body heat. “Yeah. Is everything okay?”

“I didn’t hear back from you earlier.”

“Sorry. I was outside with Eloise when I got your text. She was having the time of her life running around. We’ve always lived in apartments, and it was nice for her to have space to play where it was safe.”

He was studying her as she talked, and she felt a hint of a blush begin to creep over her cheeks as she rambled on. Ford was always entirely too observant. They were close enough that she could smell his woody scent. He was so big, a part of her wanted to go to him, soaking in some of that strength and warmth. She brushed a strand of her hair back, her hand slightly trembling. Ford tracked her movements with his eyes. He hadn’t stepped closer, but he hadn’t moved away either.

“Jett told me you guys were at the office today,” she said, trying to focus on the issue at hand. She was in danger. Her attraction to Ford should be the very last thing on her mind.

“Yep. The guys and I are still running down everything about Nicholas and Natalia’s backgrounds. I wish the FBI would have arrested them last night so we could be done with those two.”

“Well, they still can, right? Arrest them I mean. I thought they just needed to get everything in order.” She released a breath, swearing that his eyes softened. He could tell she was nervous. Clara wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed about that or not. Ford saw her too clearly. It was both flattering and unnerving. She still didn’t know entirely what to make of his attention. Just because Ford said he should’ve taken her on a date before kissing her that way didn’t mean he wanted a relationship. He was a single guy used to living the bachelor life. He might be an attentive lover, but as for wanting a girlfriend? That was an entirely different matter.

“The arrest should be coming soon. I understand the Bureau wanting an airtight case, but it burns me up that they could be out there looking for you. I want you to be safe.”

The intensity in his dark gaze surprised her. “Ford.”

“I care about you. I realize we don’t know everything about one another yet and that I didn’t handle things the way I should have last night, but I’ll be damned if I let any harm come to you.”

Her eyes watered, and Ford took a step closer.

“When this is over, I’m hoping you’ll give me a chance. I won’t rush you into anything or pressure you, but hell. I’ve been on my own for a long time and know that I feel like a different man when I’m around you. I want to see what this is between us.”

The tears spilled over, and he moved closer until she was backed against the wall, his hands cradling her face. His thumbs swiped away at the wetness on her cheeks, his dark eyes observing far too much.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

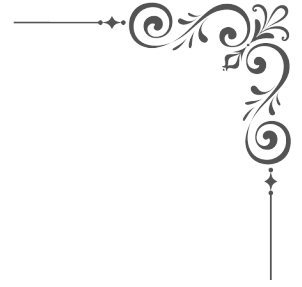
“I told you the other night I won’t hurt you, sweetheart,” he said, his voice husky. He was so close she could see the crinkles in the corners of his eyes, the dark stubble across his jaw. Ford was raw and real and so intense, it took her breath away.

“I don’t just casually date,” she admitted. “I have a daughter and don’t have the time or energy to just fool around.” Her hands were resting lightly on his chest, and her fingers clutched onto the soft fabric of his shirt, as if entreating him to understand

Another tear rolled down her cheek, and he gently thumbed it away. “I don’t just fool around either. I’m not looking for a one-night-stand, and I’m too old for that nonsense anyway. You’re too good for a man like me, but that doesn’t stop me from wanting you.” Her lips parted, and he lowered his head. The heat between them was practically unbearable, the invisible force pulling them together impossible to fight. She gasped, and then Ford’s lips were on hers, his hands sliding to cradle her head as he stole her breath.

Clara clung to him. Just like the other night, heat rocketed through her entire body. His touch, his scent—everything felt magnified. Her mouth opened as his tongue slid inside, exploring. Claiming. Ford growled as he shifted even closer, his erection pressing against her belly. She was panting and gasping, desperate to be even closer, when suddenly a piercing alarm sounded and the house went dark.







FORD STIFFENED, PRESSING Clara against the wall as the alarm in Jett's house sounded. Her smaller body was tucked against his, and whereas she'd been soft and pliant in his arms moments ago, now she was rigid. Terrified. He looked left and right but couldn't see a damn thing in the darkness. The alarm itself didn't bother him as much as the fact that the electricity had suddenly gone out. Someone opening the front or back door without typing in the code to disarm the system could've inadvertently triggered the alarm. But the electricity being cut at the exact same time? That was a problem.

Clara was shaking, her hands still clutching his shirt, and she was saying something about Eloise. Jett shouted from the other room, but Ford couldn't make out the words over the noise. He ran a hand over Clara's head, inhaling her vanilla scent, and ducked down, hating the tears that now ran down her face once again. "I think someone's in the house," he said into Clara's ear. "Eloise will be okay. Jett and Luke are in there with her."

A moment later, the generator kicked on, and he blinked in the sudden light. Ford stepped away from Clara, using one arm to keep her against the wall as he looked around. Nothing was disturbed in the foyer, the front door still shut. He didn't sense anyone near them. The damn alarm was still piercing the air though. "Come on," he said, wrapping one arm around Clara as the other retrieved his Glock from its holster. Clara relaxed slightly as she seemed to realize that he was armed. He was just as deadly without a weapon, but she might not understand that.

He held her tightly against him, his gaze sweeping the area as they moved down the hall. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he wished he could hear what was happening over the noise. He looked up, somehow sensing something was outside. Suddenly, Anna's scream pierced the air, and then they were running toward the kitchen. "Stay behind me!" Ford yelled, pulling Clara around to his back.

The cold breeze from the open back door chilled him to the bone.

"Anna, tell me what happened!" Luke yelled. He'd pulled his own weapon out, his blue eyes sharp as they scanned the room for any additional threats.

Jett was already on the phone, barking out orders over the alarm as Anna stood there crying, gesturing wildly with her arms. Lena was on her phone as well, urgently telling an emergency dispatcher the address. Ford's gaze landed on the open door. His eyes swept the kitchen, realizing who was

missing. No one had disarmed the alarm yet, and the earsplitting sound made him want to break the damn thing. His heartrate spiked as he ran toward the back.

“Eloise!” Clara yelled.

Ford reached behind him, holding her back as he moved onto the deck. Clara was screaming now, almost hysterical. The cold winter air bit into him, but he barely felt it, adrenaline and rage pumping through his veins. Frowning, he looked up at the dark sky, the low thumping of a helicopter making him pause.

Luke and Anna ran onto the deck behind them, the silence deafening as someone finally disarmed the security system. “They took her!” Anna panted. “We were in the kitchen decorating cookies, and someone knocked on the back door. I wasn’t even thinking. Jett told me Gray might come by later on. I forgot about the alarm and opened it right as someone cut the electricity to the house,” she sobbed. “Two men were out here. I couldn’t stop them. I let them take her!”

Clara collapsed on the deck, crying, as Ford crouched down beside her. “Do you hear that?” Luke asked, cocking his head then rushing to the edge of the deck.

“A helicopter,” Ford agreed. “They must’ve bypassed the fence by flying right over it. Maybe under the cover of night, the cameras didn’t catch them if they repelled down. The sensors on the fence would’ve tripped the alarms if they scaled it. There were two men?”

“Jett and I were still finishing dinner,” Luke said. “Anna saw them. We jumped up when the alarm sounded, and then the lights went out.”

“We need to check the cameras,” Ford said. “Did they escape on foot or get back on the helo? There’s a lot of ground here to cover.”

“I’m going to sweep the area,” Luke said. “We don’t know how many men were here. Maybe someone is still out there who got left behind. I’m going to check the perimeter of the house to make sure it’s clear.” He grabbed his own weapon and moved off the deck, jogging down the steps into the dark night.

“We’ll get Eloise,” Ford said, running his hand over Clara’s back as she shook from both fear and the cold night. “I promise I won’t rest until she’s back in your arms. We’ll search the grounds, get air traffic control to let us know which way the helo went, and bring her back to you. I swear that we’ll find her.”

“She’s just a little girl,” Clara cried.

“Why is there a knife on the kitchen floor?” Jett yelled, storming onto the deck. He rushed over to Anna, taking her in his arms as he looked around. “That fucking backup generator took too damn long to kick in. We could’ve stopped them.”

“I tried to stab one of the men when he grabbed me,” Anna said tearfully.

“With a butter knife?”

“That’s what I was holding. I panicked!”

“There’s blood on it,” Jett said, his eyes narrowing as he tried to soothe her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, and he wiped away the tears streaming down her face. “Even if you only scratched him, we’ve got his DNA. There’s some hard evidence for the Bureau since they’ve been sitting on their asses. Where’s Luke?”

“Checking the perimeter of the house,” Ford said. “Those guys were long gone by the time we got outside. They had a damn helicopter to get in and out. We’ll search the grounds, but I doubt there’s anyone still here. It was already in the air when I ran out to the deck.”

Jett’s face looked deadly. “I just spoke with West Renken. IT is pulling all my surveillance footage from tonight. Lena called 911, so the police will be here soon, too. I’ve got to call the Bureau. There’s not a damn chance this doesn’t relate to the case. If they don’t arrest them tonight, we’re taking them down ourselves.”

Ford clenched his jaw, nodding. There was no doubt in his mind that Nicholas and Natalia had orchestrated this. Going after them without getting the go ahead from the Feds wasn’t exactly legal or how they normally operated, but he didn’t give a shit. Clara’s daughter had been kidnapped. He wasn’t waiting around, allowing her to become a statistic. They’d find her, and then he would end the evil behind the god damn human trafficking organization Nicholas was running if it was the last thing he ever did.

Sirens sounded in the distance, and Jett met his gaze. “Let’s go back inside. We need to call Gray, too. He’ll help with the search. Lena can handle the police. One of us should stay here with the women.”

“I’m going after Eloise,” Ford said, helping Clara to her feet.

Her cell phone began buzzing, and she pulled it from her pocket in surprise. “It’s an unknown number,” she said, her voice shaking.

Ford snatched the phone from her hands. “Who is this?” he seethed.

There was silence for a moment. “A businessman willing to make a trade,” a male voice said.

Dread snaked down his spine. “Nicholas.”

Jett’s astute gaze landed on him. He circled his finger around, indicating Ford should keep him talking. Jett was already calling IT on his cell, no doubt seeing if they could trace the number.

“So you’ve heard of me,” he said with a bark of laughter. “That was quite a show we put on tonight. A little extreme, even for me. Shadow Security has cost me a lot of money over the past year. Without my partner, my business is only earning half of what I was used to. That little disruption a year ago where you stole my cargo caused some severe growing pains.”

“Cargo?” Ford asked in disbelief. “You’re trafficking humans.”

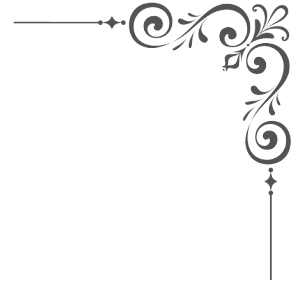
“Word on the street is that children could earn me a pretty penny. I was hoping to fetch a nice sum for Clara—those big, blue eyes and huge tits are a turn-on for plenty of men. Some prefer girls much, much younger though.”

“NO.” Anger blazed through him, and his fist clenched so tightly, Clara stepped away from him in alarm as his entire body stiffened. Ford felt like he was about to explode, fury rocketing through his very bloodstream. He’d spent years in foster care trying to prevent others from getting hurt when he could. He’d seen countless horrors in his life. There was no way he was letting a single thing happen to Clara’s little girl.

“I might make a trade though,” Nicholas continued, his voice deceptively casual. “The woman, plus fifty million dollars, and you agree to leave my operation alone. I’ve bribed government officials before and will do it again. They’re usually willing to turn a blind eye for the right price. I don’t need some fucking mercenaries after me though. If you can do all that and agree to stand down, I’ll give you back the kid.”

“We’ll never agree to that,” Ford said, his voice steel.

“You have one hour to decide. After that? You’ll never see that little girl again.”





CLARA THREW UP AGAIN, her head pounding as she leaned over the trash can. When Ford ushered her back inside, telling them Nicholas had Eloise, she'd been unable to keep her dinner down any longer. Ford hadn't told her exactly what Eloise's kidnapper had said, but the devastation in his eyes had been enough. They'd been trafficking women. Selling them. And now they had her innocent little girl.

"I don't care what time it is!" Jett yelled into his phone. "Get me those god damn flight records ASAP. I want to know exactly where that helicopter is going." He cursed again, his fist slamming down on the counter.

Ford was updating Gray over the phone, pacing back and forth in the kitchen like a caged animal. "I should go out and help Luke search the grounds," he muttered. "It's taking too long to get answers."

"I've got more guys coming to help," Jett said. "I don't think anyone's out there though. They left by helicopter for a reason."

Anna rubbed Clara's back as she dry-heaved again, and Lena rushed over with a glass of water. Tears streamed down Clara's face, and she knew she was blubbering nonsense to the other women. She couldn't even think clearly, let alone form a coherent sentence. "Shhh, Jett will find her," Anna soothed.

The sirens from outside grew louder, and Jett himself stormed to the front door, yelling at the others to open the gate. Clara looked around the commotion in the kitchen, bewildered, but Lena was already watching the camera feed on a monitor, allowing the police and emergency vehicles onto Jett's property with the touch of a button. Luke knocked on the back door, announcing himself, and rushed back into the kitchen. "I don't think anyone's out there. The men who were here earlier are on that helo." His gaze landed on Clara. "We'll get her back. Ford and I are leaving right now."

Ford suddenly lifted his phone to his ear, exchanging a glance with his teammate. "You have something?" Ford asked whoever had just called. He clenched his fist, looking angrier than Clara had ever seen him before. "Luke finished searching the grounds. Negative. Right. We got it. On our way."

His piercing gaze landed on Clara. "I'm heading up to Boston. We have reason to believe they were returning to their home before leaving the country."

"What?" she gasped.

“That was West. He was able to run traces on Natalia’s credit cards, and one was used thirty minutes ago not far from their home.”

“Why are they going back to Boston?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe they have other, uh, victims that are being held there. In the past, they’ve trafficked women out of the country on box trucks. Hidden cargo. It’s not just women they’re moving now. Nicholas and Natalia need to get out of the country themselves. They had to know they might end up under investigation after Anastasia was arrested, but they just moved up the timeline. They’ll be arrested for kidnapping, the other charges slapped on them later. It’s over for them.”

Clara’s hand flew to her mouth, and he crossed toward her, roughly pulling her into his arms. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. His hands moved over her back, trying to soothe her, but he was stiff. On edge. Clara could feel the tension in every muscle of his body. Ford was a lethal warrior, and he was about to go into battle to get her daughter back.

“We’ll find Eloise,” Luke said from behind her, his voice hard. “I know this doesn’t make it any easier, but they probably drugged her to keep her quiet. She’s probably sleeping now, unaware of anything that’s going on.”

Clara choked out a sob, her body sagging against Ford.

“It’s true,” Ford told her, his voice gentling. “She probably won’t remember most of it. They drug the women to keep them compliant and to make sure they’re quiet in transit. If Nicholas is moving Eloise from a helicopter to an airplane, they don’t want a screaming child drawing attention. She’ll be safe until we get to her.”

“But they’ll hurt her. Sell her.” Clara clung to him, burying her face in Ford’s chest. “She’s everything to me. Please don’t let them take her!”

The front door opened, and she heard multiple voices and footsteps. Jett was rapidly explaining what had happened, and she heard police officers and other first responders rushing into the house.

“I’ll get her,” Ford said, his voice gruff with emotion. “We’ll intercept them before it comes to that. We’ve already notified the Boston Bureau. They’ll contact the Boston PD and airport authorities. Everyone will be looking for them. They’re not leaving the country, Clara. I swear to you.”

“How long of a flight is it?” she asked.

“From here to Boston? I’d guess an hour by helicopter.”

“But how are you getting there?”



“West got us a flight,” Luke said, cocking his head to the door. “We’ll get your daughter back. Let’s roll.”



FORD BIT BACK A CURSE as the helicopter flew through the night, the thumping of the rotors matching the pounding of his heart. With a quick stop at Shadow Security to gear up, Ford, Luke, and Gray were now enroute to Boston. Jett had enough contacts and people on his payroll that he’d been able to get a pilot and bird for them almost immediately. The helipad on top of the headquarters building wasn’t used often, but it had come in fucking handy tonight.

“How is she?” Gray asked, his gaze meeting Ford’s.

“Clara? She was almost hysterical.” He scrubbed a hand over his face, shaking his head. “We were in the other room, talking. Hell, I’d backed her up against the wall and kissed her right before all hell broke loose.”

Luke snorted, looking amused for a moment. “So you made up.”

“Yeah, we fucking made up and then her kid was kidnapped. It doesn’t even seem possible they could breach Jett’s property like that.”

“He wasn’t planning for anyone to fly in,” Gray pointed out.

“Yeah. He’ll have cameras everywhere now. You won’t be able to walk two feet without tripping over one.”

Static came over their headsets, and then the men heard Jett’s voice. “Nicholas Valentine’s helicopter just landed ten miles outside of Boston. It’s in an industrial complex, according to my contact at the Bureau. There’s multiple buildings and warehouses located there.”

“What the hell are they doing there?” Luke asked.

“My guess is storing cargo—women.”

“Fuck,” Ford spat out. “How the hell are they planning to get all of these women out of the country tonight? Truck them to a damn airport?”

“They aren’t. Maybe he’ll take a few, but after that helicopter stunt, he knows we’re after him. He’s out of time. The FBI set up a stakeout at a regional airport nearby where his private plane is, but flight data shows the helicopter he was on landed at the industrial complex instead.”

“What about Natalia?” Ford asked.

“Still at their home, according to cell phone records. It doesn’t make sense. She used her credit card earlier tonight. West was able to have his guys hack into the satellite systems and track her cell phone that way. Evidently,

she's getting sloppy. Natalia hadn't used her phone all week but turned it back on tonight. We've got her exact location."

"Well shit. Are the police headed there?" Luke asked.

"Affirmative. She'll be arrested and brought in. But you'll be going directly to Nicholas. The FBI is diverting some of their agents from the airport, but you're already in the air. ETA is ten minutes. Over."

"I wonder why Natalia isn't with him?" Ford asked, looking at his teammates.

"Don't know," Gray said. "And if she's at their house, why isn't she moving? She has to be aware of what's going on."

"She could've left the phone," Luke said.

"Supposedly, Nicholas's business partner killed himself last year. Maybe she realized the walls were closing in on her and did the same thing."

"You think she offed herself?" Luke asked.

Gray lifted a shoulder. "I can't imagine her staying at the house like a sitting duck otherwise. Why use her cell phone tonight? She and Anastasia were mindful of electronic communications. All of their plans are crumbling. Her sister was arrested. Their revenge plot against Shadow Security to kidnap Clara backfired. If Natalia hadn't been caught on camera, it's possible she and Nicholas would have continued their human trafficking operation. They weren't even on our radar."

Ford clenched his jaw, looking out into the dark night. He wanted to be with Clara, comforting her, but he'd have to trust Jett and Anna to watch over her now.

"Five minutes," the pilot said over the headsets.

"Shit. We're almost going in blind," Luke muttered.

"He already knows we're coming," Ford said. "There's not a fucking chance he flew away from Jett's house thinking we weren't coming for him."

"Did Jett take Clara's cell phone? Nicholas said he'd call back in an hour."

Ford nodded. "Jett has it. An hour's up, but it's too damn late."

Floodlights shown in the distance as they approached the commercial buildings. It was a hell of a lot different from their military days. They weren't over foreign soil battling insurgents. They were outside of a major U.S. city, taking down an American who dealt in trafficking humans. Ford took a deep breath, trying to rein in his anger.

They'd formulated a plan on the flight over, and it was go time.

“One minute,” the pilot said. The thumping seemed louder and louder, beating in his bloodstream. His gaze was alert, focused, as he studied the buildings below. Nicholas’s helicopter was on the ground, but he saw several large trucks and men moving. Ford readied his weapon. They’d grabbed Kevlar vests, rifles, helmets, and comms equipment from the armory at headquarters. He still had the Glock that he always carried, plus his utility knife. All that was missing was his camo gear, but the dark tee shirt he had on and jeans would conceal him enough in the night.

He hoped like hell that Eloise was indeed asleep. Otherwise, he hated to imagine the fear she’d be going through right now. This was the stuff of nightmares, and it killed him that Clara and Eloise would now know a small amount of the horrors of this world.

They touched down in the corner of the parking lot, the men exiting the helo as shots were fired. The helicopter was already lifting back into the air, moving away as the team ran forward. This wasn’t a military helicopter like their days in the Army. There were no weapons onboard, save for the ones they carried. They’d fight like hell anyway, eliminating the enemy and rescuing Eloise and anyone else held captive.

Communicating over their headsets, they moved forward, taking down untrained men as they went. Nicholas’s thugs had virtually zero training compared to the former Deltas, and they moved as one unit, eliminating the enemy.

“Two box trucks are by the warehouse on the far west side,” the helicopter pilot informed them, having a visual of the ground since he was back in the air. “One car appears to be idling near their helicopter in the east quadrant. Headlights are on. Engine is running. I see smoke from the exhaust.”

“Roger,” Ford replied. He motioned to Luke. “Head to the eastern quadrant. Gray and I will go west and intercept the trucks.”

Luke signaled that he understood, and then pointing his rifle the way he was headed, jogged off. Distant sirens began to sound as Ford and Gray ran toward the warehouse and trucks on the western side. The cold air washed over Ford’s face, but he was too keyed up to notice the temperature. Ford slowed his steps as he heard a car alarm sound from somewhere.

“Is that in one of the warehouses?” Gray asked, swiveling his head.

“We need more boots on the ground,” Ford said. “This complex is huge, and only three of us are here to search.”

“We’ll get her. Backup is coming. We’ll search every building.”

Ford and Gray ran to the corner of one of the warehouses, crouching down to peer around the side. Two box trucks were backed up to the garage door of one warehouse, and they watched in horror as several men were forcing bound women toward them.

“Holy fuck,” Gray muttered. “Where do they think they’re going with them?”

“No idea. If Nicholas was smart, he’d have gotten the hell out of here and saved himself. There’s no way he’ll escape with all of those women in a fucking box truck.”

“There’s three guys, possibly a driver as well. The trucks aren’t running though,” Gray said. “Look. One is empty. They’re loading the women into the other.”

“Maybe it’s a decoy,” Ford said.

They watched as another woman was pulled out, dressed in a short skirt and bra. She had to be freezing in this weather, and Ford wanted to hurt someone at the way they were treating these poor girls.

“We can take them out,” Gray said. “They’re so busy with the women, their weapons are holstered.”

“Luke, SITREP,” Ford said into his headset.

“There’s no one here,” Luke replied. “The helicopter is off. There’s a car running, but no one is in the driver’s seat. I’m going to move closer to search it.”

Ford signaled to Gray, and the two men edged quietly along the side of the warehouse. One woman stumbled as they moved her, and the guy holding her arm smacked her across the face. She flinched but didn’t cry out, clearly too scared to resist. Steeling back his anger, Ford moved even closer. He looked to Gray, holding up his fingers.

*Three. Two. One.*

As two men emerged from the back of the truck, they fired, both men falling to the ground. Screams from the women erupted around them, and Ford and Gray sprinted toward the remaining tangos.

“Where’s the third?” Gray asked.

One of the trucks rumbled to life, and Ford cursed. “Shoot the tires!”

Gray ran toward the vehicles and shot out the tires on the first truck, the sound of gunshots echoing through the night. Two more women stumbled from the warehouse, crying, and Ford called out, telling them to hide and get

down. The sirens grew louder and louder, and suddenly Ford stilled as Nicholas emerged, carrying a duffle bag that was stuffed full.

“Call off the police, or I’ll kill her right now!” Nicholas screamed, aiming a gun at Ford. He dropped the bag to his feet, the thump on the ground making his heart clench. Ford’s eyes tracked from the duffle bag back to him, his heart racing. “Drop it!” he ordered. “Drop your weapon!”

“Not a fucking chance,” Nicholas said. “I’d love to shoot you right between the eyes, but I’ll end her life first.”

“No!”

Nicholas kicked the bag as Ford flinched. “I’ll do it! I’ll kill her right now!”

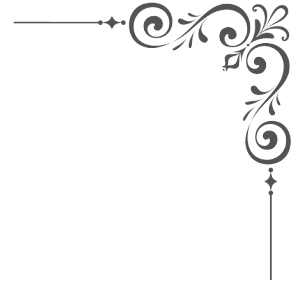
“He’s bluffing,” Gray said over the headsets. Ford heard a car door open and shut. “She’s here. Eloise is here and alive. She’s sleeping in the back of the car that he left idling. I just turned it off. Holy shit. We got her.”

Ford let out a breath, his gaze narrowing. He aimed his weapon at Nicholas’s chest.

Nicholas shouted something unintelligible, and then Ford dropped to the ground as a gunshot went off. He rolled and lifted his head, aiming his rifle at Nicholas. At the same moment, Gray came running from the side, shooting Nicholas in the head. A pool of blood began to form on the ground as Nicholas’s lifeless body lay there beside the duffle bag, and the screams of the women filled the night.

Tires screeched and sirens wailed as police cars finally raced into the complex, and Ford swiped a hand over his forehead as he stood, closing his eyes in relief. The thumping of the helicopter grew louder as their pilot landed once again, and the sound of footsteps running on concrete drew his attention as Luke came sprinting over with Eloise bundled in his arms.

“Thank God,” he murmured, taking the sleeping child from his teammate. “It’s over. It’s finally over.”





CLARA SNUGGLED AGAINST Ford on her sofa the following night, clinging to him like he'd vanish into thin air. It had been a hellish twenty-four hours, with plenty of tears shed and promises made. Fortunately, Eloise didn't remember most of it, but Clara would never forget the terror that she'd gone through worrying about her daughter. When Ford had returned with his teammates, Eloise in his arms, she'd run to them both and never wanted to let go. He'd looked almost teary-eyed himself, and it was shocking to see such a gruff, hardened man nearly brought to his knees.

"You think she's sleeping?" Ford asked quietly.

"She is. I stayed in there so long because she wanted me with her until she fell asleep. I know kids are resilient, but I thank God that Eloise doesn't remember much about what happened. She knows a man came to the back door at Jett's home, but she has no memory of anything afterward."

"Good. She was sleeping when Luke found her. She didn't even wake up once until we were back home. The women we recovered will need a long time to heal, but Eloise is just a child. There's a special kind of hell waiting for a man that would intentionally harm children."

"I'm not even sorry he was killed," Clara admitted. "Does that make me a terrible person?"

"No," he assured her. "It makes you human. Some of the evils of this world will never make sense, but I wholeheartedly believe it's a better place with Nicholas Valentine no longer walking around in it."

"Whatever happened to Natalia? We were so busy at the hospital getting Eloise checked out that I didn't even think to ask."

"She was killed."

"Really?"

Ford nodded. "She was found at their home in Boston. They're conducting an autopsy but believe she may have been poisoned. She'd gone out to the store and was planning to meet Nicholas according to her phone records."

"Who poisoned her?" Clara asked, confused.

"Nicholas had laced one of her drinks. She knew a lot about his operations and could incriminate him."

"So, he killed his own wife?" she asked in disbelief.

"He was nothing but pure evil. They're planning to exhume the body of his partner, too. Although he was originally believed to have died by suicide,

the FBI wants to further examine him.”

“Holy crap. It feels like a miracle that Eloise wasn’t hurt. And those poor women....”

Ford trailed his fingers over her arm, and she yawned. “They’ll get the help they need to recover. You didn’t get much sleep last night and are exhausted. Why don’t you head to bed. I’ll crash out here on the sofa like I did the other night.” She held onto him more tightly and shook her head. “No? You’d rather I leave?”

“No! I don’t want you to stay out here because I want you to stay with me. In my room,” she clarified.

“I’ll stay wherever you want, sweetheart. You know that.”

“Okay, then let’s go to bed.” Before she could move, Ford had lifted her into his arms, standing. She giggled in surprise, but then he dropped his head, kissing her. Things had been sweet and tender between them this evening, with soft touches and gentle caresses. The air felt like it had shifted now, crackling with electricity as her body heated. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she felt his big shoulders. His whiskers rubbed against her as he kissed her again, and then he was moving down the hallway, a man on a mission.

Ford gently set her down in her bedroom, one large hand landing on her hip. “We can go slowly, Clara. I can just hold you tonight if you want.”

“No. I don’t want to wait. I almost lost my daughter yesterday, and I want something good to happen now. I want you. All of you.”

He stared at her a moment as if making sure she really meant it, and then he was moving, kissing her again, harder than before. Rough hands tugged off her shirt as their kisses grew more heated. Her bra came off a moment later, and then Ford was lying her down on the bed, pulling her legs over the side. She gasped as he kissed his way over her breasts, savoring, nipping, and sucking on her nipples. “You’re so damn sweet, Clara,” he groaned, laving his tongue over one as it beaded under his touch.

“Ford, my God,” she murmured softly.

One large hand squeezed her breast as his mouth tended to the other. Her pussy was drenched with arousal, her panties soaked, and his calloused fingers slid up her inner thighs. The skirt she was wearing got pushed up to her waist, and he tugged her panties down. They hung around her ankles, but he didn’t stop, just lifted her legs over his shoulders. She was trapped, spread wide for him as thick fingers wrapped around her waist. Clara was panting,



gasping, and then Ford's mouth was on her. There was no gentle teasing like the other night. Ford was simply devouring her.

One hand moved from her waist, sliding through her delicate folds. His head lifted as he searched her eyes, and two thick fingers penetrated her. She was stretched wide, her inner walls clamping down around him. "You're tight," he murmured. He slowly moved his hand in and out, gauging her reactions. His thumb swiped over her clit, and she arched off the bed with a cry.

Ford growled and circled her clit again, his thumb never stopping as his fingers thrust in and out. "You're going to come for me, honey," he said, his voice gravel. She whimpered and tried to buck against him. His hand at her waist squeezed tighter, holding her in place. He lowered his mouth to where his thumb had been, and as he curled his fingers inside her pussy, he sucked her tender bud into his mouth.

Clara screamed as an orgasm shot straight through her, her body uncontrollable as Ford wrung out every last ounce of pleasure. As she lay panting, he righted her legs, slipped her panties off her ankles, and softly kissed her pussy again, causing her cheeks to heat. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you." He fully removed her skirt and then stripped down himself as she repositioned herself on the bed, scooting up to the top. Her head rested on her pillow as she watched him, transfixed by this muscular, gorgeous man in her bedroom. He'd produced a condom from his wallet and was sheathing himself, his impressive erection bobbing up toward his stomach.

"Like what you see?" he teased.

"Ford," she said, sure she was turning red.

"I love your eyes on me, sweetheart." He lowered himself down until his large body hovered above hers. Large hands cradled her face as his erection rubbed against her core. He kissed her, gentle at first and then more deeply, swiping a stray tear that ran down her cheek.

"Are you okay?" he murmured.

"Just overwhelmed. I'm fine," she promised.

"Death by orgasm," he teased, lightly nipping at her neck. She laughed, shocked at the easiness between them. She'd been overcome with emotion a second ago, and now he had her giggling in bed. And Ford? She'd never have guessed that a gruff man like him could be so sweet. He looked at her, those dark eyes seeing everything, and kissed her again, slowly, so gentle that she thought she might burst.

Clara's hand slid between them, and she gripped his thick erection. "You're big," she said, squeezing him.

"I'll be careful with you," he said, his deep voice sending shivers down her spine.

His biceps bunched as he shifted. Ford lined himself up and then slowly pushed in, kissing her as she tightened around him. His tongue trailed along the seam of her lips, demanding entry, and she opened to him, their kiss deepening. He pushed in further until she gasped, his cock fully seated inside her welcoming body. He was thick and throbbing, stretching her, and Ford rocked in and out slowly, letting her get used to him. Heat coiled in her belly, the feel of him filling her shocking in its rightness. She clung to him, moaning, as he began to move faster, and Ford shocked her by rolling them over so she was on top. Her legs spread over his muscular thighs, the hair on them tickling her sensitive skin. His thick erection filled her, stretching her in a way no man ever had before. "Ride me," he said, his large hands wrapping around her waist as she moved to sit atop him.

His eyes heated as they landed on her bare breasts. She felt self-conscious for a second but relaxed as he helped guide her movements, his hands on her waist as he bucked up and down beneath her. Her breasts bounced, drawing his gaze again, and Clara was gasping, her hands on his muscular chest as waves of pleasure began to wash over her. He was smiling, clearly enjoying that he was still in control of their lovemaking. Her inner walls clamped down around him, and he grunted, bucking up into her faster. His grip on her waist tightened. One hand slid to where their sexes joined, his thumb toying with her clit.

She faltered, almost falling on top of him as he strummed her swollen bud. "Come for me," Ford ordered. "I want to feel you squeezing my cock." His thumb massaged her as he thrust up and down, and as she bounced atop him, sparks began to shoot straight through her. Ford took her deeper, faster, and she couldn't control the unstoppable orgasm that exploded as she collapsed atop him. Clara was panting and gasping, clinging to Ford as he stiffened and came as well. He held her to him as he came, his cock pulsing inside her as his fingers tightened around her waist.

He held her that way for a moment, then collected her in his arms, kissing her softly. His hands roamed everywhere as she lay half sprawled over him, caressing and soothing.

“Oh my gosh,” she murmured, her cheek on his warm chest. She could hear Ford’s heart pounding, and it somehow felt even more intimate than what they’d just shared. “That was indescribable.”

His hands slid over her back, one cupping her bottom possessively. “I’ve got all sorts of ways I plan to make love to you,” he promised.

“Well, give me a little breather first,” she joked.

He chuckled, the freeing sound filling her bedroom. “We’ve got all the time in the world, sweetheart. I never had a family,” he said, growing serious. “The past twenty-four hours scared the hell out of me. I’d already grown to care for you, but this made me realize exactly how much.”

“You could’ve been killed,” she whispered.

“I’ll always do everything in my power to protect you and Eloise. I know it’s too soon for talk like this, but I’m hoping we’re in this for the long haul. I’ve never felt this way before, but you mean everything to me.” She sniffled as one large hand slid over her head, his fingers threading through the tresses. “I hope that one day you’ll let me make you mine.”

“Ford,” she whispered, tears smarting her eyes. She shifted to look at him and saw the emotion in his as well.

“I’d do anything for you,” he said huskily. “I want you to know that, because it’s the truth.”

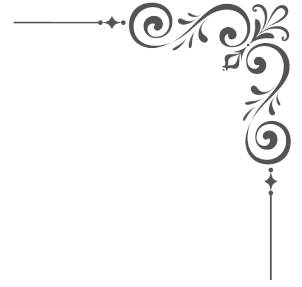
“You’re going to make me cry,” she said, swiping at her face.

“I hope they’re still happy tears.”

“They are. You make me happy,” Clara said softly. “You’ve given me something I didn’t even know to wish for. I feel safe with you, but I also just feel complete.”

“I’ll give you everything,” he promised.

He searched her eyes for a moment and then pulled her close for another heated kiss, stealing her breath, and imprinting himself on a part of her soul.



*One month later*

“HELL OF A PARTY,” LUKE said, glancing around Ford’s backyard. Eloise shrieked in the tree house as she hid from his teammates down below. It was too cold for water guns, but he’d found a silly marshmallow shooter that Eloise thought was hysterical. He had to admit seeing his old Delta buddies shooting puffy marshmallows at a kid was something he never expected. He wasn’t sure who was having more fun—the adults or her.

“Yep. It’s good to have everyone over. And hey, now Anna’s pregnant,” he said with a chuckle. “Can you see Jett firing off marshmallows like these other guys when he becomes a dad?”

“Not a chance in hell,” Luke said with a chuckle, taking a swig of his beer.

Sam and Nick walked over, looked tanned from the month they’d spent down in South America. “This is what you do when we’re gone?” Nick joked. “Find yourself a ready-made family and plan on moving them in to your place?”

Ford lifted a shoulder. “When you know you know.”

“I’m happy for you, man,” Sam said, slugging him in the shoulder.

“Okay, I fixed the cake!” Anna declared, walking out into the yard as Jett carried it. The rest of the men stood around, smiling, but Clara looked confused.

“It’s too cold to eat out here!” she called out. “Just leave it inside and we’ll come in.”

“I know, but I want everyone to see this first.” It was a ridiculously big sheet cake, too large for the number of people there. She’d put figurines of a couple on top, the man kneeling down in front of the woman. Clara looked at it as they got closer, blinking. “But that’s....”

Ford cleared his throat and moved toward her, thinking again that she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Clara’s cheeks were flushed from the cold, her dark hair spilling down around her. One of the guys lifted Eloise down from the treehouse, carrying her over to watch, but Ford’s attention was solely on the woman in front of him. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small velvet box. When he got to Clara, he knelt down on the ground as she gasped.

“I wanted to wait for the perfect time, but with you and Eloise moving in soon, I realized that the perfect time is now. You’re everything I’ve ever

wanted, Clara. I love you and love Eloise like she's my own. I want nothing more in the world than for you to be mine always. Will you marry me?"

Tears glistened in her eyes, and she whispered yes. Ford slipped the diamond ring onto her trembling finger and then stood, kissing her as he wiped away her tears. His buddies whooped and hollered, congratulating them both. When Clara pulled Ford with her over to Eloise to explain what had happened, her daughter squealed in excitement. "Does that mean we get to eat cake now? Why is the cake so big?" Eloise asked, jumping up and down as she held hands with Clara.

"Anna ordered it," Jett said.

Anna winked at Eloise and then smiled sweetly at Jett. "You know what they say, go big or go home."

"I don't think that applies to cakes."

"Oh, it does," she assured him.

"We are at home," Eloise said. "Ford said we can move in here with him and I can play in the treehouse every day."

"That's right, sweetie," Clara said.

Ford shook his head, laughing as Eloise asked for the first piece. Anna took her inside so they could slice the cake, and Ford beamed at Clara as the others began filing into his home as well. "How long did you plan this?" she asked when they were alone.

"I picked out a ring a while ago. It was early, but everything has been quick with us. You're it for me, sweetheart. With you and Eloise moving in, I want to do this right. I want us to be a family."

"We are a family," Clara said. "You're everything I've ever wanted."

"I love you," he said, his voice filled with emotion. He stepped closer, brushing her hair back, then ducked to whisper in her ear. "I'm going to show you tonight exactly how much."

Her cheeks flushed a pretty pink, and she pulled him in for a kiss, her eyes sparkling. "I love you, too." Unable to resist, he lifted her into his arms, kissing her as his friends watched from inside, cheering. He was surrounded by the most important people in the world to him, and the best part of his life was only beginning.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR reading Ford and Clara's story! If you enjoyed this book, you'll love [Luke](#). Find out what happens when the former

Delta meets a woman needing his protection.

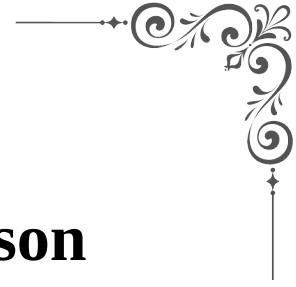
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Rescuing the teenagers only solves one problem. The evil men who Wren watched now want her dead, before the truth she's discovered can ever come to light. Asking for Luke's help isn't a problem, but falling for him might be. Can she trust a former military man not to break her heart?

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Stranded with a SEAL  
Summer with a SEAL  
Kidnapped by a SEAL  
SEAL Ever After



ALPHA SEALS CORONADO  
SEAL's Desire  
SEAL's Embrace  
SEAL's Honor  
SEAL's Revenge  
SEAL's Promise  
SEAL's Redemption  
SEAL's Command



CORONADO TEAM 2



SEAL's Code  
SEAL's Chance  
SEAL's Vow  
SEAL's Oath  
SEAL's Choice  
SEAL's Claiming



### SHADOW OPS TEAM

Jett  
Ford  
Luke (Aug 2023)



### SINFUL MARINES

One Night with a Marine  
Her Sinful Marine  
Her Forbidden Maine



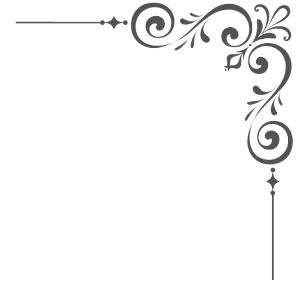
### LINE OF DUTY

Make Me Yours  
Be Mine Tonight



### SOLDIER SERIES

Christmas with a Soldier  
Valentine from a Soldier  
In the Arms of a Soldier  
Return of a Soldier  
Summer with a Soldier



## About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author Makenna Jameison writes sizzling romantic suspense, including the addictive Alpha SEALs series. Makenna loves the beach, strong coffee, red wine, and traveling. She lives in Washington DC with her husband and two daughters.



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