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Dale Mayer



EWAN

SEALS OF HONOR

EVAN

SEALs of Honor, Book 8

Dale Mayer

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Back Cover

Everyone considered Evan a bit of a wild card. Even Megan. Little did she know he was carrying the torch for her and all the rest was camouflage.

When she transfers to the West Coast to join the new helicopter division, their lives collide once again.

Another SEAL unit is under attack and needs their help, but when the attackers turn on Megan, she's the one in danger.

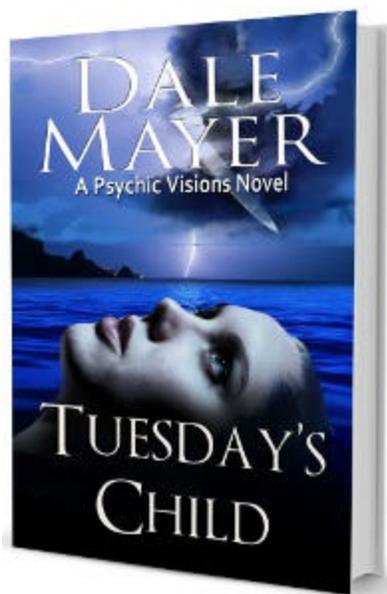
With the enemy closer than they'd like to believe, Megan and Evan struggle to piece together what happened to their friends.

They need to figure it out fast before there are more victims. Starting with them.

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Chapter 1

WHAT A SHIT storm.

As ops went, this one had hit the toilet in a big way. And in Mexico to boot. Two SEALs down. Two more injured but ambulatory and the shit just kept on dripping. Levi and his unit were in trouble – Evan Wilson was part one of the extraction team. The second half was the helicopters flying in.

Gunfire ripped through the uneasy silence. Evan sank lower. In order to make the extraction Evan's team would have to clear and hold a place for a helicopter to land. And that wasn't easy. This was a first for him. He wasn't as new to the unit as Chase and Brett, but he couldn't be called an old timer yet either. He'd have said seasoned until this mess. Now he realized that for all the good times, he'd been relatively lucky as far as missions went.

Because when SEAL ops went bad – they went deadly.

But they weren't going to leave any of their men behind. Especially not Levi.

Sweat dripped down his forehead. High on the landing atop the plateau he'd been picking off the enemy below one by one. There was one more. He just needed a good shot. Swede and Cooper were getting closer. Once clear they could run in and pick up Levi. Although knowing him, Levi wouldn't leave without Stone. But then Stone and Levi were two of the same. Four of them had come over and ran into trouble immediately. Evan and the eight-man unit he was part of had been dropped in to get them out.

Word was reinforcements on the enemy side were minutes away and carrying rocket launchers while their military helicopter was six minutes out. Then again, those were the odds they loved. They did shitty like the rest of the world did well.

It should be their motto.

Another head popped up. There. He took the shot and moved on. He didn't need to see the result, he was a hell of a sniper and that had been an easy one. Now...he shifted when he heard Markus behind him. "Left."

Shit. He lined up again. Was there no end to these assholes?

He took another shot. Seeing Swede and Cooper on the move, two of the biggest men in the unit, he sprayed the area to give them a free run.

“Move, move, move,” he whispered as he mentally ticked off the minutes before the helicopter arrived.

He could hear it in the distance.

A hawk’s cry ripped through the air. Damn well time. Hawk and Shadow were moving through the enemy taking them out one by one as silent and as lethal as only those two could.

He waited, the dust settling...the air still, then he caught a movement on the right. He looked through his sight. Bull’s-eye.

Wap, wap, wap.

The noise of their ride home echoed in the distance. He gauged it at four minutes out. A long four minutes. And he had a job to complete before then.

There’d been no enemy fire for two minutes. Then Hawk and Shadow were down there. Not much would escape them. Those that did, he took out. They were less than a hundred yards from the landing site but up an exposed hill. He had six men behind him.

The other two of Levi’s team were both injured. Mason and Dane were trying to stabilize them to be airlifted out. Brett and Chase were on the far side, holding their position.

Wap, wap, wap.

Three minutes.

Another bird cry in the sky. Good. Swede and Cooper had their men.

Now to get them all back and in the air safely.

He hadn’t seen anything heavier than automatic rifles yet but could hear vehicles approaching. With the damn rocket launchers if the intel was any good. The last thing he needed was to have the helicopter go down with all of them on board. That was not a statistic he was willing to be a part of.

Dane crawled up beside him. “Status?”

“They are on the return run. No enemy fire in four minutes.” He paused. “The men?”

“Tough and in rough shape. One is almost done.”

Shit.

Dane slipped back to the injured men.

Done usually meant physical injuries that killed his career. Everyone here knew that was the end of the line. The worst nightmare for them all.

He could only hope that Levi and Stone were in better shape but knew that was a pipe dream. Levi was a personal friend of his. He'd seen the lines deepen on his face over the years. He needed to get out before it killed him. Maybe after this.

And suddenly the men were racing toward him. He sprayed the area as Swede carried Stone and Cooper packed Levi. *Wap, wap, wap.*

They raced past Evan.

Helicopters approached from behind.

Come on, show yourself. I know there is one more of you bastards. No way am I letting you take any of us down at this point.

Wap, wap, wap.

The dust flew as the helicopter lowered to the ground. Men scrambled to get the injured onboard. Mason called. "Moving out."

Evan didn't move, his gaze searching the territory. He'd be the last one. One prick was still out there and now the first of several vehicles had arrived. It sat...waiting. Well, so the hell was Evan. The men would need less than two minutes to scramble aboard, secure the injured and lift off.

He figured he needed thirty seconds.

There.

He hoped they had a damn good pilot. He didn't want to be left behind.

But neither was he going to let his team be taken out because he missed something.

Time.

He lifted onto his heels, crouched and ran, his eyes scanning.

He saw the bastard. Now loading a rocket launcher on his shoulder. Evan lined up the shot and fired. The man's head flung back as Evan flung himself into the helicopter.

"Go, go, go," he yelled, lifting for another shot.

The helicopter rose, the movements faster than expected, and so damn smooth he knew who the pilot was. Didn't that figure?

It was Ice. Her real name was Icelite, some kind of Nordic druid name. But she was known as Ice for her cool calm under pressure performance. Was her new co-pilot with her? Megan? His heart immediately said yes.

If he were honest he was damn glad to have Ice. And Megan.

It's just he'd rather have Megan under him.

Like she'd been three years ago. They'd parted ways after one hell of a

hot and heavy weekend. He'd gone on to bury his sorrow and regret that he hadn't moved to make it more than that ever since, and she'd ended up engaged. *What the hell.* Thankfully she'd come to her senses.

Ice, now she was a whole different matter. Her name had been linked with Levi but no one asked – *ever.*

“Nice shot,” Dane helped him to his seat when the helicopter leaned to the side as it turned and headed home.

He looked around at the rest of the men and mentally counted them off. “We’re flying heavy.”

“Full load plus one. Can’t be helped.”

Evan nodded and closed his eyes.

“Ice will get us home safe.”

“Who’s she flying with?” Evan asked in an even voice, hoping Dane wouldn’t read into the question. But he knew. His heart already knew. He was such an idiot. Why didn’t he realize he’d had a good thing at the time? And move to make it more than a fling? Just think of the years they’d missed. They’d parted ways amicably, but he’d never been able to find the same magic with anyone else. Reinforcing that she was the only one for him.

Then again, maybe it was all in his head. The memory better than the reality. Who knew? Unless he had a chance to get her back in his bed and see if that magic was actually what he remembered, there was no way to know.

But he wanted to find out.

Chapter 2

MEGAN WATCHED HER radar screens while the helicopter buffeted to the side as Ice slipped away from the attack. Megan had nerves of steel but Ice – well she was like none other.

Unless you mentioned the name Levi to her in private. Then her nerves would shatter. But in public she'd never show a reaction. Megan, on the other hand, well she'd spent her life wearing her emotions on her sleeve. She'd been working hard to change that.

The two of them made a great team even knowing the two men that bothered them were both on board. One had just shot the enemy to shit, and the other had been shot to shit. She could see the white-knuckle grip of Ice's hands, but not everyone would recognize the signs.

Megan was only holding her own because she had seen Evan get on the helicopter alive and well. And who knew she still cared so much? Now if they could navigate the hell out of here...

"Clear," Ice muttered under her breath to the helicopter. "Take us home, sweetheart."

Megan cast her friend a sidelong look, seeing the strain around her mouth. "He'll make it. He's tough."

"He will. He is."

Nothing more. Then again what could Megan say? This day sucked. She'd seen a lot in the seven years she'd been in the service. But nothing ever prepared one for losing friends and never for losing them in front of you.

"Evan okay?" Ice asked.

"Yeah, the hotshot walked through fire as usual," she muttered. She wouldn't say the two women were close friends, but the job demanded trust and that required a little getting to know one another. She considered Ice a friend and hoped the relationship would deepen.

"Takes skill."

"And attitude." Megan didn't know anyone else who could do what he did and always smile about it. Hell, several of the SEALs *never* smiled. Then

again, many had nothing to smile about. At least that was before the Keepers were born. Evan was one of Mason's group now, but wasn't a member of the Keepers yet. That wouldn't happen until he found his true love. And that was just unbelievable to her. He'd been the opposite of a Keeper when she'd known him. He was a player. A swinger. A man about town with the best of everything – and all to hide the emptiness inside. But he couldn't see it. Didn't want to see it. And if he did, he didn't seem capable of knowing how to change it.

Then her knowledge of him was three years old. She'd been back East since then, but gossip traveled fast and far and often.

Apparently the luck of the Keepers was still holding with Cooper and Markus being the latest casualties. At least that's how some guys referred to them. In truth she thought they were all jealous. She was.

The easy short-term relationship scene was good for both sexes for a lot of reasons, but it got old quick.

At least it had for her. She'd even had a two-year relationship after her sheet-dancing weekend with Evan.

She'd been approved for the helicopter-training program and sure as hell wasn't going to turn that down. And Evan had made no talk of anything longer than the sweat drying off his back, so when she was given the ship-out date she took it and ran, but like an elastic stretched too far, she'd taken the first chance for a transfer and returned to the West. Only she hadn't considered Evan as part of her motivation. Until now.

As soon as she arrived she'd been paired with Ice and that part of her life had stabilized and moved forward in a solid way. She loved her work and the people she worked with.

She'd been happy. Then she'd seen Evan again... And everything came rushing back.

The helicopter straightened out and flew a steady course to the ship. The miles were easy now that they were clear of enemy fire.

She loved her job. As in really loved her job. She knew the men in the back felt the same but when was it done? When was it time to walk away and do something different? She had no children. Her parents were both military, so it wasn't like she'd had much choice. She'd been groomed to go in this direction since birth, although the flying was her own particular bend to the scenario. But it felt right. God she loved the freedom. And knowing that she

was needed. That there were people – good men doing dangerous jobs counting on her – well that just added to it.

“You good?” Ice asked.

“Perfect.”

Which was their code word for life sucked but they went on anyway.

Megan sighed. She turned her gaze away from the tight lines around Ice’s mouth. “Perfect is what we do,” she muttered.

“Amen, sister.”

For the next hour they flew through the brilliant sky up the coast back into US airspace. They should have been out of enemy airspace and safe at this point, and there was nothing untoward in the sky. It was a smooth flight homeward. If you ignored the fact that four of their own were badly injured in the back.

“Update?” Megan asked through her headset.

Mason answered, “Two stable, one critical and Levi is holding.”

Ice could hear the answer too.

She frowned. She knew the risks. They all did. But was there anything more painful than knowing there was a road one should have taken but hadn’t and now could lose the opportunity before being given a second chance?

“He’s strong,” Megan said calmly. “He’ll pull through.”

“He might but Stone is going to lose his leg.”

“And I know he’s going to think that’s the worst thing that could happen to him, but you and I both know it’s not.”

“No, but this is his life. It’s his whole purpose for existing,” Mason said in a low voice. “There’s no returning to the unit after this.”

“Well, if the others make it, chances are there are going to be four who need some career counselling.” In the background she could hear someone swearing and cussing. “What’s the commotion?”

“Levi screaming at Stone to hold on.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him.” She’d only met Levi a few times but his character wasn’t hard to miss. Another question burned her throat. She shouldn’t ask. She wanted to desperately but there was no way she wanted the others to know she cared. She’d seen him jump in but there’d been a lot of firepower at the end. He might have been hit.

“He’s fine.”

Startled, she caught her breath back. Then had to ask. “Who?”

And gasped when he said, his voice equally low, “Evan.”

Shit shit.

“Good,” she said calmly, her heart pounding in shock. “I’m presuming all your unit are?”

“They are,” he said equally casually.

She sighed. “Thanks, Mason.” She knew he’d understand.

She glanced over at Ice to see a small smile playing at the corner of her lips. “What are you smirking at?”

Ice gave her that flat stare she was so famous for. “Nothing worth smirking at here,” she said, her tone of voice cool. But then she ruined her hard ass look by adding, “It’s well past that point.”

“You’re a fine one to talk,” Megan said with spirit. Ice was a hell of a woman, but they hadn’t become friends by backing down from each other. No woman in the military was short on backbone. It grew thicker and deeper and stronger with the territory.

The ship came into view. They were two minutes away. They’d made good time. But was it fast enough for the injured men? Christ she hoped so.

Within minutes they were down and organized chaos took over the back of the helicopter. When she was done with her last check through she pulled her helmet off and exited her side. Instantly, she was engulfed in the crowd. A heavy hand grabbed her by the upper arm.

“What the...”

She spun to find Evan tugging her back. Startled, she drummed up a smile. “Hey, nice shooting back there.”

He nodded his thanks, but his tone was cool. “Likewise.”

“Except I wasn’t shooting.”

“No, but it was pretty fancy flying.”

“Nothing more than usual. And Ice well, she’s Ice.”

His lean face was covered in dirt, his clothes muddy and torn. But it was the worry and exhaustion written in the lines on his face that endeared her to him. “How are they?” she asked softly. She knew all SEALs were one unit but they all had some closer connections than others. Levi was Evan’s friend.

The lines deepened. “It’s hard to say. Levi will live. Stone is going to lose his leg. We’re not sure, but he could lose both.”

She swallowed. “That would be tough but then he’s tough too. He can get through this.”

“He is and he will but that’s not the end any of us want. For ourselves or our friends. The others aren’t in great shape either. Likely none will be returning to active duty.”

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely, trying to tug her arm free. He wouldn’t release her. She stood tall in front of him. “Was there something else?”

He took a deep breath and released her. So she guessed the answer was no.

“When did you get back?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Almost a month ago.”

He reared back slightly and frowned at her. “I didn’t know it was that long ago.”

“Why would you?” she asked in a cool voice.

He snorted. “Because I normally have an internal radar where you are concerned.”

“Right, a radar that tells you when to run in the opposite direction,” she said, shaking her head. “Honestly, I’m surprised you’re talking to me now.”

He looked surprised. “I never did that. I wouldn’t. I seriously only just found out you were back a couple of days before this mission. Of course I’d heard about the hotshot lady pilots. Ice and her new co-pilot. You’ve made a hell of an impression.”

“No, that’s Ice. I’m just the sidekick.”

“And a good one at that. Ice told me you were the best she’s had.”

She loved to hear that. Then again, Ice was something else. “She’s phenomenal,” Megan said warmly. “I’ve never met anyone like her. It’s as if she’s connected instinctively to the machine at all times. Mentally and physically. I swear it.”

“She’s as much of a legend as Levi is.”

That brought the conversation right back around. She couldn’t help but notice how quickly the group moved away from them. She’d long since lost sight of the injured as they’d been raced to medical below.

She reached into the helicopter for her bag only to find it already in Evan’s hands.

“Thanks,” she said grudgingly.

He raised an eyebrow at her tone. She sighed. “I like to look after my own gear.”

“Duly noted.” He passed it to her.

She hefted it over her shoulder. “Catch you later.”

Keeping her stride steady she walked inside. It was all she could do to not turn and look behind and see what he was doing.

“How about coffee?” he asked from right behind her.

Well, that answered that.

“Not today.” She threw him a smile. “We’re taking the helicopter to North Island for repairs and then I get to sleep in my bed.”

“Alone?”

Megan misstepped. “Sorry?”

“You heard me.”

“I hope I didn’t. That would mean that you really were putting your nose in where it didn’t belong.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” He held his hands up in front of him but with a big grin.

“Good. Because it’s none of your business.” Getting pissier by the minute and not really sure why, she turned and took several more steps again.

“What if I want it to be?”

This time she was ready for him. She knew him from old. “I’m not looking for a good time anymore, Evan.”

“Are you sure? We were good together.”

“We were. But we are no longer.”

He opened his mouth and she held up a hand to stop him. “I’m not looking for the same thing now.”

He nodded. “That’s good. I don’t want the same thing either.”

She shot him a look of disbelief. “Right.”

“Hey, if you can change so can I.”

“Maybe and maybe not.” She shook her head. “This is a stupid conversation.” She kept walking. “I’ve got to go. Save the games for someone else.”

And she kept on walking.

*

SHE WAS MORE beautiful than ever. Older, stronger, her spine stood straighter. She’d matured into something so much more than before.

And he wanted her. He'd always wanted her.

But she wasn't there for him – at least right now. And that was something he'd do his best to change. He turned and headed back to grab his gear. The return to reality came with the grim awareness that someone else wasn't going to be able to look after their own. He joined the rest of his unit to find Ice hauling an armload.

She was carrying Levi's gear. She handed it over to Mason. He accepted it.

Like a baton being passed, she turned and walked away.

How she'd gotten her hands on it Evan didn't know but assumed she'd either found it after the medics stripped him or it had been left in her helicopter. She always went over her helicopter. With a nautical awareness. Everything was meticulous with her. Hell, Levi was the same.

They were a matched set.

He had no idea what went wrong between them, but something had and it had been major and final. And yet neither had another partner.

Ice walked past him, her long single braid down her back, her deep ocean blue eyes cold like her name. She gave him a short nod and kept on walking.

In two steps he'd reached Mason and the growing silence in the group. "Levi?"

He shrugged. "He's alive. But we don't know more than that. They all are."

"Good. Then we take care of their stuff until they get back."

As plans went it was the best they had.

Chapter 3

MEGAN WOKE THE next morning, sore and tired. Not sure why but she tried to shake it off as she put on her jogging clothes. Outside, she stood listening to the birds as she took several huge gulping breaths of fresh early morning air into her lungs.

After a couple of stretches she headed out. Her legs were rubbery. Uncoordinated. As if she needed to go back to bed for a few more hours. But that wasn't going to happen. She just had to push through it.

She was good at that. Ignoring the heaviness, she hit the trails at a sprint sure to set the blood pounding in her veins. The day was gorgeous. It was early with a freshness to it that had her lungs sucking in joy. She pounded forward at a steady rate, watching as the world slowly woke up.

At the end of her five miles she stopped several blocks from her small house and walked the rest of the way to cool down. She did a few arm stretches to loosen up. A hot shower then she had to get to work. She had a long day ahead. Hopefully not as bad as yesterday.

Missions like yesterday's were hard on everyone. Especially when their own got hurt. Caught up in her own thoughts, the whiff of his presence caught her by surprise. She knew before she looked at her front door that Evan was going to be there.

In fact, he was almost at her side. She slowed to a stop and studied his beloved face, while wondering at the longing for what they'd had. How could the pull be so strong after so long – and flare up so fast? He was deadly to her senses.

“You're looking better,” she said by way of greeting.

“You're not,” he answered, his gaze intense on her.

“Nice. Not.” She shook her head. “Is that how you charm all the women in your life?”

“Are you a woman in my life?” His grin lit up the loneliness in her heart.

“No. I'm not.” She glared at him but there was no heat in it.

“Would you like to be?” And he flashed that devilish grin at her again.

“Hell no.”

The grin fell away. “So can I drop the player pretense now?” he asked in a quiet voice.

She froze. “Is it a pretense?”

“Absolutely.” He laughed but the joviality was gone. It was a serious calm Evan now. Secure in himself. “I might have been like that a long time ago, but years have gone by. I’m different. You’re different. Why don’t we just leave it at that?”

“That works for me.” And it did. She didn’t need to hang on to that shit. She’d almost made it to the chapel and the whole white picket fence thing. That she didn’t was her fault. But he didn’t need to know. Besides if he’d changed to the man before her, then she liked what she saw. More than liked. Knowing he hadn’t wanted more than a fling held her back last time. And circumstances had conspired against them. They were both older, more mature, and maybe both were interested. Although she’d need to wait a bit on that one. She didn’t want to rush into anything. And fail again. He was a good man. He deserved more.

“I’ve got to go. I’m late already. I’m supposed to meet up with Ice this morning and also have a training session on a computer upgrade later this afternoon, too.” Listen to her. She was babbling like an idiot.

“Sounds exciting,” he said smiling.

“Well not as exciting as rescuing big bad SEALs,” she said teasingly.

“Needed an extraction, not a rescue, thanks.” But he smiled at her. “And I do mean the last part.”

“You’re welcome.” Laughing, she ran up the stairs to her front door. She slammed it closed behind her and headed for the shower. Running into Evan had taken up precious minutes.

The hot water felt damn good. But by the time she was dressed she had to skip breakfast. She didn’t want to go in late – and for just once, she’d like to be earlier than Ice. It hadn’t happened yet.

And today was no exception.

“Good morning,” Megan said quietly as she made it to where the helicopter was undergoing repairs after yesterday’s flight. Ice had flown it back to North Camp after they’d been given clearance to return to base. She watched Ice check over the helicopter like it was her baby. And it was in a way. “How is it?”

“Two bullet holes, both needing to be fixed but she’s solid.”

Megan nodded. Of course there were holes. She remembered the bullets hitting as they came in for landing, but with all the chaos and a safe return she’d forgotten about it. Not something Ice would ever do. She walked over to see the damage. Thankfully it was minor. “How is Levi?”

Ice shrugged. “They are all in intensive care. None will be back to work – for a long time – if ever.”

Megan sighed. “New recruits coming up.”

“These four men are not replaceable.” Ice’s voice was colder than ever.

“None of us are,” Megan said quietly.

Ice closed her eyes. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“Hey, it’s understandable.”

“More than you realize. Stone is my brother.”

Megan gasped. “What?”

“Stepbrother. We spent a decade in the same household growing up, but then he moved out and our parents split. It had been the second marriage for each of them, and the last I heard they were both on thirds.”

“Have you been to the hospital to see him?”

Ice shook her head. “He’s in surgery and will be in intensive care for a while. I’ll go later.” She turned to look at Megan. “How’s Evan?”

“Cocky as ever.”

“Really?” She frowned. “He’s not been that way for a long time.”

“Well, we do have some history that might be bringing out that behavior. He says he didn’t know I was back. Hell, I’ve been here a month now. If he’d wanted to find me then he would have.”

“He changed after making it through BUD/s training,” Ice said. “Something inside him settled. He wasn’t just military. Now he was elite but with it came a ton of responsibility. It was the making of him.” She waved a hand. “I like who he is now.”

Megan snorted. “Good, you can have him. He’s part of my history. Not my present.”

And if she said it enough times she might believe it.

“No.” Ice smiled, a small twinkle in her gaze. “The man he was is part of your history just as that person is part of *his* history. But who he is now, is very different. That man could be your future.”

Her phone buzzed. Ice answered it, listened for a moment then hung up

and turned to look at Megan. “We have to go.” Ice shot her a look that said she wasn’t liking it either. “A special meeting has been called about yesterday.”

“Did we do something wrong?” Megan asked. “Our mission was as tight as we could make it. Quick in and out with all aboard.”

“Yep, but they want us there so we’re to be there – 0900 hours.”

Megan groaned. “Fine. I’ll grab coffee and head over.” She walked a few steps and turned to see Ice standing and staring at the helicopter like she was staring at a friend who was dying. “Ice, you okay?”

Ice shrugged and said. “I will be.”

Whatever that meant. With a frown Megan turned back to see Evan standing in front of her. “And it’s you again. Are you stalking me?”

She said it with a light tone as she searched his face. How long had he been standing there? Had he heard their earlier conversation? Her life was unsteady right now. Yesterday’s shit storm was rippling outward affecting all aspects of her life. Bringing Evan back into it was something else altogether. Both good and bad. She wasn’t ready for another relationship, another failure.

“Of course I am,” he said with a grin. “I figured I’d walk to the meeting with you.”

“I’m not that new,” she said, her tone edgy. “I do know my way around.”

“Yes but tempers are short and I figured you’d have a smile on your pretty face, and that would be way nicer to sit beside than a mess of angry men.”

“Yesterday was bad.” She walked at his side. “I need coffee before we head into the meeting.”

“Not sure meeting is what we’d call it.”

“As long as my head isn’t on the block, I’ll be fine.” She hated being in the wrong. Especially in the military. Accidents happened and sometimes shit went south for no clear reason. But that didn’t mean heads didn’t roll. Weeks were spent training for possible contingencies, but there was no way to account for every variable. There would be new training directives after Levi’s mission. He might be done but he’d left a legacy behind.

It was a sober atmosphere inside the debriefing room.

“Stone has lost his right leg. The doctors are hopeful that his left can be saved,” the commander said in clear no-nonsense tones. “He’s going to be in

the hospital for weeks and then in recovery for months.”

Megan watched as the faces turned grim while the commander continued. “Levi took three bullets. One has lodged in the bone of his lower back. He’s had two removed. That one is going to require a delicate operation that could leave him paralyzed. Rhodes and Merk took two bullets apiece. Both are expected to survive. As for active duty? Not for a long time – if ever.”

Silence. The men shifted uneasily.

That was an entire four-man team gone. Taken out. Not only an entire unit, but one of the elite. And one they all knew.

“So what the hell happened?” the commander asked. “I want every last detail.”

Mason spoke. “We don’t have any details on Levi’s mission. We did the extraction. That went off smoothly.”

The commander nodded. “In that all the men were brought back alive, yes. But I want to know what you found and exactly what actions were taken when. I want every one of the men responsible caught. Levi was on a special op and one we had no reason to think was at this level of danger. It was an intel hunting mission only. They should have been in and out fast, hopefully with proof and names. They were to move up the agenda only if things were really bad.”

Silence.

“An ambush? Maybe the enemy knew Levi was coming?” Swede suggested from the far side of the room. He glared at them all. “So why and how did they take out a SEAL Team?”

Megan almost smiled. If it wasn’t for the subject matter and the seriousness of it all she would have. Swede always made her smile. A huge man and a gentle giant but he’d hauled Stone out of danger alone and there was a reason Stone was given that nickname. He weighed enough of them.

“Right. *How* did they know Levi was coming? That the men were going to be there at that time?” The commander paced across the front of the room. “Mason, I want the details from the beginning.”

Mason stood and gave as close an accounting as he could of what they saw from the time they were air-dropped to the ground a quarter of a mile away.

*

JUST HEARING THE details made Evan wince. The op was supposed to have been simple but due to the nature of it, they all knew there was nothing simple about it. The first helicopter had dropped them and they'd found the location within ten minutes. Gaining the lay of the land and finding the men – well as always that had taken more time than they'd wanted. But Evan had stayed high and picked off the enemy as they showed. He hadn't seen as much going on below as some of the others. When it was his turn, he relayed the information the commander wanted to hear.

Unfortunately, he was looking for something none of them had to offer.

Levi had been betrayed. Now they all wanted to know by whom. And stop him from betraying someone else. "Very few people knew Levi's itinerary or destination," the commander said in a hard voice. "So he was either tracked, we were hacked, infiltrated, or someone deliberately betrayed our men. We need to know who and how. And we need to know if any of them are here."

Chapter 4

“**I**S THAT THE reason for the doubled up security?” Dane asked, his voice hard and uncompromising. “You think we messed up somewhere along the line.”

An awkward silence settled.

“No, your unit did exactly what you were sent in to do.” The commander took a wide-legged stance. “You pulled our men out of a tough situation and in the process you saved their lives.”

Silence as everyone waited.

“The problem is something no one expected. Because it’s not something we’ve ever done.” The commander paused. “You need to know. You brought back something extra.”

“Extra,” Mason barked. “What was extra?”

Megan leaned forward. She’d done the head count. There’d been the exact amount of men there was supposed to be.

The commander stood tall. “Inside the wounds of all four men we found trackers.”

“Inside the wounds,” Mason asked incredulously. “I worked on the men but I didn’t see anything like that.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Micro size, they were found in the X-rays. And the men who placed them there would have to know that they’d be found – sooner than later.”

“Trackers?”

Megan sat back. “Are you expecting an attack here now?”

The low murmurs in the room quieted.

“We’re planning for that contingency. At the same time intel did not show that this group had the firepower to attack a military base... Considering that all four men had these buried in their flesh, the enemy already knows exactly where they are.”

Mason stood up. “How deep in their flesh?” he asked in an icy tone.

“It appears the trackers were shot into the open wound with some kind of

injector.”

“Damn it,” Cooper said. “That sucks.” He glared at the commander. “Did any of the men know?”

“No.” The commander shook his head. “Not that they can remember. There was some hand to hand but no one remembers anything like this. It wouldn’t have taken much. The trackers are small.”

“We have to consider all possible contingency plans.”

“Plans that include attacking the military base?” Hawk shook his head. “That’s gutsy.”

The commander nodded. “As you can see, we need to know everything you might have seen, heard...and yes, even felt.”

That set the tone for the next couple hours as everyone gave their impressions and details of what they’d seen.

Megan nodded as Evan’s information matched up with what she’d seen. Given the chance she collaborated his story. “But, I never saw the enemy.”

And finally, it was done.

No answers. No clarity, but at least everyone knew who’d been there and what they’d seen. There was a somber air as the meeting broke up. Megan walked out to the hangar and her locker. Men were all around. She passed several wheeled trolleys of parts. The threat alert had been raised, but she didn’t think that would change much. Why would it? It would take balls to attack the base. And that was a threat they all faced every day. “Why four trackers?” Megan asked.

Ice’s response from behind made her freeze. “In case we only picked up one or two of our men.”

She stared at her shock “They don’t retrieve *all* their men?”

“No, they don’t.”

That sucked. “I’m off for the next few days,” Ice said. “Unless things change and leaves are cancelled.”

“I hope not. I’m due to have tomorrow off.”

“I’ll be back if something changes.” Ice pulled her jacket off a hook then threw it around her shoulders and walked away.

What did that mean? Megan watched with misgiving. She wanted to help her but she was hard to get close to. Especially now. Ice had put walls up. She walked out into the sunshine hating the tension in the air. Surely the enemy wouldn’t be so stupid. There were thousands of trained men and

women here. An outright attack would be easily repelled. An air strike would be taken out before it could cause much damage.

No. If it were her, she'd be a lot more subtle. Then the enemy didn't seem to know or understand subtle. They were all about carnage.

The atmosphere had changed outside. She frowned.

"Can't say this is the way I'd expected to spend my next few hours," Evan said quietly at her side.

"Oh?" She motioned at the increased security now at the hangar. "I've never seen this before."

"Lucky you. Only when we're under attack. From outside or from within," he admitted. "Unfortunately, I've seen both."

"Of course," she cried out softly. "There's going to be an attack from within."

"And you're basing this on..." Evan stared at her. "Did you see something, know something?"

She shook her head. "Nothing new but just think about this. Why go to all that trouble and not attack?"

"I'm not sure I'm getting where you're going here."

"We're all thinking a big attack. Trying to figure out where and how the attack is going to come, but what if a smaller assault comes from another direction. They know about this being a military base. That's all they needed to know. If they send anything big, we'll handle it, they know that. So instead, what if they go super small?" She smiled at the dawning understanding on his face. "We're looking to the skies and instead the ants are marching in one by one on the ground."

"Except our men aren't so narrowly focused that they wouldn't have considered that."

"And did they pair that up with the fact that someone knew about Levi's mission? And were they waiting for them?"

He shrugged. "Of course. This isn't so unusual. We're always looking for traitors."

"Yes." She nodded, knowing inside there was something here. Something they needed to dig deeper into. "But are you looking from within as in one of us?"

He stared at her. "Talk like that..."

"I know, it's hard to think someone we know might be involved," she

said in a low voice, looking around behind them. “Although we’re talking Mexico not Islamic countries, consider the problems we’ve been having all over the world of young men and women becoming radicalized – often in a very short time period. Sure, I’d much rather think of a traitor being someone who had no choice. Someone who was pressured into it – rather than someone choosing to betray their friends and country. But it’s happening everywhere. We’d be foolish to *not* consider it here.”

Evan grabbed her arm and tugged her out of the way of a cart as it trundled slowly past her.

She didn’t know the man driving, but was it her imagination that had him glancing at her and holding that look longer than necessary? She let out her pent up breath as he carried on.

“Not very nice to consider those you work with being against you,” Evan said bluntly noticing her glance. “Those you depend on, is it?”

“No it isn’t,” she said in a hard tone. “But I’m not a fool. And just because something makes me uncomfortable doesn’t make it wrong. I’ll do what I need to do.”

“There’s *nothing* you can do,” he stressed. “It’s not like you’re going to be able to access their personal files or stalk anyone here.”

“I know that.” She threw up her hands. “But I want to do something. I can’t stand sitting around and waiting.”

“Let it go. Sure, stay wary, and if you see anything then let all of us know, but other than that...”

She reached up and stroked her temple. “I know. I know. I’m sorry. I’m not trying to jump to conclusions...”

“It’s a tough time for all of us. When one of us goes down we all want to do something to help. But we have to have a target – not just create random ones.”

“I wasn’t trying to do that.” She glared at him. “Isn’t it time for you to slink off out of my life again?”

He snorted. “No. Not likely to have that joy again. Everyone needs someone so you’re stuck with me.”

“Like hell,” she snapped. “I’ll find someone else, like Ice to pair up with, thanks but no thanks.”

“Not happening. She’s headed to the hospital to stand guard.”

“I know she’s off for a few days. What do you mean stand guard?”

“The trackers. Everyone has been volunteering to stand by the injured men on their time off, in case they are going to be targeted.”

“Surely there’s security for the men, why time off?”

“It’s an honor thing,” he said. “Besides all hands are needed on base. So this frees up more man hours to figure this out.”

“I want to help.”

He shook his head. “You’re too slow. There’s forty men already signed up. Ice has been here a long time. She knew the process and got in quick.”

“Not to mention it’s Levi and Stone she’d be watching over.”

“As will every one of the other forty odd men who have volunteered.”

She winced. “Yeah, my chances are nil. That’s the problem with being new.”

“And yet like you said, you’re not *that* new.”

“Right. And time for you to leave me alone again,” she said bluntly.

“Not happening,” he said cheerfully and snagged her arm, looping it through his. “Let’s go. It’s lunchtime.”

“And if I don’t want to eat?”

“Too bad. The military is hell on the appetite. Stress is a huge killer. Besides, gotta keep up your energy. Never know when you’re going to be needed.”

“Ha, I did miss breakfast in order to make the meeting.”

“Not good. Let’s go.” He dragged her gently toward the street.

“Where are we going?”

“A small café I know.” He grinned. “It’s okay, lunch is on me.”

*

HE LOVED THE look of outrage on her face. She wanted to be coaxed, but at the same time she didn’t. She’d always been prickly. Maybe that was the attraction...knowing that she wanted him but didn’t want to. It was her heart and body over her mind. Right now the mind was firmly in control and he wanted to blow that to hell.

She was a puzzle. He’d been trying to figure her out ever since he met her. But they were going on different paths back then. He wanted to become a SEAL and she was working to become a helicopter pilot. They’d each

achieved their dreams and had come back together again – both still single.

He'd heard the rumors that she'd gotten engaged but had recently broken it off. That event coincided with her return to the West Coast.

Good. He was sorry for the pain she'd been through but wasn't sorry enough to wish her back into another man's arms.

Better she healed a broken heart here – where he could hold her through the process.

Although, if he were honest, she didn't look to be pining for anyone.

Unfortunately, not even him.

Chapter 5

LUNCH WAS A tense, uneasy affair, and yet she couldn't pinpoint why.

"You're really edgy, aren't you?" Evan asked calmly as he picked up the remaining half of his sandwich.

She shrugged and picked away at her salad.

"Do you know Levi and his unit?"

"Only the same as everyone else here. I've met him by sight but I doubt he knows who I am."

"I wouldn't count on that. Levi takes special care to know who he works with. If he didn't trust you, you wouldn't be flying."

She raised her eyebrows at that statement. "Really?"

Evan nodded. "Not that he'd go out of his way to make sure you were done, but if he didn't think you were competent and the best of the best then you can bet he'd have something to say to those above him."

It shouldn't have made a difference but she knew what a legend Levi was, so it did. She understood there was a certain level of mystery around him, and that she'd likely never know what he really did. Hell, she doubted anyone did. Something had gone seriously wrong this last mission. Would he leave it alone when he recovered? She wondered if she could if their positions were reversed.

She put her fork down and gave up the pretense of eating. "Feels shitty."

"It does." Evan nodded as he continued to eat. "It's always tough when something happens to one of our own. To have four go down..."

"But they are all still alive."

"True enough." He stared at her over his sandwich, his eyes a little too sharp. "Are you sure you didn't know them? Seems like it's affecting you pretty badly."

"I don't know them, but I lost several men in a mission gone wrong last year back East. One was a pilot."

He slowly lowered the sandwich, chewing as that laser sharp gaze assessed her. "That would have been brutal."

“It was. I was supposed to fly that day but last minute changes...”

“Makes you appreciate your humanity a little more. And the ease with which death finds us.”

“That it does.” She picked up her coffee and murmured, “It was way different though than what happened here...”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re a family. Whether it’s back East or here.”

She studied the small coffee shop. “I agree.”

“What’s going on? You’re not really listening to me.”

She blinked then stared at him. She dropped her gaze to the table. “I’m wondering if I saw something.”

“Tell me.” The joviality was gone.

She glared at him. “Who died and made you boss?”

That cat-like gaze never shifted. It locked on her and stayed there. “Tell me.”

She threw her napkin down – and that’s when she realized she’d shredded it before scrunching the pieces into a ball.

“Yesterday when we came back. There was a crew bringing in a new HVAC panel.” She shrugged. “It was nothing. There are all kinds of security clearances set up for stuff like that. It would be stupid to think the men were anything other than what they were supposed to be.”

“What made them suspicious?”

“I couldn’t see why they needed four men. The panel was small. I could see two. Maybe even three if they needed a gopher for testing purposes...four seemed like overkill.”

“Not necessarily,” he said slowly. “When we have civilians doing work we have no one on base qualified to do, the expectation is that they come in and get the job done then leave quickly. So to have an extra man to make the job faster makes sense.”

She gave him a quick nod. “That’s true.” A sunny smile slipped out. “I’m just making too much out of nothing.”

“But it still bugs you?”

“Not really...” but it did. In a big way. Four men were too many. Making a decision, she asked cautiously, “I don’t suppose there’s any way to check how many men were let in for that repair job, is there?”

“Everyone is tracked in and out. If four came in then four went out.”

“I’d hope so but...”

He finished his meal and stood up. He held out his hand. "Let's go."

"Go where?" She stared at him, as if confused.

"We can go check how many came in and out."

"Really?" She brightened. "Great. Then I'd know for sure and could forget about this." She placed her hand in his.

*

NOW THAT WAS a lovely first step. Trust. Nothing like a shared goal. He wasn't asking much. Just the world. He didn't know why her. He'd tried to forget her. Tried to find another partner. Instead, she held his heart in her hand. And it made little difference as she'd been trying to avoid him ever since.

He led the way back to where he knew he'd find Mason.

At the big meeting room where Mason was prepping for a large presentation, Evan stopped and cleared his throat.

Mason turned and frowned. "What's wrong?"

Evan could feel the hesitation in Megan's movements. "Megan is worried that she saw something yesterday. It's easily corroborated but I wanted to run it by you first. You might know."

He put the chalk down and turned to look at Megan. "What did you see?"

Evan listened as she explained. "I'm probably making too big a deal of it. It's just it seemed odd to me," she said with a shrug.

"Anything else?" Mason asked, his probing gaze locked on her but there was curiosity there. As in he heard her and expected more.

She winced and slid him a sidelong glance.

"What haven't you shared?"

"It's nothing major and honestly I don't want to make a mistake based on race."

Mason studied her. "They were another ethnic group?"

"Yes, they were all Mexican looking. They spoke Spanish. But I don't want to make a snap judgment based on something like that."

"We don't do that." Mason called down to security. Even listening into the one half of the conversation, it was easy to understand the information.

When he replaced the phone, Mason turned to stare at her. "A van did come through to fix the vac system in the hangar you were in, but they say

only two men were clocked in and out.”

“So,” Evan said. “They just met up with other men while here? That’s certainly not unheard of.”

“Neither would it be unheard of if they were hiding in the back of the van,” Megan said, her voice tart. “I’m not saying anything other than there were four men at the same place at the same time.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” Mason said in low slow tone. “I’ll check it out further.”

“Or we could,” Evan jumped in. “Asking questions won’t seem untoward if she’s bothered by something.”

“And you, what’s your excuse for being there?” Mason asked slowly.

Evan glanced over at Mason. “I’ll be able to think up something.”

“Stone is missing his lucky cross,” Mason said. “Please check the helicopter for it and ask the crew if anyone has seen it.”

Evan flashed a smile and nudged Megan back out of the room. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t need you to go with me,” she said, tugging her arm free. “It’s probably nothing.”

“And now it is something even if only an item to knock off our list of things to check out.” He wasn’t going to brook any argument. “Besides, I’ll get to spend a little more time with you this way.”

She laughed, a bitter note weaving through her tone. “And why the hell would you want to do that?”

Chapter 6

SHE HADN'T MEANT to let that slip out. At least not that way. It was the truth, but she hadn't wanted him to see her inner pain – or her worry.

“Because I like you,” he said lightly. “Because I love what we had. And I'd like to try again.”

“I'm nothing to you,” she answered calmly. “We had a fun weekend but knew it wasn't to be. Why would you want to go back to that time in our lives?”

“That's not what I'm trying to do,” he protested. “I'm saying what we had was wonderful, but the timing wasn't right.” His smile was bright and captivating. “Now it's a different time. We're different people. Maybe it's the *right* time.”

“I don't know that I'm ready for a relationship. I just came out of a long-term one.”

“Good. That means you're free for me.” He flashed that smile again.

She laughed in spite of herself. “Maybe and maybe not.”

“As long as you don't say no, then it's all good.”

She went to open her mouth and say that exact word but he kissed her lips shut then quickly pulled back. “Don't say it.”

“Don't kiss me,” she bit off. “We aren't that kind of friends.”

“What kind of friends is that? Ones who care about each other? Ones who can wrap an arm around each other and give comfort?” he asked as he did exactly that.

“Everything is so lighthearted to you. A game.” She shook her head. “You haven't changed.”

“I have,” he protested. “Honest, but I'm trying to find a common ground here for us. A way forward and you keep blocking me.”

She shot him a look as they approached the hangar. “You're like a puppy.”

He snorted. “I wasn't three years ago and I wasn't on the mission yesterday.” That gaze turned on her. “Or was I?”

She smiled. “No,” she whispered. “You were all man then.”

He winked.

And damn if she didn't feel color rising up her neck and face. “You're deadly.”

“We're deadly together,” he whispered. “Remember that.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“For me it's like it was yesterday.”

She glanced at him sharply. “Really?”

He shifted uncomfortably and she realized it was his turn to be embarrassed. But he lifted his head and let her glimpse the man behind the jovial face. To see that he was serious. She gave him the sweetest of smiles. “It's nice to know I was unforgettable.”

“You left soon after, and I didn't have a chance to tell you how much,” he whispered. “I didn't even know you were leaving that fast.”

There was pain in his voice. She sighed and reached out a hand. “I had wanted to spend time with you for a year before that. But you never saw me. You were always with someone else, and I didn't want to be someone else. But when I knew I was leaving, I was determined to take that little bit of you with me.”

He gave her the slowest dawning smile that reached into her very soul. She shook her head. “This is way too fast. I moved on. I fell in love. Got engaged. Then when that broke up, I came back here.”

“To me.” He nodded. “Perfect.”

“No,” she said laughing. “Not to you. I haven't been holding a torch for you. As I recall we were both happy to walk away.”

“Not sure about the happy part,” he said. “I can tell you that if I was at the time, I wasn't soon after. I very quickly realized that we'd had something special. I missed it – you – all these years.”

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SHE BLINKED AT him. Then again.

He winced. “A little too much too fast, huh?”

He reached for the door handle in front of them. “I know. Who knew?” He tossed her a light grin hoping he wasn't crossing a line but she was hot, a

damned good pilot, and she was going to be overrun by men in a heartbeat. He wanted to make sure his heart was first.

“Not me,” she muttered.

She shook her head and walked into the huge hangar. Six helicopters stretched out in front of them in various states of repairs. “Did Mason really ask you to find something belonging to Stone?” she asked as she strode across the floor. “Or was that a cover up for you in case anyone asked?”

“Both.”

The helicopter was being worked on. The side panel was going through a quick switch out. But as she didn’t see anyone working on the machine at that moment, and with her new suspicions she had to admit to feeling slightly nervous seeing the machine was sitting here unprotected.

Accessible.

She murmured to Evan. “Is this standard?”

“This is standard. There is security around even though we aren’t going to see them just standing around being suspicious of everyone.”

She frowned. That didn’t make her feel any better. “But that also means anyone could come in here and sabotage the machines.”

“In theory anyone on base could do just that, but they’d have to be already working on the machines to gain access or have a specific reason to gain access, and the buildings are all under video security. North Island isn’t open to just anyone.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” she muttered. “Until you consider that the video cameras are great to look at *after* a crime has been committed.”

“You’re really paranoid, aren’t you?”

“No, not really. It’s just when you have a paradigm shift the world around you looks different. And now I realize how vulnerable the machines are.”

He laughed. “They aren’t. They are in a secure location, checked before and assessed after every flight. If there was something to find it would have been found.”

She nodded but didn’t appear to believe him.

Then she flew these machines. He wanted to learn but hadn’t had the time or the opportunity yet. His life often depended on the pilot’s skill and the machine’s soundness. As he stared at the helicopter in front of them, he realized she had reason to be concerned. If the sabotage was external then everything he just said *would* apply. But if it was internal then there were

many less safeguards. And if the person had an exit strategy then the damage could be set in motion and the guilty party could get away without anyone knowing the difference. Then there were the newly radicalized that were all too eager to become suicide bombers.

He frowned not liking the direction of his thoughts.

Her concern was catching.

She hopped up into the helicopter, stood and looked around.

He watched her. There was a stillness to her movements as if she was seeing, hearing something – no maybe sensing something. He'd seen it over and over again. The inner workings of the brain often refused to stay contained by the science of what was possible. He knew many a pilot with an unnatural connection to their machines and the way they could make them respond to a touch. It was both fascinating and terrifying.

And watching her right now was an eerie reflection of Ice when he'd seen her do something similar. She'd found a problem in a fuel line that time. It was a faulty line, not sabotage, but she'd insisted the entire machine be gone over anyway.

As he'd flown in that machine hours later, he'd respected her sensory perception.

He'd love to know that Megan had the same instinct.

He watched and waited. She turned in a slow circle, her gaze assessing as it landed on each section of the helicopter as if mentally checking off a list in her head that all was well.

Suddenly, she moved and sat down in her seat.

“Anything wrong?” he asked cautiously, not sure what she'd just been doing.

“No, I think it's all fine,” she said. “So far.”

He nodded and hopped in, going to where Stone had been lying. The bottom of the helicopter had been hosed out already so if there was anything on the bottom before then it would have been washed out. Or caught up somewhat. He went down on his hands and knees and searched the metal flooring. Nothing to the left. Nothing to the right.

He started to stand again but she spoke from behind him. “What's that?”

He turned, noticed the direction she was pointing, and found a tiny piece of cloth. “Looks like a bit of cloth from one of the uniforms. The metal is standing high here so it could have caught on the man's sleeve when they

cleaned out under here.”

“Right.” Silence for a moment, and he turned around to see her heading to the back of the machine. He finished his perusal and joined her. “I couldn’t see anything.”

“That’s too bad. Looks like when he lost his lucky piece he also lost out on his luck,” she commented.

“Superstitious?”

She shook her head but he knew some men were. Some wore lucky socks on a mission or held a picture of the woman they loved, or carried a momento of some kind that would keep them safe and that momento ranged from crosses to rocks to a woman’s scarf to the same piece of hard liquorice candy – now thoroughly covered in lint and dirt.

But whatever worked for the men...

Who was he to judge? Considering he’d been secretly pining for the woman in front of him and even had the same type of wine he’d cracked open on their first night sitting at home in case she ever returned. Now for the first time in a long time he had to wonder if maybe he might finally get to open it.

Chapter 7

IT WAS HARD to not feel a little foolish, but Megan had needed to come to the hangar and look. Nothing appeared wrong, but she felt better making sure the machine was safe and sound. That maintenance was in progress didn't change the fact that no one was here or that anyone could have done something. The bottom line was if someone wanted to be an asshole they'd manage it somehow.

After a good look around, Evan jumped down to the floor.

As she hopped down, she heard someone call out.

She spun around to see Fred, one of the oldest mechanics in the place, walking toward her, a proverbial cookie in his hand. He was in great shape but his weakness was sugary treats, and he could always be found with something. Even if it was only a chocolate bar sticking out of his pocket.

"What's the matter," he called out to her, a frown on his face.

She shook her head and smiled at him. "It was a rough day yesterday. I wanted to come back. Silly, huh?" She motioned to Evan at her side. "Stone is missing his lucky cross, so Evan is here to look for it."

She glanced from Evan back to Fred, then asked, "You didn't see it, did you?"

"No – No one turned anything like that in either." Fred shook his head. "Bad business this one. Stone is a good man. Don't like to see anyone lose a limb, but he's got the right attitude and if anyone can surmount this he can."

"He does," Evan agreed.

Personally, Megan didn't give a damn if anyone did have the right attitude. It was still a hell of a loss, and he might feel even more pressure as everyone figured he'd handle his injury without a problem. He had the right to be angry and feel defeated for a while. It was that he shouldn't wallow. Life had to be lived. With or without a leg. She just hoped he got to keep the one. There were worse things obviously, but it still was going to be a hell of a challenge.

"He's up for it," Fred said, making her realize she'd been muttering out

loud. “Stone and Levi are a pair of big hard asses.”

Evan laughed. “So are Merk and Rhodes.”

Fred nodded. “That’s one hell of a special ops team. Betrayal sucks.” He spat on the floor and popped the last bite of cookie into this mouth. “What the hell is this world coming to?”

There was no good answer so she walked away with a nod.

“Hey, Evan,” Fred called out.

Evan turned to see one of Fred’s mechanics in the machine holding up a cell phone.

“Is that yours?” Fred asked, nodding toward the item.

Evan checked his pocket then swore. “Thanks, it must have slipped out when I was searching.” He grabbed it up then returned to where Megan waited for him.

“Satisfied?” Evan asked as they stepped out into the sunlight.

“That we haven’t found anything means nothing,” she said. “We need to look at the video cameras. Maybe there were more people hidden inside?”

“And we can do that.”

She turned to glance at him. “Really?”

“Mason was going to ask for it.” With perfect timing his phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the message out loud. “Approval granted to view the cameras on northeast corner of the hangar where HVAC repair was done.”

She brightened. “Awesome.” And didn’t it figure they were going to be limited to just that one camera. Still, as long as they could see no one else came or went she’d be satisfied. Until her mind came up with another possible scenario. “Where do we go?”

“Security.”

She nodded. Like she knew where that was. “Lead the way.”

He did. By the time they reached the room with the security cameras, they’d had to pass two checkpoints. She was happy to see the base taking the threat seriously.

Evan didn’t appear to notice.

Inside, the video they’d requested was loaded onto one screen off to the side for their viewing.

Evan pressed play and they watched the van approach and disappear around the corner before appearing in front of the hangar again. “Stop the

video,” she said. “How long is it out of sight?”

He replayed the video and they checked the timing. “Eight seconds.”

“Okay. Not enough time for someone to have stopped, gotten out and the van to have continued to drive.”

They played the video again. This time they watched it all the way through. The van came to a stop. The driver hopped out as did the passenger. A moment later, clipboards in hand, the men removed piping, ducting, and a large box from the van.

She caught her breath at the size of the box, but it was opened and unpacked to reveal a new side panel for one of the systems. “Why a new side panel?” she muttered.

Evan laughed. “The HVAC system is out of the way but not that much. Someone or something probably slammed into it.”

“Aren’t they on the roof?”

He nodded. “They are but that means little. It could have been loosened in that bad storm we had last week. If it was it’s going to be a bitch to tighten again, it’s easier to just replace the panel.”

“Makes sense.” She’d seen enough stripped bolts and slots too large to hold anything tight. As they watched, the men quickly went about their business. They were off camera for a long time but the van stayed in one place. Evan fast-forwarded the video.

“I guess that answers that,” Evan said as the two men returned to the van, turned it around and exited again. It went off screen on the return journey, a shorter period.

“They are moving faster now,” she commented.

“Going home. Job is done and now they know where they are going.”

She nodded. “So it looks normal to you?”

Evan straightened. “It does.” He eyed her carefully. “You good now?”

She stared down at the video. “Can you go back to where the van arrives and is off screen for those eight seconds?”

He shot her a look but didn’t say anything. He quickly hit replay. She studied the movements on screen, then hit stop, rewound and came back to the spot that bothered her.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s stupid but I can’t help but wonder if there’s a chance men could have slipped out the back in this time. If the van was still moving, and they

opened, hopped out, and shut the door, could they do it in eight seconds?”

*

EVAN STUDIED HER face. She was really concerned about this. He went back to the image of the van as it just started to move around the corner. Then zoomed in to the driver's side window. There was the driver, he leaned forward as if looking where he was supposed to go. Normal. Check. He studied his hand position. Both on either side of the wheel, both clearly visible. Again. Normal. Check. He studied the side of the van. It had no side windows and bore the logo of Aston's Heating and Plumbing. It would be easy enough to check if that was the company that held the maintenance contract for these systems. He studied what he could see of the back of the van. Which given the angle was a fair bit. Not the license plate but that could be pulled off any number of other cameras.

“The brake light is on,” Megan tapped the monitor. “Why?”

“He's peering forward as if looking for where he was going to park,” Evan said. “Chances are he's slowed down to a crawl anyway.”

“So he's riding the brakes?”

“Looks that way.” Evan frowned. “Not unusual.”

And then he saw it. “Shit.”

“What?” She leaned forward studying the frozen screen.

Evan realized the room was too quiet. Men had turned in their seats to study what they were doing. What they might have found.

Steven, head of security, an old friend, and a long time navy man walked over. “What are you looking for and what do you think you found?”

Steven studied the monitor. Then leaned over and shifted the video to the large wall screen on the left. “Is that easier?”

“Yes,” Evan said softly, walking over to the wall. “Megan, do you see it?”

“I do now,” she whispered.

“Don't keep us in suspense,” Steven said impatiently. “What did you see? We honored the request but there was no explanation.”

“I couldn't get out of my head the possibility that maybe somehow men had been allowed onto the base that shouldn't be here.”

Steven's face flattened. "Explain," he barked.

Evan quickly filled him in. "So we didn't have anything specific to go on, but now we have a little more."

Steven walked over to the wall screen and studied the time stamp and the image. "Eight seconds isn't very long," he muttered.

"No, but it's long enough."

Steven reached out and tapped the back of the van. "Damn."

Evan smiled. "Exactly. They jumped the gun."

Steve was already on the phone.

In the video, the handle was turned down at a slight angle, the door...a hair open. Something that could only be done from inside. As in someone was holding the handle and ready to jump out.

"Got him." Evan smiled but there was nothing pleasant about it. And the men in the room all mirrored the same look. "You were right, Megan. There is someone on base that shouldn't be here."

"And they have access to the hangars," she said in a hard voice. "That's so not good."

Chapter 8

SHE WAS A pilot and as such had nothing to do with the next scenario, so she was summarily thanked and booted out of the room.

Outside she stood in the cooler air, staring at the overcast sky. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing,” Evan said. “They’ve got this.”

She studied him. “I figured you’d say that but had hoped for a different answer.”

“No, you did a lot already. No one had even considered this, and you gave them something specific to go on and possible proof. They are on it, now let it go.”

She shook her head. “Sure. Just like that. To know there could be any number of men on the base who could be planning an attack and I’m to just let it go?”

“It would be good if you did.” He nudged her toward the hangar. “Aren’t you going to a seminar this afternoon?”

Glancing at her watch, she winced and nodded. “I’m already late. Not good.”

“Let’s go.”

He ran at her side as she made it to the workshop in just under five minutes. And still five minutes late. He gave her a hard kiss and whispered, “Say nothing to anyone, remember that.”

She nodded and turned to join the rest of the pilots for the new computer training session. And came face to face with Butthead. One of the many superiors she dealt with on base.

“And of course you have a reason for being late?” Lieutenant Gerard asked as she passed him gate-keeping at the doorway.

“I do.” She took her seat and tried to calm down. “I was in the hangar looking for a missing token from one of the men injured in yesterday’s mission,” she said, opting for a partial truth.

Not even he could take umbrage with that.

This afternoon should be easy enough. They had an upgrade to the radar system on board the helicopter with many new features. Ice should be here too – days off or not. She grabbed her phone and texted her. The response was immediate. *I'm at the hospital. Take notes for both of us.*

Sighing, Megan settled back into her seat and listened.

The time disappeared as the new applications were revealed, and she could easily see how advantageous this upgrade was going to be.

The question and answer period was lively and interesting. By the time they broke for the day, her head was swimming and she couldn't wait to get back in the air to work with the program. "That's it for today," the trainer spoke above the din. He waited for the noise to lower then said, "I'll be available for questions all of tomorrow."

The march for the door started.

"Megan Hemmingway." Butthead stood in front of her. He narrowed his gaze at her. "And how long did that take?"

She raised her eyebrows, not sure what he was implying. But he was her superior officer. She glanced at her watch and assessed when they'd gone into the hangar. "I guess I was there for just over an hour and a half."

"To look for a token?" he asked, his voice dry and critical.

She stiffened, not liking his implication. "Yes," she said and stared at him calmly. Most of the men in the military were decent family men but then there were the few who could make life very unpleasant for everyone, especially women.

"And of course you were alone."

Interesting. "On the contrary. I was with one of the SEAL team that had been involved in the rescue. He was the one requesting the token so he could return it to the man in the hospital."

Silence.

She'd always had a problem with this man, but the military bred their troops with more attitude than any other career so it came with the territory.

He gave her a hard nod, and she slid past him.

Outside she gave a mental shake. She'd enjoyed the afternoon but then she really loved to learn new things and anything to do with upgrades on her job were huge.

The sky had darkened while she'd been inside. She headed toward her vehicle. It was later than she'd expected. The blame for that could be put

squarely at the feet of the QA session. Still lots of good information came out in that session, so it was hard to begrudge the time.

She really enjoyed flying. The glimpse into the combat she'd seen yesterday had given her an insight into so much more. Not a nice one.

War, on drugs or people, was shit for everyone.

She drove home and parked outside the front door of the little house. It was cute and just big enough for her. She hated to clean and this was something she could manage. Walking inside she tossed her keys on the table and headed to the kitchen. She was starving. She opened her fridge and groaned. She hadn't made time for shopping yet. And that was the last thing she wanted to do right now. She studied the stack of takeout pamphlets on the side counter. She couldn't stomach the idea of pizza again. She really did enjoy cooking, but what was the point when it was just her? If she was entertaining then it was fun.

But eating alone, not so much. After being in a long-term relationship, she'd gotten used to having meals together and planning weekends with a special night out. Now it was just her and her alone.

It sucked.

But then again, she had little to complain about. She could do with a few more friends. She frowned and considered Ice sitting at the hospital. And made a fast decision. She texted her, asking if she was still there, and got an immediate terse *yes* back.

Have you eaten?

Not hungry.

Too damn bad. Ice was a lean mean machine, but she needed to eat like everyone else. Turning around Megan picked up her keys and walked back out the front door. She was suddenly in the mood for Greek. She took a slight detour to the only restaurant she'd found so far that had authentic Greek food. That she'd had enough time to try several already didn't say much about her cooking skills.

It actually said more about her state of loneliness.

Once at the hospital she parked and wandered through into the reception and asked for Levi's room. She was immediately told the men weren't allowed visitors.

"How about the men and women standing guard?" she asked, gently holding up the bag.

And received a flat look in return.

“Right. I’ll just text them.”

She walked away and phoned Ice.

“Ice, I’m in the waiting room with Greek takeout. Where are you and how do I get to you?”

There was a moment’s hesitation then Ice said reluctantly, “Take the elevator on the left and come to the fourth floor. Someone will meet you there.”

As she hung up, Megan sighed with relief. She’d had enough trouble making friends in the couple of weeks she’d been here, and although she had a good basis for a deeper friendship with Ice, she hadn’t been sure of what type of reception she’d get tonight.

On the fourth floor she was greeted by four men. She stared at the hard faces and realized that if nothing else no one here was downplaying the security issue.

She held up the bag of takeout food. “I figured Ice wouldn’t eat without being forced to.”

The men exchanged glances then stepped back.

“Thanks.” She walked down the hallway following one man. Another walked at her side and the other two followed. Was there something else going on she didn’t know about?

“Wait here.”

She stopped and didn’t move. She was no fool.

The door to the left opened and closed.

Then it opened again and Ice came out. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“Why is that again?” she asked curiously. “I care about these men too, you know. I don’t know them personally, but that doesn’t mean I want them to suffer.”

Ice studied her face for a long moment.

Megan kept hers open and friendly, but there was cool determination in her voice. She didn’t want to push in where she wasn’t welcome, but how was anyone going to know who she was if she didn’t push at least a little?

Ice nodded. “Come in for a moment then.” Ice led her inside the room set up with two beds.

Megan recognized Levi and Stone. “Nice that they are together.”

“Not protocol but given it’s easier to keep them covered if they are in the

same space, we managed to convince the doctors to have them both here once their conditions were upgraded.”

“Not much room to sit down,” Megan said looking around.

“No need to sit.”

“Right.” Of course not. She looked at the man standing on the side watching her, waiting for her to do something he could jump on her for.

She faced Ice. “Do you know something I don’t?”

Ice shrugged. “Better to expect and not have anything than to be unprepared and lose a life.”

Megan wanted to ask if she heard about the van and possibly suspects on the base, then figured she should just keep her mouth shut. These men and Ice appeared to be paranoid enough for all of them.

Feeling awkward, she handed the bag of food to Ice, then she turned toward the door intent on leaving when it opened in front of her and Evan walked in.

*

HE GRINNED WHEN he saw her. “Hey, look who’s here.” The four men crowded in the open doorway behind them.

She sighed. “I’m just leaving.”

“No need to leave on my account.”

“It isn’t on your account,” she snapped. “I was leaving anyway.”

“Wait a few minutes and I’ll walk out with you.” He gave her a wink.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I came to see how Levi was doing.” He glanced at the small room in surprise. “Hell, I didn’t think you’d make this happen.”

“It took some persuading,” Ice said with a warm smile. “I know they are happier together.”

Evan nodded. “Have they woken up?”

She shook her head, the whisper of a smile a mere memory “No, not yet.”

The big man on the side spoke up. “They can’t. Drugs.”

Megan winced. “I guess that’s a good thing.” Shit. “I’m glad you’re here to watch over them.”

“Why?” Ice interjected before anyone else could get a word in.

“That’s actually what I came to talk to you about,” Evan said in a low voice as he quickly explained what Megan and he had found.

When he finished the air had warmed up considerably.

Megan glanced around to see the men looking at her more as a curiosity but with respect.

“Do we have any confirmation of that?” Ice asked, her dark eyes darkening even further.

“No, not yet. The handle was definitely in the downward angle as if to open and the door was open enough to see a thick black shadow. The only possible alternate theory is the door was tied in that position.”

“And it wasn’t on the way out?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

She nodded. “Then we assume the worst.”

She walked over to Levi and stared down at the unconscious man. Megan hadn’t had a chance to see him in the bed, feeling uncomfortable enough just being in the room, but the look of naked longing on Ice’s face was heartbreaking.

She lowered her head and waited. Finally, Ice walked over to stand in front of her. “I need a favor,” she said abruptly.

Startled, Megan straightened and gave her a clipped nod.

“I need several changes of clothes and a few personal items from my house.” She motioned at the two men lying in bed. “I won’t be leaving these two until this is settled one way or another.”

Megan nodded slowly. “I can do that.”

Ice pulled out a set of keys. “My address is,” and she rattled off an address that was unfamiliar but heard Evan’s comment in the back of her ear, “I’ve got it.”

They spent a few minutes discussing what she needed then Megan turned to leave.

“I’ll be back in half an hour,” she said. She looked at the bag of takeout food and said, “Make sure at least half of that is gone before I return.”

Ice’s face was set in stubborn lines. Megan turned to the men. “Happy to bring back food for you guys too, but she needs to eat.”

The men grinned and nodded. “We’ll see to it.”

One man said, “And make mine pepperoni.”

“Ha, no way,” another man growled. “I want as many meat toppings as

we can get and still call it a pizza.”

The men were still wrangling as Evan led Megan over to the second room where Merk and Rhodes were lying. They were at least awake and talking to the two men standing guard. Evan brought those four up to speed and extended the offer. “We’re picking up pizza for those in the other room, anyone else want anything here?”

As they walked down the hallway back to the elevator a few minutes later, Megan asked, “Can they really eat a large pizza by themselves?”

“Yes and so much more if they get the chance.”

She shook her head. “No wonder they are so damn big.”

He laughed and looped his arm through hers. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Chapter 9

IT WAS NICE to have this sense of camaraderie, and although she hadn't planned to slip back into the relationship she'd had with Evan, it seemed natural enough to do so.

Maybe even more so as the world had an uneasy edge to it. She could see the security everywhere as they drove first to Ice's home to collect a bag of necessities then to the pizza joint and placed an order. She wondered how anyone could eat that much. The restaurant owners seemed happy enough to get the business.

"Slow today?" she asked, looking at the empty restaurant.

"The place emptied an hour or so ago, and it's been a ghost town ever since," the manager said.

At his words, Megan turned to look out the window. The street was mostly empty with the exception of a few slow driving cars. Was this a coincidence or instinct keeping everyone inside and hopefully out of harm's way?

The pizza smell as they drove back to the hospital made her mouth salivate even though she was sick of it. She'd have loved to dig in right now but that was hardly fair. There was so much to eat she couldn't imagine the men getting through it all. Evan also wouldn't let her pay. She'd planned on it, but he'd been adamant. Then again she'd brought the Greek.

When they arrived the men's eyes lit up. What was it about a simple pizza that warmed a man's belly and brought comfort to his soul? She didn't have the same reaction these men did. Her weakness was tea. The world was okay if she could have a moment to enjoy a cup of tea to sip and enjoy.

Right now the atmosphere had little of that.

The men came out into the hall and lounged against the walls as they chowed down. They took turns, eating and snagging a couple of pieces to go back inside to let the next man come out. But as they did so they managed to empty almost a full box each.

She held the cardboard boxes rather than place them on the ground. There

were several straight back chairs to sit on. Conversation was low and minimal. When everyone had had a chance she stacked the few remaining pieces into two boxes and delivered one box to a room.

Then they left.

The process had been little over an hour.

Back outside it was as if time stood still. There was still a dark overhanging cloud in the air and the streets appeared more than a little empty. She ran her fingers through her hair and realized all she'd done was transfer the pizza grease to it. Great. Shower time.

"Now what?" Evan asked as they walked to the parking lot.

"I'm going home to get rid of that lovely pizza odor I'm wearing."

"What?" he cried. "It's a great smell."

"Ha, it was all good until the double anchovies." She gave a mock shudder as he opened her car door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll follow you home – you only live a block away from me."

She stared at him, her mind suddenly flooded with images of his bedroom. That's where they'd spent the entire weekend a few years ago. She spun around and looked at the streets, trying to orient them in her mind. "Really?"

"Yeah." He grinned a boyish grin and said, "In fact, I'm behind you and over one."

"I had no idea."

She went to get in when he said, "Are you sure? I figured you were just trying to get as close as you could." He gave her a big wink and hopped into his truck.

She slammed the door with a little more force than necessary. Then laughed. If nothing else he was good entertainment. And her mind flooded again. Slick bodies on sweat soaked sheets. Hot loving she'd never had before or again. Even with her fiancé, the sex had been good, great even, but nothing like it had been with Evan. She'd figured it had been the circumstances. The sweetness of the moment, knowing it would be over soon.

But he'd just brought it all back again.

She drove home carefully. She could see him behind her waiting and watching as she got out and headed inside. She appreciated the gentlemanly behavior to see she got home safe. Even though she was quite capable of

looking after herself.

Inside she locked her door and headed upstairs to her tiny bedroom and bathroom. It was shower time then maybe a cup of tea in front of the television. A bit dull but that's what she needed after a day like today.

She stripped in the bedroom and walked into the shower. Turning on the hot water to warm up, she grabbed her robe and hung it up on the back of the door.

The steam wafted out of the shower as she opened the glass to step inside. Instantly the heat pounded on her skin. She loved it. She stood unmoving for a long moment, letting the hot water soak into her body. She hadn't been chilled prior to stepping in, but for some reason the warmth was giving her comfort she hadn't known she needed.

She reached out for the shampoo and started to work on her hair. Super thick and wavy, she washed the auburn locks then conditioned them before grabbing up the soap and starting on her body.

When she was done, she stepped out of the tiled room wrapped in a towel. The bathroom was steamy. She turned on the fan as she dried off. She finished up with her absolutions for the night, grabbed up her robe and put it on. In the bedroom, she pulled back the bedding and turned to face the dresser, needing her pajamas.

And froze.

A man stood in front of her dresser, gun in hand, casually pointed at her. A man she didn't recognize. Then again he looked like dozens of men around. Dark hair, tanned skin.

She shook her head even as her heart pounded and recently dried skin turned clammy. "What do you want?" she asked in low tones.

He never said a word. He nudged the gun toward the bed. As if she knew what that meant. In her heart she was afraid she did. That she was in a robe and standing beside a bed didn't help much.

Swallowing hard, her mind racing for options, she stared at him in shock. His outfit. A typical mechanic's overalls she'd see anywhere around the hangars and many other places for that matter.

"Move."

Move where? She stared at him belligerently, only now realizing her clothes were lying on the floor and he was actually motioning to that pile beside the bed. He wanted her to get dressed. Which meant he planned to

take her somewhere.

Shit. Of course it could be worse. He could want her to lie down.

She bent and lifted the pile to place on the bed and quickly dressed, using the robe as a shield as long as possible.

She deliberately didn't look at him as she dressed, but she was keenly aware of his every movement. Her martial arts skills were top notch, her down and dirty street fighting skills less so, but neither were a match to a bullet. Particularly not for the police issue stock the man was holding.

Where the hell did he get that piece? She gave herself a mental slap. It didn't matter where it came from. One could get anything one wanted if the money was there. Sad but true.

Her bedroom window was open. She frowned as she did up the zipper on her jeans. She wasn't very high off the ground, but she was on the second floor. Could she dive through, hit the ground and then run? Would she be able to get away from the gunman? Chances were good she'd take a bullet, still the gunshots would wake up the neighbors.

"Hurry," he said in a normal tone but with an accent.

She nodded quickly, not wanting to be dragged out only half dressed, but her mind had locked on to the word neighbor.

Evan was only a hand's throw away.

How could she let him know she was in trouble? She peered at the gunman behind her, and he glared at her. Of course. She grabbed her t-shirt and pulled it over her head then taking one arm out of the robe at a time, she managed to get it on. She had a pair of sandals beside the window where she'd kicked them off the other day. She bent, slipped them on and latched up the buckle around the heel. They weren't the best option, but they were better than being barefoot.

As soon as she had the second sandal on, she glanced at the gunman. He was waiting patiently for her. He must be taking her somewhere she needed to be dressed normally.

Too bad for him, she wasn't in a mood to socialize.

And she threw herself out the window.

*

EVAN SAT AT his computer, sorting through the news hype to see what was really going on in the world. He was tempted to go for a run. He was irritated and keyed up – but why?

There was damn little he could do about the shit going on right now. He wasn't going to be called on duty unless he was needed. The entire base was full of capable men and women and most had no clue what was going on right now. All they had was supposition and a tilted handle, like he'd said to Megan, the security team were on it. Nothing that would justify a lockdown and search. And yet the security level had been upped and there was an edginess to the air as if something else was going on that no one quite understood. But the waters deep down were shifting.

He got up and paced his living room. Maybe he should go for that run. Drain off some of this energy. Or hit the gym? He checked the time. It was only nine-thirty. Still hours to go before it closed down. An hour's workout would take care of this. He grabbed his gym bag and put on his running shoes.

As he opened his front door, keys and bag in hand, he paused.

What had he just heard?

It came again.

Panting. Racing footsteps. A hard bang.

He dropped his bag and raced outside. He couldn't see anyone.

Checking out the rest of the yard, he headed into the backyard. Nothing.

"Hello?" he said in a low voice.

"Evan?"

"Megan," he raced toward her. She was at the back fence in the garden huddled behind the huge flowering bush. He took a look around, but the night was dark and silent. Maybe too silent.

"What's the matter?" He crouched at her side. "What happened?"

She was gasping for breath. "A gunman in my bedroom. I jumped out the window."

"Jesus, are you okay?"

"I think so. Careful," she said grabbing for him as he started to rise. "He's likely still out there."

"Have you seen him since you ran?"

"No," she whispered. "I haven't. But then I was more concerned with getting the hell out of there than anything."

“Good. That’s the priority. Now the bastard will be hunted down.”

He helped her to her feet, both of them staying below the six foot fence line... “Can you walk?”

“Well, I ran, does that count?” She gave him a big cheeky grin, but he could see the effort it took.

“Come on inside.”

She went to take a step but winced, her small cry loud in the silence. He didn’t give her a chance to explain, he scooped her up and raced inside. He had calls to make. And a manhunt to set up.

Inside he sat her down on the couch, sent out an alert to the men he could count on to have his back, and now by extension, Megan’s back. Then he turned his attention to her foot.

“It’s minor,” she said, brushing his hands away. “My parkour, or street jumping skills are less than stellar.”

He sat back on his heels and studied her face.

She gave him a lopsided smile. “My bedroom – it’s on the second floor.”

A shadow crossed his features but he nodded in understanding. “You didn’t damage anything major, so that’s good.”

He quickly unbuckled the sandal on her right foot and lifted the ankle, his fingers gently probing. She winced once.

“Nothing broken from the look of it.”

“Told ya so,” she said in a mocking voice.

“Any other damage?” he asked as he stood up and looked down at her. In the distance he heard running footsteps and the sound of a vehicle. That was Swede’s truck turning the corner.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

He grinned. “The troops are here.”

“Troops?”

The front door burst open and footsteps raced in. Shadow and Hawk were neck in neck for first place. Cooper and Swede came in next. He held up a hand as he rattled off her address.

“Gunman in her bedroom,” Evan said tersely. “She jumped out the second story window and came here.” He pointed through the back window to her place. “Less than ten minutes.”

“Still too long,” Hawk said racing silently out the backyard and flying over the fence.

“Mason and Dane are heading straight to her place,” Evan called out.

The house emptied as the men scattered. They knew what to do and would do it with an efficiency that would surprise anyone else.

Evan turned to see Markus striding in the front door. He grinned. “You’re late.”

Markus snorted. “As if.”

Evan filled him in as Markus gave Megan a long look. “Why you?” he asked carefully.

Her gaze went to Evan.

Evan told him about what they’d seen on the video, and Megan’s suspicion of the young workmen. He already knew about the trackers on the injured men.

“And what did he look like?” Markus turned that fierce frown onto Megan. “What kind of weapon?”

She told him what she could but it wasn’t much. “I had my back to him most of the time while I was trying to get dressed and figure a way out.”

“And the way out she chose was to dive out of the second story window and test her wings,” Evan said on a dry note.

“It worked though, didn’t it?” She glared at him. “I couldn’t figure out what else to do that wouldn’t get me a bullet in my back.” She shifted restlessly. “Honestly, I figured I’d get hit no matter what I did.”

Markus snorted as he walked around behind her. “You did. You just don’t know it yet.”

She twisted to look at him and gasped in pain.

Evan raced to her side. “You were shot?”

“No, no way I was.” She shook her head quickly. “I’d have known.”

“No, often we don’t know until after the panic dies down,” Markus said. “You’re still moving so chances are it’s a flesh wound or if you’re lucky it’s just a graze, but you’re bleeding all over the couch.”

Chapter 10

SHE BOLTED TO her feet. “Oh my God. I’m sorry,” she cried. Then wavered in place as the pain hit.

Evan was already behind her, holding her in place, while Markus lifted her shirt. She shuddered as the dull throb turned into a sharp excruciating awareness. “Damn it. How bad?”

“Not bad. It skirted your ribs and slashed skin and the muscle, but it could be so much worse.” Her shirt was gently lowered. “Interesting spot.”

She turned to face him. “Maybe not, I grabbed the sill and jumped to the side, landed and rolled then kept on going. I remember the landing and thinking I’d wrenched something, but I wasn’t exactly going to slow down and check it out.”

“It does need stitches.”

“No, I’m sure it will be fine.” She stepped away from the men. The last thing she wanted was for them to know she hated needles. In fact, she’d been known to faint – as in pass out cold at the sight of them. So not good for her reputation.

But from the grins on their faces they already knew or guessed.

Her smile fell away and she glared at them. “No stitches.”

“Not an option,” Markus said gently. “Either Evan is taking you or I am. Or you can have an ambulance with sirens in front of the whole world if that makes you feel any better.”

Her glare deepened.

“This way you can stop in and see the guys,” Evan said. Markus glanced over at him. “We took pizza and Greek to Ice and the others standing guard,” Evan explained.

“Guess you’re Megan’s bodyguard now.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard,” she snapped, her temper flaring. Maybe it was the pain, maybe it was the reference to being incapable of looking after herself or maybe it was knowing she was going to lose the upcoming battle and have to deal with a needle, but it sent her mood into the pits.

“Right.”

Evan walked into the hallway and grabbed his keys where he'd dropped them beside his gym bag. “Let's go. With me or Markus – or if necessary with both of us.”

She snorted and walked out the front door. Her head high, she turned to say something then thought better of it.

And missed getting shot a second time as the bullet spit into the doorframe beside her.

She was dragged back inside and the door slammed shut. She turned to see Markus on the run out the backdoor and around. He was going after the shooter. Evan was on his phone.

How had the shooter known she'd be here? Had he watched? It wasn't like she'd gone far. Or was Evan the target?

She stared at the ceiling, realizing she was still in the same place Evan had dragged her to. She was sitting in the hallway behind the front door. The bullet hadn't penetrated the door, thank God, so she could stay here for the moment.

And that's when she realized Evan had a gun in his hand as he finished sending out the alarm.

Did Markus have a weapon? Or was he such a badass he'd take down the shooter with his bare hands?

She almost laughed, positive she'd heard similar feats accredited to various SEALs in history. They had a reputation to uphold after all. She shifted until she was leaning against the door. And caught sight of the couch ahead of her. There was blood on the back and the side. So she'd likely left a bright red blood trail for the shooters to follow, too. Goddamn it.

How had she not known she'd been shot? What could she have done differently? Nothing. She hadn't even known until she'd been told.

And by then it was too late, the trail had already been laid.

But a half dozen men were out looking for the gunman. What were the chances one of Evan's unit had been shot already – they'd damn near walked into a trap.

“Have your men reported in, are they safe?” she asked when he glanced over at her.

“Haven't heard from them all. They'll check in with Mason. I've warned them.”

He put his phone away and crouched in front to her.

“He’s missed getting me twice,” she whispered, giving him a gentle smile. “What’s the chance he’s determined to try a third time?”

He stood up and peered around the glass panel in the door. “Let’s get you to the living room.”

He helped her to her feet and led her to the larger room with the bloody couch. “We’ll get him. The base will be on lockdown until we do.”

She stood in the center of the big room hating the vulnerable feeling of being exposed. “It’s all glass. I’d feel better in the bathroom,” she admitted. “At least we can’t be seen there.”

“Go around the corner to the dining room,” he motioned with his hand, “You can sit there without being seen, and you’ll still have a decent view.”

She nodded and followed his instructions. Of course he’d have known that about his floor plan already. Probably one of the first things he’d done after moving in.

Her house was so damn small she could likely be seen from every location with the exception of the bathroom – making it the safest in the house – unless she got pinned in there in which case she was a goner.

Pulling out the chair, she sat down stiffly and shifted so she could see the empty backyard. The second story window on the house kitty-corner to Evan’s was visible – and open. She gasped and immediately shifted further back. Yet for all she knew the owners just wanted fresh air. It was evening after a hot day. She’d be doing the same right about now if she was home. When no shots fired, she relaxed slightly.

“Now what?” she asked Evan as he joined her.

“For the moment we sit tight in the dark.”

“I hadn’t even noticed you’d turned off all the lights.” She ran her fingers over her face. “Not the end to the night I was looking for.”

“As soon as it’s clear we’ll take you to the hospital to get stitches then stash you somewhere safe until this is over.”

“I thought I was safe at home and never expected them to find me here. I’m sorry about that,” she said in low tones. “I wouldn’t have led them here if I’d known.”

“Don’t piss me off,” Evan snapped. “Unless you’re a part of whatever they are up to, then you are as much of a victim as anyone.”

“Not real fond of that term.”

He grinned and his teeth flashed in the half-light. “None of us are.”

She lowered her head to rest on her arms on the table.

He patted her back. “Sleep.”

“Not likely.” But her voice was drowsy. “Maybe I’ll rest for a few minutes.”

It didn’t make any sense that she’d be tired – she hadn’t done anything. And as long as she ignored the pain in her side, she didn’t feel too bad. But damn it was hard. As for her ankle...that pain refused to be silenced. She wanted to be tucked up in her own bed and sleeping now. This sense of violation – of not being safe in her personal space was new to her. It was one thing to have a dangerous job but another altogether when that danger came home – literally.

She slowly let the tension drift off her back. To not be alone right now was wonderful. To know it was someone who cared about her – and she didn’t quite get that but she’d take it right now – priceless.

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AS SOON AS her breathing leveled out, he got up from the dining room table and walked around to the other side of where she lay crumpled on the chair. There was fresh blood showing on the shirt, but there wasn’t a stream dripping to the floor. They needed to get her checked out, but it didn’t look like she’d done any more damage. Had the exhaustion something to do with her regular sleep pattern, or was it due to the stress and volatile situation? Of course shock and blood loss could account for it too.

He’d seen reactions from one extreme to the other. Whatever she needed to do for her body to reenergize worked for him. He checked his phone but there was nothing new. The police would be here soon, and they’d have to go through the process. He’d hoped to get her to the hospital first, but he didn’t dare leave the house right now. Not unless he was the intended target and not her?

Considering that, he frowned. He’d been on any number of missions and likely had garnered many enemies, but they wouldn’t be personal. No one knew who he was. The SEALs as a whole might be a target. The United States military machine as a larger target. But just himself – not likely.

Not unless someone had figured out who served on the individual SEAL teams and what missions they'd been part of. That wasn't impossible to find out but not likely.

Except it also wasn't likely that anyone could infiltrate the base and cause havoc as they were doing right now.

He turned the idea around and around then tossed it aside. No, Megan was likely the target. It had been her bedroom and the shooter had followed her to him. Except the shooters had used different guns. Unless he had a rifle over his shoulder and carried the handgun. Made sense. Or he had a partner. And that made even more sense.

His phone buzzed. Mason.

All clear. ETA five minutes.

Right. So where was Markus then? The others were returning, or at least some of them. Now if he could find Markus and make sure he wasn't running into any bullets, he'd be good. Markus was a hell of a man. Hell, they all were. But he was closer to Markus than some of the others. Seasoned warriors filled the SEAL ranks. The teams were called on to handle some of the worst shit imaginable.

And they did on a regular basis.

Evan had come on board at the same time as Markus. Maybe that's why they'd clicked. It wasn't the easiest breaking into the old guard, but they'd both managed it. Now Evan couldn't imagine anything different.

The older ones stepped down, allowing room for the young blood to step up.

And sometimes they were forced to step down. Like Stone was going to be.

He could be reassigned but that wouldn't sit well.

Evan would rather eat a bullet than sit at a desk grounded for life while the rest of his friends carried on wild and free. But there was a time when your reflexes weren't the sharpest and your eyes weren't the brightest. There were no ex SEALs. Once a SEAL always a SEAL, but maybe not always on active duty.

And there were many careers available to no longer active SEALs. He knew two that had gone into private security. Who knew what lay in his future? As long as he had one he was good.

Stone's situation had been a hell of a reminder. Merk was in bad shape

too. The muscles on his calves had been shot to shit. Multiple rounds of surgery lay ahead for him and at the end of it, a different occupation of some kind. Evan looked at Megan.

A helicopter pilot. Another dangerous ass job. But if she could handle his job then he sure as hell could handle hers.

Not that she'd said anything positive in that direction, but he'd take it as a good sign that she'd come to his house. Sure, he was close and all, but so were many other houses.

She knew him and she'd come to him. Like a homing pigeon.

And that's the way he liked it.

Chapter 11

SHE WOKE TO a house full of men.

And pain. So much damn pain.

While she'd been resting, her muscles had stiffened and her side now screamed at her. She couldn't imagine trying to move, but the bathroom was not going to come to her. Besides, she didn't know most of the people here.

And she was not a social butterfly. That was Evan. Maybe that's why she worried they had nothing in common. He had dozens of friends and always had events planned day in and day out.

She liked her own space. Time to herself.

Yet, she'd loved being part of a special twosome. Loved knowing she was in a bubble with someone else who wanted to be in there with her. Being wanted was seductive.

She needed more than that though and had broken off the relationship with Peter. He'd kept pushing her to set a date, and finally she'd taken a good look at why she'd been avoiding doing just that. She didn't *want* to set a date. She didn't *want* to get married. And that had been a shock – to both of them.

They'd broken up soon after.

She'd felt terrible. She felt like she'd led him on. But she'd been comfortable and had not wanted to change the status quo and go against popular opinion. It had been he who had wanted the commitment. Not her.

At least not with him.

Now she didn't know what she wanted.

But she had no intention of leading someone else in the wrong direction. She had to be there herself or she wasn't going down that path. And that could mean she'd be alone for a long time.

Her heart ached every time Peter's face slipped into her mind. It hurt to see the pain and betrayal, the shock on his face. He'd loved her deeply. She'd loved him – but not deeply enough to go through with a marriage. And that was on her.

Now months later she was wary.

Of relationships, of men, but more than that, wary of herself.

What if she couldn't love to the depths that others could? What if there was something wrong with her? She had loved being with Peter. He was easy going, good looking and a great lover. He put his socks into his laundry and did the dishes, so why couldn't she do what he wanted?

Because he was too easy. There'd been no fire. No spirit. No arguments. It was like eating bland pudding every day. She wanted steak sometimes. And that made her sound like a two-year-old.

Damn it.

Her parents had been devastated when she'd broken her engagement off. Her mother had berated her for letting such a good man go. Peter was still a good man – just not for her.

Her father had warned her that the type of job she did made her a not so good marriage prospect and wasn't the excitement of her job enough? Didn't she want to come home to the calm and peaceful environment that Peter could give her?

All valid arguments.

And didn't change the facts one bit. She couldn't force herself to marry him.

Hearing that one helicopter unit was being transferred to North Island, CA soon after, she quickly requested to be on it. She hadn't heard for months but had stepped up her game. When the good news came in she quietly started to give away the remnants of her life back East. She didn't tell her parents for a long time – until she got a date for the move.

By the time it was time to go, she felt like she'd gone through a marathon. She'd had to shift her life, her belongings, and deal with the emotions of releasing that part of her world.

It hadn't been easy. But by the time she boarded the flight to come West, she'd been feeling very much like she was stepping out of an old skin and jumping into a new one.

And she hadn't been able to contain her excitement.

She just hadn't planned on being accosted in her own bedroom a month later.

Making her way back to the dining room table after washing up, she sat back down carefully and waited. They'd get to her, she was sure. But the military had a process and good luck making it go faster.

“There you are,” Evan said with a smile. “We left you to nap a little longer, figured you’d be fresher for it.”

“Thanks,” she said, not sure she appreciated it. The thought yes, but to sleep while a half dozen men came through and watched her. Ugh.

“It was only for a couple minutes,” he said. “So not to worry.”

She shook her head. How did he do that? “Did you read my mind?”

“Nope. If I could do that, I wouldn’t be sitting here.” He waggled his eyebrows with a leer that made her laugh.

Several men sat down at the table. Not one of them was smiling. She stifled her own humor and prepared to be interviewed.

And she was. Not in a bad way but there was an edge to their voices as if Evan had held them off from waking her. Or maybe that was her imagination. There was enough going on to piss anyone here off.

With a gentle smile she answered their questions and gave as much information as she could, finishing with, “I’m sorry, I can’t be more help,” she said. “It happened so fast. I just bolted and never saw him again.”

The men asked her a dozen different questions in different ways, but she still had nothing new to offer. Then they asked about what she’d seen at the hangar. She looked over at Mason, a question in her eyes.

He nodded. “We’re cleared.”

“Good, then you explain it all,” she said. She leaned back, feeling the fatigue and pain pull at her. She didn’t want to go to the doctor, but right now it was better than being here. Evan filled in the men. When he finished she was peppered with questions again.

Still, the direction shifted away from her as more men joined in the discussion. The noise was tough to deal with.

A hot cup of coffee was placed in front of her. She smiled at Evan gratefully. “Thank you.”

“How are you holding up?”

“Fine.” She bolstered her smile to convince him but knew she’d failed immediately. “Hey, I’m okay. The shock is wearing off and the wound is starting to really complain. And I’m not much for pain killers but...”

His phone buzzed. He read it and stood up. “I’m taking her to the hospital. She’s going to get checked over then go up with Levi and Stone for the rest of the night.

“Actually, I was hoping to sleep in my own bed.”

Evan immediately shook his head. “Not happening. Here...” and he motioned around the full room, “I do have a spare room, but the best scenario for a few hours is the hospital.”

“Those rooms were jammed. There wasn’t place for another bed.”

“And yet they got you the next room where Ice is standing guard.”

Ice? Megan smiled. “Okay, maybe just long enough to grab some shuteye.”

“By the time the wound is treated there won’t be much of the night left.”

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HE KNEW SHE didn’t want to go, but it was too easy to have a minor injury take over and become something major. They didn’t need that. She was going to be off duty until she was back on track as it was. No way she wasn’t with the bum ankle. Still, he didn’t want his pilot anything but one hundred percent while on duty.

And she wasn’t fully mobile.

Ignoring her glare, he cleared it to take her to the hospital. Summarily he picked her up, and ignoring all the squawking, carried her out to his truck.

“I can walk, you know that right?”

“You’re hurt, in shock and have an injured ankle. You could also still be in danger,” he said quietly. “And if I wanted a chance to hold you in my arms, to know that you’re actually still alive after a few near misses, maybe you could indulge me that moment.”

She froze. He could feel her gaze on his face.

“I wasn’t in that much danger,” she muttered.

His gaze slid her way, one eyebrow raised almost to his hairline. “You could have died both times,” he said brusquely. “I know all too well how this shit can go wrong fast.”

She opened the truck door for him, before awkwardly sliding onto the front seat. He closed the door then raced to his side and got in.

Within seconds they were on the road.

“How did you know I was in your yard?” she asked. “I never made a sound.”

“Back to that radar with you thing,” he said with a laugh. But inside he

wasn't laughing.

This was serious. Two attempts was two too many. Time to turn this around.

He drove the rest of the way in silence. At the hospital, he pulled into the parking lot and hopped out. She was standing on her own two feet determined to be prickly and independent. He understood that. He just didn't want her to be so independent that she hurt herself. If that meant hovering and nagging to make sure she looked after herself – so be it. He wanted to look after her.

That was the last thing she wanted.

Too bad.

They'd work this out eventually.

Chapter 12

THE HOSPITAL WAS busy. She took a seat and leaned back to close her eyes. Her ribs were killing her. Her foot throbbed. She so didn't need this.

"You okay?"

She nodded, mustering up a tired smile "Yeah, I am."

"The wait won't be long." He reached over a hand and gently clasped hers.

"Megan Hemmingway?"

She hopped to her feet and immediately fell to the side. Or would have except Evan was holding her up.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"Let's just get you in."

He assisted her into the cubicle and took a seat on the chair. She waved him away. "You don't have to wait here. Go and take care of your shit."

"You are my shit," he said calmly. "I'm here until I pass you over to Ice and her group."

She glared at him. But inside, God help her, she was relieved. She didn't want to be alone.

The doctor walked in just then. "So what's the issue?"

She pointed to her ankle.

Evan piped up and said, "She was shot at. Her ribs were grazed."

Maybe she did want to be alone. "It's just a scratch."

"And one that needs to be stitched."

The doctor was all business, choosing to look at the gunshot first. With her shirt off and sitting with only her bra on, she glared at Evan. But he wasn't being polite and looking elsewhere. She wasn't in anything more revealing than a bathing suit and he'd seen everything she had to offer already so it hardly mattered. But it did. She closed her eyes thinking about that. If it was one of the men she worked with would she care? Not really, they'd just be doing their job. And there wouldn't be the intimacy there was with Evan. Because of course, she didn't think of any other men like that.

Only Evan, which said a lot.

She was nervous to go in that direction. He wanted more than a quick lay. And how was she supposed to deal with the whole relationship bullshit when she'd messed up so badly already. Evan was a good guy. She didn't want to hurt him. Like she'd hurt Peter.

And maybe she wouldn't. Maybe it would be different this time.

Could she take that chance?

But neither did she want to be alone for the rest of her life. The doctor moved on to her ankle. After a close examination he straightened. "Stitches, and an X-ray of the ankle just to be sure. I'll get the nurse to arrange that."

He walked out.

She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, but a nurse came in a few minutes later. "This is a needle to freeze the area so the doctor can put in the stitches."

Megan hurriedly looked away and swallowed hard.

Megan stared blank faced at the wall while the nurse froze the area. She could get through this. She clasped her hands together and counted slowly to one hundred. Evan reached over to cover her hands with his. The nurse did a little cleaning of the wound before the doctor came back in and put in fourteen stitches. Fourteen. Like who knew the graze was that long. Next thing she knew there was a piece of paper in her hand. "Take these painkillers as needed."

He walked to the door. "The nurse has you scheduled for an X-ray. At that point you can leave if it's only a sprain. If it's broken we'll have to cast."

As soon as the nurse put a clean bandage over the stitches, Megan, with her help, put her shirt back on.

Evan never said a word. But he only released her hand when she needed it back.

The nurse disappeared for a few minutes then returned with a wheelchair. "Let's keep you off that ankle."

Protesting was useless and the freezing hadn't been enough to keep the pain at bay. She was starting to feel pretty shitty.

Evan grabbed the paperwork and then wheeled her over to the X-ray department. Only one person ahead of her. Good.

She was in and out within ten minutes. She'd hoped that would be it, but then they had to wait to make sure the images were clear and didn't need to

be redone and then for the radiologist to examine them.

When the X-ray technician came back out and said, “No breaks, you’re good to go,” she managed her first real smile in a long time.

“I wouldn’t be so happy about that,” Evan said. “Sprains often take much longer to heal than actual breaks.”

“Maybe, but it feels like it’s better already.”

“Upstairs now,” he said pushing her toward the elevator.

“That makes no sense,” she said. “They are all booked into the hospital. I’m not injured. I don’t need to be admitted so I shouldn’t be there.” A yawn caught her sideways.

“And you won’t be for long. Just long enough to grab some sleep. You can’t go into your house. I can’t go into mine yet. You’re injured, immobile, and in danger. This is the best place for you at the moment.”

She had to admit the freezing was wearing off, her body was aching from the jump out of the second story window, and her ankle... Well she had just learned what throbbing actually meant.

By the time he wheeled her to the fourth floor the same men she’d met earlier waited at the elevator for her.

Those flat gazes studied her.

She smiled as naturally as she could. “Just a sprain and a few stitches.”

Their tension eased back, but they looked at Evan for confirmation. She could almost see his nod. They turned and led the way to the rooms she’d been in earlier. She wanted to say something but didn’t have enough energy to care if they believed her or not.

“I wasn’t confirming that those were your injuries,” Evan said as if reading her mind. “They were actually asking if you were still in danger.”

She gasped, twisting to look up at him and cried out in pain.

“Don’t move,” he warned. “Those stitches are going to hurt for a while.”

“Hell, they already are,” she muttered without heat. It was nice to know she had people looking out for her, but as a woman in the military she worked hard at being one who didn’t need help. She was supposed to help others.

One of the men opened the door to a third room and Evan wheeled her in. There were two beds and both empty. Evan helped her onto the closest and then covered her up with a blanket that had been placed folded on the bed.

“Sleep,” he ordered.

“Go away then if you want that to happen. You’re too distracting.” She yawned, making a lie of her words. She sank into her pillow and gave a heavy sigh, letting this day disappear.

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HE WAITED UNTIL her breathing was steady and deep. The drugs the doctor gave her should keep her under for a few hours and with the painkiller prescription he held in his hand, she should be okay. It was tough but she was young, healthy, and strong. The ankle was a concern though. He lifted it to rest on a second pillow, propping it up. She never moved. Depending on how restless a sleeper she was, her leg might stay there. He’d seen plenty of men sleep with injured limbs elevated while sleeping.

From the hallway, one man walked into the room, leaving the door open. He stood at the window, slightly behind the door so he’d have first warning.

Evan nodded to him. “Thanks, Benji. I’ll fill her prescription and bring it up to her.”

“I’ll be here,” Benji said.

Evan didn’t know this man well, but if Ice vouched for him, then he would be fine. He walked out to find she was in a heavy discussion with Mason. That Mason knew her wasn’t a surprise but that he held her close in a caring hug was.

He waited until they were done.

Mason said something to Ice then nodded to Evan.

Ice turned and smiled at him. “Is she in bed?”

“And asleep.”

The other men crowded around. “Now tell me exactly what happened so that we know what we’re up against.”

He gave them the longer version, adding, “He managed to gain access to her bedroom on the second floor and held a police issue Glock. However, the shots that were fired at my front door came from an automatic rifle.”

“Right, so different shooters,” one of the men stated.

“Or one well-armed man,” Ice clarified. “One familiar with sniper rifles and breaking and entering, but one who didn’t like the idea of jumping out of a window to keep his prisoner.”

Several men curled their lip at that assessment.

“Keep in mind he either had an accomplice or he managed to track her back to my place. Either way they got a second attempt in.”

“And missed.”

“Not by much. So maybe they’ve had bad luck up to now or else they are not as proficient as they like to be. We don’t want a third attempt to be the one that gets her. If they suspect she’s seen something then it would explain why she’s being targeted.”

“Or they were trying to flush us all out.”

“Why though? There are so many of us. Some on base and many not. They could attack the base with less difficulty than trying to locate individuals and taking them out one by one.”

There was a contemplative silence as each considered the ramifications of what that implied.

“Let’s take this one step at a time,” Ice said in that low calm voice he always associated with her. “Evan, leave her with us. I’ll text you when she wakes up.”

Evan nodded. “Good, thanks. She’s likely to try to slip away when she does wake up.”

The men grinned. Benji, now standing in the open doorway, said “She can try.”

Evan nodded and left her in their capable hands to fill her prescription.

Chapter 13

MEGAN WOKE TO a terrifying silence. She sat up without thinking and cried out, clutching at her side, shuddering with pain. Then instant awareness of her surroundings. One hand clamped around her injury, her breath locked in her chest as she studied the room she was in. Just where was she and why? A hospital room. But she was fully dressed. She glanced down at her foot resting on a pillow in an attempt to keep it elevated and her mind flooded with memories.

Evan. The intruder. The shooting. And all the damn questions. Right.

She was safe. In the hospital and it was quiet and she was alone.

There were worse things.

She slipped her feet to the floor, gingerly putting her weight on her ankle, then hobbled her way to the bathroom. Inside the small room, she stopped and stared at the mirror. Good Lord. There was blood all over her shirt, her face, even her arms. She sighed and after using the toilet she grabbed the washcloth and soap and cleaned what she could. She brushed her shoulder length hair out with her hands and flipped it back. There was nothing to be done for the injury on the ribs. It hurt like a bitch but time was the only healer for that. As for her ankle, well that was going to take time too...maybe a lot of time. She wasn't going to be able to walk very far, making work out of the question. She should let someone know she might not be able to work for a few days.

Her phone wasn't in her pocket. Sitting on the side of her bed she struggled to think as to where she'd left it. And realized it was on her charger where she always placed it before going to bed. Damn. The intruder could have grabbed it. He'd get all kinds of contacts. But only friends. She knew better than to keep anything more there.

Still, she missed having it. Could she get back into her house and retrieve it? And what about her purse and personal belongings. A clean shirt would be lovely. When the police were done would they let her back in to collect her stuff, or maybe they'd let her back into her house permanently. That would

be the best option. She was sure fingerprints as well as other things needed to be collected, but beyond that there wasn't a whole lot to be done. Unless they were afraid the asshole would come back.

Her lips turned down at that. She didn't want to stay hidden until they caught the guy.

She hadn't recognized him. His mechanic suit could have come from anywhere, and it had no name tag. But how hard would it be to find a suit in the hangars – they were everywhere.

So he'd picked up the easiest of disguises and gone with it.

That didn't take brains, just opportunity.

So what else did this say about him?

He'd targeted her. Had she been his target originally, or had she become his target for some reason?

She'd love to know why.

Had he chased her to Evan's place or had someone targeted Evan as well, and she'd been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Bastards. Why would anyone want to do that? He was a good man. A damn good one.

Irate on Evan's behalf, she stumbled back to bed and lay down again. Lifting her foot up to rest on the pillow, it instantly felt much better. She needed the ankle wrapped up and to be at home where it could rest while she was on her laptop at least. She felt completely useless and hated it.

The door opened and Ice walked in.

"Good. You're awake. I was going to put this on your ankle but figured that would be a hell of a way to wake someone up." She waggled an ice pack in her hand.

"I'm glad you restrained yourself." Megan groaned as the cool ice surrounded her sore ankle. "Much appreciated.

"How does it feel?"

"It's fine. Just need to be off it for the rest of the day, and I'm sure it will be back to normal. I'd rather be at home. Not here."

Ice shook her head. "Not happening until Evan gets back."

"What does he have to do with anything?" Megan muttered. "It's the police that get to say if I can go home or not."

"Well they could, but they aren't done with your place yet, and they are also working on Evan's at the moment so you can't go there either."

"I wasn't planning on it," Megan said.

Ice gave her a long look that had the heat rising on Megan's cheeks.
"You're here and this is where you're staying until I hear otherwise."

"Crap," she muttered. "I don't make a very good patient."

The door opened. Benji stuck his head around the corner. "Ice, Levi looks to be surfacing."

Megan sat up.

Ice held up her hand. "No. You're staying right here."

And she spun on her heels and walked out. As she left she said, "Benji here will stay and keep you company."

"I don't need a babysitter," Megan argued, glaring at Benji.

But the tank with the baby face just smiled at her. "I'm a great babysitter," he said.

"I'm sure you are. I just thought I could leave. Maybe grab some food. Some coffee would be good. Sneak home where I can get a shower and a change of clothes," she said.

"Nope, not happening," he said cheerfully. "But we might manage a coffee. Someone is due for a coffee run soon."

"But not you?" she asked hopefully.

"Not me."

"Of course not." With bad grace, she leaned back against the pillows and sighed. "Any chance someone could go to my house and get my cell phone or laptop at least and while there pick up some clothes."

"Evan was heading over there a little bit ago. If you're lucky he's still there and he'll grab what you need." Benji pulled out his phone and placed a call.

Megan watched him carefully. Evan knew a ton of people here. She knew no one.

"Evan, Megan is awake and she's looking for a few things from her house."

Benji nodded then handed her his phone. "He wants to talk to you."

Grateful, she accepted it. "Evan?"

"Yeah, it's me. Where's your phone? I'm standing in your bedroom, nice bed by the way." And damn if his voice didn't drop into a sexy whisper. She could hardly respond as she wanted to with Benji standing there and watching her. "My phone is on the back of the dresser sitting on the charger."

"No it isn't. The charger is empty."

She frowned. "Maybe it's in my purse. That's in the kitchen drawer, first one on your left as you walk in."

She could hear his footsteps as he walked down the stairs to her kitchen. "I'm opening drawers," he said, and she could hear the sounds of them opening and closing. "But not seeing a purse."

"I hope he didn't steal it. That's got all my credit cards and ID in it."

"Base ID?" he asked sharply.

She gasped. "Yes."

"Then there's no point in continuing the search here. Chances are good that's what the bastard wanted."

"No, he wanted me to get dressed so he could take me somewhere." She shifted and groaned as the stitches pulled.

"Lie still," he ordered.

"Ha, I am. I'm locked in this room and no one will let me leave." She glared at Benji who gave her an angel's smile in return.

"Good, then the men are doing their job," Evan said. "Be thankful. If you can't get out then no one else can get in."

"I know that, but I was hoping to get home and get a few things."

"Instead, I'm here and can get what you want," he said in a smooth voice. "Need a change of clothes. Anything else?"

"Did he leave my laptop?"

"Where is it? I didn't see one."

"It's on the floor under my night table. I often have it on during the night when I can't sleep. So I store it there." She could hear him running lightly up the stairs. "It's here."

"Oh great. Can you bring that and yes to a change of clothes please. And grab my black jacket from the kitchen chair. I might need a coat."

"Okay. I can be back to you in about twenty minutes."

After saying good-bye she handed the phone over to Benji. "Thanks for letting me talk to him."

"Sure, no problem." He accepted it from her. "Your phone's missing?"

"And my purse." She glanced at her watch. "I need to call the bank."

"Use my phone." He tossed it on the bed beside her.

"I can't yet, I don't have the number."

"It's got data so go ahead."

She smiled. "Much appreciated."

He shrugged and settled back along the window. Just enough to see out but not enough to be visible. Hidden but in a good position.

Always on guard.

She quickly found the information on the phone once she managed to focus. Then made the call. She was on hold for several moments then finally managed to get through. She cancelled her cards and ordered new ones. How could she get a new phone from the hospital? She couldn't. Not really. She could easily hook up a new one to the same plan, but she needed a phone – even an older one to do that.

She handed the phone back to Benji and snuggled deeper in the pillows. She was tired. Not sure why when she hadn't done anything yet, but there was no getting around the fact she could close her eyes right now and sleep.

“Nap if you can, it's what your body needs.”

“I know but I don't want to miss Evan. He's bringing stuff for me.” She let her eyes drift shut. “Wake me when he comes.”

“Will do.”

And she let sleep reclaim her.

*

HE WANDERED THE house. The police were still working, but he'd been allowed to come and collect a few personal items for her. He'd have to check them out so the officers knew what was missing and what he'd taken. He'd told them her phone and purse were gone.

They'd not been impressed but not bothered until he said she thought that her ID might be in her purse. At that they'd made multiple notations and asked a mess of questions. He answered what he could and told them to contact her about the rest.

He quickly collected a few items of clothing and found a small backpack in her closet. He laid the items out on her bed, brought in one of the cops to check them off the list before packing them up.

Next he stopped back at his house and collected an old phone he had in his dresser drawer. It still worked, just didn't have all the new features he'd wanted. Maybe she'd be okay to use it for a few days until she could get to the store and buy what she wanted. Although, it might be more of a bother for

just a few days. Next stop was the coffee shop. She was going to need a shot of caffeine when she woke up. She was a coffeeholic like so many of them on the base – hell, almost everyone he knew was addicted. He pulled the truck to the drive-thru and ordered coffees for all of them. Next stop was...food? Should he pick up something? Or see how she was when he got there?

“I’ll wait,” he said, feeling like he was on a first date for all the nervous hemming and hawing on what to do. So not his normal style. He made it to the hospital parking lot, texted Ice that someone needed to come and give him a hand to collect coffee and snagged Megan’s backpack. He waited at the truck until Tonner arrived to help carry.

“Hey, that’s a lot of caffeine,” Tonner said.

“I should have just grabbed a box of the stuff and some empty cups,” he said. “Would have been easier.”

“And possibly cheaper.”

“Something to keep in mind.” He unloaded the front of his truck. “Hell, for what this cost I could have picked up a coffee maker and a pound of coffee and set it up in one of the rooms.”

The two men tossed his idea back and forth as they made their way up to the top floor. His trays of coffee were quickly emptied as everyone reached out and snagged a cup. Finally, it was just three cups left. With his hands full, Tonner opened the door for him and he walked in to find Benji leaning against the wall and Megan out cold.

So much for wanting a hot cup of coffee.

“She asked to be woken up when you arrived,” Benji said, accepting one of the few remaining coffees. “She was pretty insistent.”

“Good. I like to hear that.” Of course chances were good she was just looking for clothes and her laptop, but he’d take the little bit of fantasy while he could. When she woke up he knew she’d bring him back down to reality fast enough.

He placed the two cups of coffee on the small table and waited until Benji left to join the others, then he dropped the backpack on the floor at the end of her bed, leaned over and kissed her gently.

“Wake up, sleeping beauty.” She opened her eyes to see him. A slow smile dawned.

She shifted slightly reaching up to rub her eyes. “I’m awake.”

“Ha, you so aren’t.” He remembered this from before. She always talked

normally like she really was awake only to find out later that she never remembered she'd spoken.

"Not good enough. Sit up and open your eyes."

With a small groan, she rolled onto her back and stared up at him. "That's mean."

"No, it's not. I remember how hard it was to wake you before. You need more sleep."

She shrugged. "Sleep is hard to come by in a new place. No friends. Left my family back East. Lots of regrets and not a whole lot of good to put sweet dreams in my head."

"Ouch. I'm sorry life has been so difficult. I wish I could make it easier."

Moving carefully she sat up and used the button to raise the head of the bed so she could relax back. "Not your fault. It was all me." Her eyes lit on the coffee cups. "Are those for us?"

"They are indeed."

She smiled as he handed her a cup. "It's still hot so be careful," he warned.

She nodded but took a small sip then smiled. "It's perfect."

"Good."

"You remembered I take a single cream."

"There's not much I don't remember." He tapped his temple. "Remember that radar? It's also about the details."

She smiled. "And did you bring my laptop or did you miss that detail?"

"Got it and a couple of changes of clothes, and I snagged your jacket so you'll be warm wherever it is you end up."

The smile fell away from her face. "Good reminder. I'd so hoped to be able to go back to my place."

"The cops were there. I told them about your missing phone and purse. So they know about your ID."

She nodded. "I feel so stupid."

"Why? It's not as if you could stop the intruder and say, 'Excuse me, I need to run downstairs, get my purse, run upstairs, grab my phone, then jump out of a window.'"

She laughed. "When you put it that way..."

"Exactly."

He smiled, happy to see her looking better.

“So what’s the next step then? If I can’t go home, where can I go?”

Chapter 14

“**H**OPEFULLY MY PLACE,” Evan said. “The cops are there too, but the intruder never gained access to my house so the investigation won’t take as long or be as intense on my end.”

Megan shrugged, her gaze on the cup. “Staying at your house is not a good idea.”

“Sure it is.” He studied her features. “Why isn’t it?”

“Because we have history.”

“Honey, that’s old history.” His lethal grin flashed. “What I’m trying to make is new history.”

“Exactly,” she said in a dry tone. “We’re in the middle of some scary shit, and I don’t want my focus to get pulled away by you.”

“Meaning I might be a distraction or your own feelings might distract you,” he asked, his gaze twinkling in the room. “’Cause either way I can’t see a problem.”

In fact, it was a really wonderful idea. She couldn’t stop a sidelong glance at that smooth jawline and sexy mouth. Damn, they’d had fun. Would it be so bad to have that again? No, and it was kind of cool he hadn’t been able to forget her and he was open about it. She wasn’t sure where her feelings lay, but she wasn’t unaffected. And she’d been quick to return West when she could. Had that been an unconscious need to see him again?

“So what’s the real problem?”

“Maybe I’m not interested,” she said, trying to infuse a cool note to her voice.

“And that’s not true. Please, at least be honest here.”

“That’s a little harder.” Especially when she wasn’t exactly sure how to word this. “My breakup was tough.”

He nodded. “I don’t think there are any that are easy. Especially as you were engaged.”

“You know about that?” She frowned, not sure she liked the idea of him knowing. At his nod she stared at her coffee. “What no one really

understands is that I'm the one at fault."

He sat down on the side of the bed. "Explain."

Wanting him to understand she said, "I couldn't set a date." She stared around the room at anything and everything but at him. "Peter and I were engaged for over a year, and I kept pushing off setting a date for the wedding. Finally, he made an issue of it – of course he did – and I figured out that I couldn't set a date," she took a deep breath, "because I didn't want to get married."

He reached out a gentle hand and laid it on her thigh. "So you feel guilty."

She winced. "In a big way. The fallout was horrific. My parents. His parents. Poor Peter himself."

"No, not poor Peter. Much better that he's not married to someone who didn't love him."

"That's the thing – I did love him. I wanted to get married but every time I thought about the actual commitment, I wanted to throw up."

She lifted her gaze to his. "I think there's something wrong with me."

His smile was gentle. "No, there isn't. You might have loved him. It's easy enough to do. I know several women who I loved and cared about, but not one of them did I love enough to be married to. I think there is a big difference. We can connect to many people on many levels, but that doesn't mean we should marry them all. Who we marry needs to be *the* one. The one person you can't imagine your life without. If you can see yourself living happily without him then he's not the one." He stroked her arm and continued in a gentle tone. "For you it wasn't right."

"It *felt* right," she insisted. She should have known before it went so far.

"Until it came to committing," he reminded her.

"Maybe I just can't commit," she said with spirit.

"Maybe you haven't found the right one to commit to," he countered.

"So I suppose you're the right one?" she challenged, wondering how the hell this had gotten so personal so fast. He might be – but how could she know?

"No, not at all," he said quietly. "I don't know what we have. I *would* like a chance to find out."

"Seriously?" She studied his features. "You're not just asking for another romp in bed?"

“Oh definitely that, but at the same time I want so much more.”

His phone buzzed. He read the text, then dialed a number, holding up a finger as if asking her to wait for a moment.

She half listened to the call then he shut it down, a smile on his face. “Problem solved.”

“Which problem?”

“The one about where you get to stay right now. My place has been cleared. Yes, I have a spare room. Or a couch as you saw, and yes you can stay as a friend for however long you need to be there. And yes, should you be ready and willing for more to happen between us, I’ll stay close while you get used to the thought just in case you mistake me for one of my buddies and decide they might do instead.”

“Like that’s going to happen,” she scoffed. “You guys are very distinct.”

“Okay, so what I really meant is I’ll be there in case you might be tempted to change your affection to one of my friends.” He spoke in such a lighthearted manner she didn’t know if he was joking or not. Then she caught the look of vulnerability in his gaze and realized there was something inside that was bothering him.

“What, did you lose a girlfriend or two to the guys?”

“Not unless they were ones I didn’t mind losing,” he joked, standing up. “Now finish your coffee so we can go home.”

She frowned, trying to consider the options but there really weren’t any. She’d been offered a safe place – with her very own SEAL to keep her safe. But it was a temporary measure. She couldn’t stay long. “Okay, thank you for the spare room.”

He grinned. “Let’s go.”

*

ICE HAD A wheelchair waiting for Megan outside of the room. Evan laughed when he saw it. “Thanks, Ice, how’d you know?”

She shot him a knowing look. “Don’t play fast and loose with my girl. She’s a damn good pilot. I don’t want to lose her.”

“No worries there.”

“And what if I’m the one who wants to play fast and loose with him?”

Megan called out from behind Evan.

Ice laughed. "Play away and have fun."

The men around them cracked up. Evan figured they liked the idea of a girl dumping him for a change. He didn't dump women. He just didn't go into a relationship unless it was clear on both sides what each wanted. Not that he wanted to be an asshole, but with Megan on his mind he wanted a chance with her if he could make it happen. Now she was here. And he wasn't going to screw that up. By the same token if he'd met a woman who'd made him forget Megan, then he'd have been there a hundred percent.

With Megan safely ensconced in the wheelchair he pushed her down the hallway to the elevators.

She glanced around at the group watching them leave. "I never got an update on the men's condition."

"That's because there isn't one," he murmured. "At least a good one."

She sighed and turned to face the elevator. "They are safe here, aren't they?"

"As safe as anyone can make them."

"And Ice isn't here officially?"

"No," he said softly. "There is security in the hospital and they are bringing in guards for each floor, but the men have requested the duty privately."

"Right," she said equally as soft. "I'd volunteer if I could."

"Not needed and right now you need to look after you." His voice hardened. "And I'll be watching over you."

"No one can keep guard twenty-four hours a day," she said. "As we well know if someone wants to plan an attack they will do so."

"They can plan all they want," Evan said. "We're on full alert. The base is undergoing a full-on search and North Island is on lockdown."

"At least they are taking this seriously," she muttered.

"Are you kidding? With a shooter loose, one that's already gained access to your house with the intent of kidnapping you, everyone will be vigilant."

She nodded.

"Forget about it for now," he said. "There are good men here. Let them do their job."

"Right."

They boarded the elevator and slowly descended.

The elevator opened on the third floor to find a soldier, dressed in navy combat uniform, standing in front, an automatic weapon in his hands.

“Shit,” Evan said. “What’s going on?”

Chapter 15

MEGAN TOOK ONE look and reached up to hit the close door button before grabbing his hand in warning. The door started to close. “Step out of the elevator, please,” the man ordered, his voice deep, dark.

But it was the look in his eyes that got Megan. They were blank. Like no one lived behind them, at least no one who cared. Evan lashed out and kicked the gun in the gunman’s hand as the door started to close. He followed with an uppercut to the throat that only partially connected. But it was enough to send the gunman stumbling backward, clutching his throat. Megan slapped the button several times and the door clicked closed in front of them. She hit the fourth floor button to send them back upstairs.

“What the hell?” she whispered. “Warn Ice.”

“On it. I only saw one man. How many did you see?”

“One.”

“If he has accomplices on other floors then we’re going to be taken out on one of the other stops.” She couldn’t move the wheelchair out of the way to hide when it rose to the fourth floor.

Ice stood in front of them, her face cold and hard. “Update.”

While Evan gave her the quick and dirty which was essentially not much, Megan studied the hallway. The men had spread out to cover the two stairwells.

“Do we know for sure he wasn’t one of ours?” Ice asked carefully.

“It’s not like we gave him a chance to explain,” Evan said. “So, no we don’t, but there was no warning. Nothing.”

“We’ll apologize if he is,” Megan added. “Unless there is a full scale terrorist attack going on downstairs, then there is no reason to be fully armed.”

“They’d use it for all kinds of reasons, but none good.” Ice pondered the shift in circumstances. “Let’s get you back to bed, in one of the other two rooms so we don’t have to split the manpower to guard a third room.”

As they spoke, Evan pushed her out of the elevator. Ice stepped in and

stopped it from moving to the lower levels. “One less exit to control.”

Megan nodded. She knew they had this down pat, but she also knew they were on the top floor and that meant it was accessible from the roof. “Who are they after and why?”

Both their phones started going off.

Evan answered his. “Mason. Yeah I’m not sure what’s going down. Do you know?”

He listened and nodded, but she didn’t understand the rest. Ice was on her phone. At least they were in the right place for something like this except the men up here didn’t have the firepower. And that wasn’t good in her mind. There was her mobility issue. She could hobble, but there was no way she was up for racing down four flights of stairs. She could rappel out the window but it wasn’t like they had gear for that.

In the room where Merk and Rhodes lay, she was parked between the two men, now both awake and pissed. They gave her a quick smile that she returned then all listened as the group sorted through the details. A single man with an assault rifle was seen in the hospital. Security was hunting for him while the place was on lockdown. It had happened so fast, but they’d lost him inside the building. The place was surrounded and a floor-by-floor search was in progress.

The problem was, the soldier had worn their uniform, making it easier for him to hide.

“Right. So no one comes up or down. I’ve contacted the commander and told him we have the top floor secured and if a team breaches this floor we will assume they are unfriendlies,” Ice announced. “He’s aware of the situation.” Then she shrugged. “I suggest you all contact who you can and let them know what’s going.”

“Already done,” Evan said. “Mason is on his way.”

Ice nodded. “If he’s planning on joining us then he needs to let us know.”

“He’s landing on the roof,” Evan said.

“And did you all consider that this entire building could go down in flames?” Megan asked quickly. “One bomb and boom.”

They all turned to look at her. “Considered. But there’s nothing we can do from here except make sure this floor is clear and our men are safe. That we’re on the top floor means a rooftop exit or we’re going out the window,” Ice said. Her face thinned. “And I mean all of us. I won’t be leaving Stone or

Levi behind.”

“We can airlift them out.”

“Is the service elevator functional?”

That started a heated debate about options in the worst-case scenario. Megan knew this could go multiple ways. She shifted enough to close her eyes and relax. She thought the rooftop sounded the best. She’d prefer a helicopter standing by and waiting. Both of them could fly them out of here in no time. And with Ice they could handle anything – or multiple anything. It was all good. “How about a helicopter on the roof for an evacuation if need be?” she suggested.

“Already happening,” Evan assured her. “They won’t – can’t evacuate the whole hospital. Several surgeries are in progress as we speak. The doctors are refusing to leave. And the patients – at least some of them can’t be moved.”

She nodded. “Depends on what or who the gunmen are after.”

“And we don’t know that at this time.”

*

HE KNEW THE logistics of moving critically injured men were the biggest problem. But first they had to figure out what they were dealing with. There were too many people to move quickly and all were likely connected to one machine or another. There weren’t enough ambulances on base to handle this. And to bring in more from the surrounding areas would be possible but time consuming. And maybe there was no need. “They are bringing dog teams in looking for explosives.”

“Too little too late,” Benji snapped. “They should be here already.”

“Easy, Benji.”

“Nothing to be easy about. We’re sitting ducks,” he growled. “I don’t have enough rope to drop anyone down from this height.”

And that started them off again.

Megan closed her eyes. Evan studied her. She wasn’t badly hurt and could make a dash for it if it came to that. None of the four men could be moved from the beds. So it was the roof or downstairs through the service elevator. He walked down the hallway to take a look. The service elevator was an older more solid elevator but still he had no way to keep it from

stopping at every floor, so they couldn't ride it straight to the parking level. Without someone else being able to stop it from the outside.

He walked from there to the windows, studying the ground below. Benji was right. That would be their worst option. The sounds of helicopters flying toward them had him studying the sky. Three Black Hawks. Good. More men.

"Three Black Hawks coming in to land."

Megan said, "Honestly, I'd rather be flying to the rescue than being the one rescued."

He laughed. "Me too."

"Hell," one of the men said. "I'm not sitting here looking for a rescue."

"None of us are," Ice said. "Except the injured. I've made arrangements for them. The rest of us are staying here. We'll be moving down floor by floor once our men are up and away."

"I'm staying too," Megan stated.

"No, you're not," Evan said. "You belong in the injured category."

"Screw that." She stood up and walked to the doorway, doing her best to hide the pain and the limp. "See, I'm not that bad."

"Nope," Benji said, giving her a slight push that immediately sent her off balance. "But you're not that good either. I vote you get airlifted out."

Evan's phone squeaked. "Mason says rooftop now."

"Let's go."

He led the way as the men carefully maneuvered four beds, carrying the two conscious and the two unconscious men to the waiting helicopters.

Chapter 16

TENSE, ORGANIZED, AND efficient. That's how she'd describe the process. The men were all so damn focused and in control. She'd been part of many rescues to date, but she'd been on the rescuers' side, never someone who needed to be rescued.

And she didn't like the switch one bit.

She also didn't think much of her injuries. She had her foot taped. If need be she'd be good to go. Sure, recovery on the other end would take a little longer, but it was so damn doable. She didn't want to get packed up and moved out of here with the injured. Her injuries were so minor they made her feel guilty.

But there was no way Ice or Evan were going to let her stay behind. The wind had picked up on the roof. Two men were being strapped into each helicopter. She made a move to join the one but Evan held her back. The first took off and then the second. Evan wheeled her to the third and tried to help her out. She shook her head. "I can do it."

His answer was to pick her up and carry her over. Getting in and out was a skill in itself, carrying a full-grown adult, it became a difficult trick. Still, he did it well like he did everything.

She was inside the helicopter and being buckled in whether she liked it or not. And she didn't like it one bit. "I don't want to leave."

"Too bad."

Rapid gunfire erupted close by. An older black helicopter rose up beside them spraying them with bullets. Where the hell had he come from?

Evan threw himself over top of her. She watched Ice and the men with her race for cover. They couldn't argue with a helicopter firing down on them.

But the helicopter she was in could.

"How's the pilot?" she yelled at Evan.

He gave her a startled look and raced to the front.

She could see the man slumped to the side from where she sat. Quickly

she unbuckled the seat belt and hobbled forward. Evan was pressing down on a gunshot in the pilot's side. The co-pilot was alive but gasping for breath. He held a hand to his shoulder. She helped move the men to the back and quickly slid into place.

The other helicopter was already in retreat.

"Like hell," she swore as she lifted the machine smoothly into the air. Evan would know what she was going to do.

She placed the headset on her head and called it in. She didn't like the cold response.

"Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage."

She wanted to scream with frustration. "I'm in the perfect position."

"Do. Not. Engage."

She groaned and eased back the power, turning the helicopter to follow the flight the earlier two had taken. "Have two injured pilots on board."

"Take them to Grandview Hospital. Your orders are to stay there. We'll send another pilot to pick up the machine."

As much as it galled her to retreat, she had to consider the injured pilots. And if she were the one injured what she would want done?

She was two minutes out, heading in the direction of the hospital when the enemy helicopter zipped in behind her. *Shit*. They were barely above the city towers now. If he was planning to attack, they had no room. There were going to be more casualties on the ground than anyone wanted. She studied the terrain even as she gave an update to command.

"If you are not being fired upon, evasive maneuvers and get back stat."

"Too late." She zipped sideways around a tall building. And coaxed more speed out of her machine. "He's coming in too close. If he's armed...shit... He's locking on..."

"Head out to open water." The orders were cool and clear. "Air support is on the way."

She wrestled with the controls as she whistled through the blocks of buildings and around corners, heading for open water. There were two naval ships in the bay. If air support was coming, chances were good, it would be coming from them.

"Hang on, Evan," she cried. "This is going to get nasty."

"Nasty is my middle name," he called. "Get this asshole."

Easier said than done. She'd banked a lot of flying time but not in

combat. But when the game was brought to her, she also knew this could make or break her career – and her life. To lose the helicopter at this point might not be something she could do anything about, but she'd do her damndest to not kill anyone on board. She wished she had Ice beside her. She could use her cool instinctive sense of command.

Almost instantly, Ice's cool calm voice filtered through her memory from other flights. *Always stay in control. If you lose that the game is already over.*

Check.

She had this one.

Stay focused on the end game. Don't let the little stuff sideline you.

Check.

She had that one too.

Do not let emotion rule. It doesn't matter what you are doing or who you are doing it for, you can't let your heart top your logical mind.

Okay, so that one needed a little work.

Megan flew low and went over the plays in her mind as she used evasive maneuvers to avoid him. The other helicopter was older without much of the firepower hers had. She let control know what she could about the machine but there was damn little to see. Not that it was going to make a difference at this point.

She needed to stay out of targeting range until backup arrived. Two black flecks flew toward her.

About time. They were too far out. Damn it.

The helicopter suddenly appeared on her ass.

Where the hell had he come from?

Shit.

Now she was in trouble. Or maybe not. Remembering a discussion with Ice, she popped her helicopter up, slowed and pulled in behind the asshole. And set her own target on him. He sped up and tried to escape the radar. Then he popped up. They danced mid-air until somehow she managed to come down on his side. And fired. She peppered the side of the machine until smoke filled the air.

He spiraled downward.

Got him.

She grinned. *Take that, you little shit.*

Instantly, alerts rang inside the cockpit. She checked her fuel.

The calm voice came through her headset. "What is the fuel situation? Can you return to the hospital or do you need to set down?"

She gauged the distance and realized her fuel tanks were low. Too low. Black smoke streamed behind her. Critical. Shit, she might have been hit after all. "Need to land. Fuel is critically low."

"Understood. Wait for clearance."

A different voice came on. She followed orders, hating that her hands were shaking in reaction, and landed the helicopter on the deck of the naval ship as instructed. Instantly, the side was flooded as medics raced to remove the injured pilots and mechanics raced to look the machine over. She pulled off her helmet and shook out her hair.

Injured and needed to be rescued. Like hell.

"Feel better?" Evan asked with a flashing grin.

"I do indeed," she said, struggling to stand up without any gasps of pain. The last thing she wanted was to show weakness now. She hobbled toward him.

Suddenly, a voice called out, "Are you injured?"

"No," she called back. "I'm not."

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EVAN SHOOK HIS head. "Like hell you aren't."

Turning to the men swarming around the helicopter he yelled, "She's got a sprained ankle and a nasty graze from a previous gunshot."

She glared at him. "I'm fine," she insisted as she walked toward him. Only to land slightly off center and gasp, her face turning sheer white.

Immediately he reached out to steady her. "Easy."

Shudders rippled down her back as she nodded and carefully shifted her weight to her good leg. She stood like a stork until the waves of greasy pain eased back and she could catch her breath.

He helped her to the edge. "Do you fly back to North Island or does someone else?" he asked her, watching the activity going on around them.

"When I know I'll let you know," she said dryly. "Chances are good that no, I won't be flying as you've seen fit to let everyone know I'm injured. I'll be sidelined for a week now."

“I’m sure there’s something useful you can do until your ankle heals.”

She glared at him. “Great. Paperwork.”

He laughed and led her over to the commander standing and waiting. After saluting she gave as concise a report as possible. Then Evan stepped forward and added his information.

The commander nodded. “You’re heading right back. As a passenger this time.”

There was more discussion but eventually, without seeing a medic, they were both ushered onto another helicopter and within minutes they were airborne. They flew over the remains of the other helicopter in the water below. There were several diving teams at the crash site. Evan watched her face close down as she studied the damage she’d inflicted and then resolutely turned and faced forward.

“First time you ever killed someone?” he asked quietly.

She nodded. “I’ve spent most of my time doing search and rescue work. I’ve brought dead bodies home but haven’t yet been responsible for those deaths.”

“Until now.”

She glanced at him then gave a clipped nod. “Until now.”

Chapter 17

SHE LEANED BACK and stared out the window, his words reverberating in her head. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not here. This wasn't the Middle East or one of the many war torn countries.

Had the drug war in Mexico come home? Were these the same guys that Levi had been dealing with?

Why now? Unless it was because they knew Levi was still alive?

And was she responsible for any of this?

Would the media pick this up or would it be reported as yet another accident as part of a training exercise? She didn't even know how to view it herself.

"Do you have an update on the others?" she asked quietly.

"No, not yet."

She nodded and kept quiet. They landed on North Island safely. Evan hopped out and helped her down. She didn't say a word when he snagged a ride to his truck then hustled her inside. Before she understood, she was standing outside his house again.

He led her into the living room. She froze. The couch was covered in blood. Her blood.

"I'm putting on coffee," he called out. "We're going to be called in soon enough, but the longer you have to rest the better."

"That would be nice, thank you," she said in a formal voice, wishing she wasn't going to have to talk about today with anyone. Only that wasn't going to happen. Just the reports alone she'd have to fill out made her want to scream. Her world had shifted, and she wasn't sure what to do about it. Taking a seat on the side of the couch that wasn't blood spattered she tried to relax. From the corner of her eye she caught sight of a sudden movement. She tensed. A huge tomcat walked the fence line between the other houses and Evan's.

Behind him she could see her house. Her home.

To think it was there – like right there but she couldn't go into it. And

maybe she didn't want to. Would it feel foreign or make her feel more violated than she felt already? Right now nothing made sense. She was weary like she couldn't remember ever being before.

Then again she'd killed a man tonight.

That should be exhausting. It should be tumultuous.

It should never be easy.

Never be something she'd become accustomed to.

Ever.

She had to remember her own humanity.

A gentle hand stroked her head as Evan walked around the couch to check out his backyard. Satisfied, he turned to study her. "You going to make it?"

She nodded, and in a cool tone she'd learned from Ice, said, "Of course."

"That's my girl."

His phone rang. He answered it. She listened while he filled Ice in on the recent events.

When he ended the call, he said, "They got the gunman in the hospital. No explosives were found. The injured SEALs have been accounted for and all are well. The trip didn't do them any further harm."

"Oh good." That was one positive thing at least.

"Ice would like to speak to you when you're ready to."

She nodded. "It's the last thing I want to do right now," she admitted.

"Give yourself a few minutes then call her."

She winced. "How about tomorrow after I get some sleep?"

"How about not." This time his voice was stern. He handed her his phone.

She groaned and picked it up. He had it dialing already. "Ice, I'm fine."

Ice's cool voice sounded so damn sweet in her ears but not as sweet as the words she uttered. "No, you're better than fine. I saw. I heard. I know. Take it easy and be good to yourself. You did well out there today."

And she hung up.

With a silly smile on her face, she accepted a cup of coffee from Evan. "Thanks," she said. "For both of them."

"Both?"

"Yeah, the coffee and the nudge to call her."

"She's good people." Evan sat down in the middle of the couch barely missing the blood stained section. He placed his coffee cup on the table, took

hers from her hands and placed it beside his. Then he gently tugged her into his arms and leaned back. And held her. He just held her, like he understood the mess she was inside.

He didn't want anything from her other than to give comfort. She needed that right now.

After a moment of peace she said, "I didn't think about it. I just shot him down."

"Good. Don't think about it now either." He eased a hand up and down her back. "Just relax and let it go."

"Can one let it go? Should I let it go?" These questions seemed deeply important.

"You have to eventually. It will cripple you if you don't. Deaths are inevitable in armed conflict. As it was his life versus the pilot and co-pilot's, yours and mine, I say you did a damn good job. It's what it is. No more and no less. This was a fight to the death and you took him out, simple and clean. He didn't know what hit him, and maybe that's the best gift of all."

"I didn't expect him to shoot at us at the hospital. It seemed so wrong."

"We never expect to be attacked in our safest places. You've been through a lot these last few days. Now it's down time. That's just as important. Maybe more so. You need to rest, heal. We don't know who else might be involved in this, so we can't let our guard down until they are caught. Understood?"

"Understood."

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HE HOPED SHE did. This job was hard enough without the roller coaster of emotions. There was a reason the country needed people like him. The damn conflicts around the world. And with conflicts came death. He'd yet to see any of them resolved peacefully.

He hoped the world leaders would continue to try, but he'd not been an innocent kid in a long time. There always seemed to be an asshole who decided he was better than everyone else and that he should play God and kill off those lesser souls. A sad reality. No one alive today didn't know about or remember the 911 terrorist attacks and with the current radical Islamic group

bringing down so much pain and destruction on everyone, it wouldn't be long before something else happened on home soil. But until they knew more, he didn't want to make any assumptions. Today was minor. Something the military would downplay to keep the public from panicking.

And in truth at this point, he couldn't confirm who the group was. It could just be a pissed off US citizen with some serious connections.

"Heavy thoughts?"

"Goes with the territory." He hugged her close. "Thanks for my life today."

She snorted. "Sheer luck."

"Not in this case." Evan's cell rang. "That's Mason now." He answered the call. "What's up?"

"The gunman managed to kill himself before anyone could get any information from him. The hunt is on."

"Interesting. I wonder what his motive was?"

"No idea but there is a team heading to his house right now." There was an odd silence. "Is Megan okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine." Evan hugged her closer. "A little shook up and her body needs to heal but other than that she's doing fine."

"Good. Levi and the others are safe and under heavy guard. We can't say for sure at this point that they were the targets, but if this is connected to his last mission we're taking no chances."

"Which would be Mexican Cartels – not terrorists."

"No assumptions at this point, stay safe."

Mason rang off, leaving Evan to think about the consequences of a mission gone wrong and everyone coming after the teams for revenge. Levi needed to wake up again. He kept nodding off with the drugs. They had a million questions requiring answers. As he rested on the couch he let his mind freewheel. Looking at possibilities. People. Situations. There was never a clear-cut answer as they had too many variables. Too bad Markus's partner wasn't around. Bree had a photographic memory and could see patterns where others couldn't. Of course she'd used the skill in investments before she'd gotten seriously ill, but it would be lovely to get her take on this.

Markus would have a fit if they tried to get her involved as stress was something they were trying to avoid in order for her healing to continue as it had been. Markus had fallen hard and Evan wished him the best but worried

still. Although Bree had been very sick for a long time, she was better now, but Markus had already lost one partner... Evan didn't want him to lose another. Yet, Bree had put on ten pounds – and she could still out eat Swede. Something the two loved to do together. He grinned. His family of blood brothers had expanded in a marvelous way. Megan shifted in his arms, reminding him that maybe he'd be the next lucky one in this merry band of Keepers. Just the name was stupid, funny, corny, and so appropriate that it made him smile.

He hadn't been joking when he said he wanted to rescue the next damsel in distress – it was a cosmic joke that this time the damsel had rescued him instead – twice.

Something the others would probably hassle him about forever. He shrugged. His ego was healthy. Besides it was Megan, and anything that brought her into his life again was perfect. Then again, so was she.

“What is making you so damn happy?” she muttered.

“You. You're making me happy.” He held her close. “I'm just so glad to have you back in my arms.”

Chapter 18

THE CALM PROTECTIVE atmosphere lulled Megan into a peaceful doze. Until Evan went from relaxed into complete readiness.

She bolted into awareness. “What—”

A finger was placed against her lips.

She stared into Evan’s hard gaze. Then gave a clipped nod to the side. She sat up and watched as he moved silently over to the glass doors and studied the backyard.

She couldn’t see anything. But he’d obviously heard something. She studied her house across the fence, but it was pitch black and looked empty. In the night she heard an owl and a hawk crying out. They were both predators. Normal. Except for Evan’s response. He completely relaxed. “That’s Hawk.”

“And an owl,” she said joining him at the glass. “What did you think you heard?”

“Hawk is part of my unit,” he said with a smile. “What you heard was his call. He’s outside and must have seen me. That was the all clear call.”

She studied his face. “For real?”

“For real.” He nodded and tugged her up close. “Do you want some fresh air?”

He opened the back doors. She slowly hobbled behind him out to the simple square backyard with a beautiful stamped concrete patio and smiled at the serene night that had settled in while she slept. “It’s a beautiful evening.”

“It is. Do you feel better?”

“I’m actually not bad right now,” she said.

The cool grass beckoned. She slipped off her shoes to let her feet feel the freshness. Her ankle was stiff and still swollen but not bad considering how much she’d been through. Rotating it several times, it immediately felt better yet again. A day of rest followed by a good night’s sleep and she’d be right as rain.

“No, it won’t be fine tomorrow.” Evan grinned at her. “The swelling

won't go down that fast. And to do too much too fast is going to mean longer healing time."

She wrinkled up her nose at him. "I was trying to make myself feel better, thinking I'd be back to work soon."

"Not happening. You're off work until you get the ankle healed."

"As long as I don't have to go back to the doctor, then a few days off is fine." She frowned. "Although it seems like a waste when I could be back East visiting my family for a few days instead of sitting here with my feet up."

"You know what you need?"

She turned to study him, his features solemn but the twinkle in his eyes giving him away. She narrowed her gaze. "Bed rest by any chance?"

He laughed. "What a fantastic idea."

"You're incorrigible."

"Nope, just a man in love."

She froze. "Don't be like that," she whispered, hating the fear and the insecurity inside. "I'm not sure I can love you back. At least not the way you'd want me to."

His smile was tender. "You're going to feel what you can and that's what you have to give. Don't knock yourself down judging it to be not enough."

With her head tilted back to the stars she wondered if she had a problem, or could it be her heart knew she still cared for Evan? Had Peter been a way for her to forget him? One that hadn't worked, making her realize she'd cheated them both.

"Evan?" a male voice, slow and low, called from the darkness to the left of the house.

"Here."

A lithe shadow dropped over the fence. Megan shook her head at the almost ethereal way he slipped into the surroundings. "If Evan hadn't warned me who you were," she said in a low voice, "I'd be terrified right now. If you ever want a new career, a cat burglar sounds right up your alley."

A sexy smile flashed in the smoky darkness. "Who knows what's in my future."

She shook her head.

"Whatever it is, it better be on the right side of the law or we're all in trouble," Evan said with a grin, then asked, "anything?"

“No. All clear.” He walked closer and held out his phone. “Do you recognize this man?”

She studied the picture. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Consider that facial hair or a different haircut might make a difference.”

“No. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him. Why?”

“Then it’s not the man from your bedroom?”

She stared. “Ah hell. This is the gunman from the hospital, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

Evan studied the image. “So the question then would be is the man who was in her house the same man she killed with the helicopter today? Or is there a third man?”

“I heard about that.” Hawk nodded to her. “Nice job.”

She shrugged. “Seems off that killing a man gets me kudos.”

“It’s what we do,” he said seriously. “What we have to do to keep our country safe.”

“I wish there was something else I could do. I hate sitting around and waiting for something to happen.”

Suddenly a ping sliced through the night.

She was thrown to the ground and covered by Evan. Soft sounds of running footsteps could be heard in the dark.

“That’s Hawk going on the hunt,” Evan said, rolling over and dragging her back against the side of the fence. Outside of the shock and a hard wrench on her stitches, which she’d been able to ignore before this and now she wondered if she ever would again, she was fine.

“Did you get hit?” She asked studying him carefully.

Evan shook his head.

His phone buzzed. “Safe house one has been cleared. Be there in fifteen. We’ll meet you ten after.”

“On it.”

He put his phone away as he studied the night. In a smooth move he shifted into a crouch then swung her up in his arms.

“What are you doing?”

And he sprinted inside the house and straight to the garage and his truck. He placed her gently inside the passenger side, then ran back inside his house. He grabbed up their bags and his keys, and was back out in three minutes. He hopped in, opened the garage door and started the engine.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“A safe house. There’s no way we can stay here.” And he hit reverse gear and was on the driveway and out onto the road flying toward San Diego. There were security checkpoints to get through. Once clear, she settled back into her seat. “I guess there’s no point in asking for details.”

“Not that we have any but as that was yet another attempt on your life, and mine, the best thing is to get the hell away while the police descend to handle the details.” His voice was hard.

“And where are we going that is safer?”

“Some place we don’t know about and some place they wouldn’t expect to find us.”

“They?”

“Someone is gunning for you. We need to know who and why.”

She had no idea and didn’t have a clue what to say to get more answers. But if there was a chance this was personal then that was a whole different story.

His phone buzzed. She reached over and grabbed it. “It’s Ice,” she announced.

“Answer it.”

“Ice, it’s me, Megan. We’re on our way to a safe house.”

“Another attempt then?” Ice asked in a sharp voice.

“Yes.”

“Levi is awake,” Ice said abruptly. “He has something to say you should probably hear.”

Evan looked at Megan. “We’ll come to you.”

She rattled off the address.

“Wait, I thought you were at the new hospital – I don’t recognize this address.”

“No, I had the men moved to a private medical center instead. I didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Uhm, did you get clearance for that?”

“No.” She didn’t elaborate.

Evan and Megan exchanged looks. That was not only not normal it was so far out in left field it made no sense. Unless she was expecting another attack and didn’t trust the people who knew where the men were staying.

Grim, Evan changed lanes and shifted in a different direction all together.

She didn't remember this area of town so sat back willing to trust Evan to take them where they needed to go. When he switched lanes again and took a fast right turn and went around a block then back into heavy traffic weaving until she made it to the far side of the seat, she finally clued in. "So we are we being followed." She twisted on her seat. "Did you lose them?"

"Yes and yes."

She shook her head and grabbed his phone to make a call. "Mason, we've got a tail. Shook him off once but..."

"Two men heading your way."

"We just changed the route. Ice said Levi is awake and might have something we need to know."

"I'll meet you at his bedside." And he hung up.

"Mason is meeting us at Levi's room," she said slowly. "But he didn't ask where they were."

She turned to stare out of the window. That was one thing about a military career. You learned to follow orders and never question why things were done the way they were done – at least not out loud.

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EVAN GLANCED OVER at her. And stayed quiet. She'd been through a lot.

Now, he wanted to know what the hell was going on. Finally, with Levi awake, they might be able to find out.

Evan pulled into the back of the hospital lot and parked. He glanced around the area then exited and walked over to her side and helped her down. And stopped. He lifted her arm and slowly raised her shirt. There was fresh blood soaking the bandage beneath. He frowned.

"Might have ripped a stitch," she said in a low voice. "But there's nothing anyone is going to do about that but leave it to heal on its own."

He studied the blood and realized there was none running down her ribs so the flow had already stopped. He lowered her shirt and stepped back. "Do you need help to walk?"

Instantly she shook her head.

"I get independence," he said. "But stubbornness is something else altogether."

She froze and then took one step and another step, this time with her bad leg. “I can walk okay. The problem is if the road is rough or uneven then a wrong step jars my ankle, making it hurt like hell.”

“Should be in bed for a few days,” he muttered.

She didn’t joke back so he’d take that to mean she agreed with him. He walked slowly at her side to the front entrance. She probably looked like she was looking for medical treatment herself.

And how the hell had Ice arranged beds here? Talk about having connections.

At the front, the doors opened automatically. Inside the air was cool, the atmosphere serene and quiet. He quickly found out where his friends were, wondering inside at the ease of how he got the information.

“Maybe Ice set that up early so we’d have no trouble getting access,” Megan suggested, sounding as weary as he felt.

He shrugged. “Who knows?” Inside he wasn’t sure if he liked it or not, but they were heading to the second floor. He’d have taken the stairs if he could have, but it wasn’t going to happen with her ankle. She should be in a wheelchair keeping that elevated and out of the way, but she was going to fight a suggestion like that. Her ankle did appear to be healing so he didn’t want anything to slow the process. The elevator doors opened to find Benji standing guard.

When he saw them, his face lit up. “Nice job.”

She flushed. “Thanks,” she muttered. “Nice to see you made it through that mess at the hospital.”

“Ha, the reports and interviews afterwards were a bigger mess. But the guys are here and so far so good.”

Evan nodded. “Is Mason here yet?”

Benji shook his head. “No, but he will be any minute.”

He led the way to where Ice stood in a doorway, her features hard, and her eyes glittering. She said, “Come on in.”

They entered a larger room than any he’d seen in the military hospital to find both Levi and Stone propped up and awake. Stone’s face broke out in welcome. Levi just looked at him.

“Levi, you doing okay?” he asked, his gaze studying his friend.

Levi gave him a clipped nod. He looked stronger. His color was better.

Evan turned to look at the other man.

“Stone?”

Stone nodded. “Doing fine,” he said smoothly.

Megan turned to Ice. “What about Merk and Rhodes?”

“They are next door and both doing fine.” She sent a pointed look at Levi and added, “Everyone needs another few days here but the rest...that is going to take time.”

“Some of us could get out of here now.”

Ice ignored Levi’s words. Evan understood. Levi was never going to be a good patient. While he’d been sleeping there was no argument from him, now that he was awake it was a different story.

“Stone, glad to hear you kept one leg.”

Stone inclined his head. “No way was I losing both.” He grinned. “And thanks for the rescue. I was sure I was a goner that day.”

“We all did.” Levi studied Megan at Evan’s side. “You flew with Ice?”

She inclined her head, imitating his own movement without intending to.

“And you took out the asshole today?”

She nodded again.

“And saved Evan here and the pilot and co-pilot?”

She narrowed her gaze and nodded one more time. Evan grinned. She was getting pissier by the minute.

Levi studied her then switched his gaze to Ice.

Something seemed to shift back and forth. All he said was, “Nice job.”

That was the thing about the guys Evan worked with. They’d be slim in their kudos to each other, knowing they didn’t need it. That top performance was the standard. But also that it was expected and appreciated. Sure there was some back slapping and high fives. And yet when someone needed it, one of the team always seemed to know.

Megan wasn’t part of the team. But even though she wasn’t a SEAL, she was in the service as they all were, and she’d achieved a unique position here partly due to working with Ice and partly because she’d been in on that extraction for these four men. Then there was today’s mess.

And the thing was Levi knew. He understood people. Understood insecurity. And gave credit where and when it was due.

Not much was required, but that little bit went a long way. And as he watched Megan settle, he gave a small nod of thanks to Levi. She’d calm down now.

Levi was a seriously good guy. Evan didn't know what his plans were now, but he was a man in command of whatever life threw at him.

If there was anything the guys could do to help him along, then they would do it.

In a heartbeat.

Chapter 19

MEGAN TRIED TO relax. She had enough trouble reconciling her emotions and ethics without being praised for killing a man. She'd done her job. That was it. She'd done the best she could and this time it had been enough. If she saw combat on a regular basis that would be tough as no one was perfectly in tune *all* the time. She'd win some and she'd lose some, and it would all happen fast. And as much as she was in the service and would be sent where she was needed, a part of her hoped to focus on search and rescue. She wasn't sure she was cut out for combat.

Ice opened the door behind them. Megan had been studying Levi to the extent she hadn't heard the soft knock. Mason entered. Swede was with him. Then Markus walked in and the room suddenly didn't seem so large anymore. Markus walked over to Stone and high-fived the man. "Damn it's good to see you awake."

Stone smiled. "Nice to be awake."

Markus studied the bandaged stump. "Blued steel or black carbon fiber?"

Stone cocked his head. "I was thinking stainless with the curves so I can run faster."

Markus snorted. "Boring. Everyone has that. If you'd lost both then that would be awesome. But with only one, I'm thinking..." and he pulled out his phone and swiped through several pages until he found what he wanted. Then he held it up for Stone to see it. "Like this."

Stone's face was a study. "Man, that's not bad," he whispered in awe. "Merk is a whiz at mechanics, he might be able to build something like this for me."

"Weaponize it and you're all set."

Megan stared. "Are you seriously planning to build a fake leg on your own?"

The men glanced over at her. "It's hardly fake," Stone said earnestly. "It's got to replace my real one so that makes it a real leg."

"Besides," Markus said, "it's a tool like every other thing we carry. So it

needs to maximize its job. In this case, it could be a hell of a weapon.”

Swede walked over and took a look. “And it could be a thing of beauty.”

“Absolutely.”

Megan shook her head. “I don’t have a problem with the look of it, but weaponize it?”

They just grinned. “We do like our toys.”

Levi spoke up. “There were only two men who knew we were going to be there. Our contact in the US and the corresponding contact in Mexico.”

“Who was the US contact?” Mason asked.

“The one here has gone missing,” Levi said. “I haven’t been able to reach him.”

“By phone?”

“Several numbers connected but still no answer.”

“Did you ever see him face to face?” Mason asked. “Would you recognize him?”

Levi nodded. “It’s one of the reasons I trusted him. I knew where to find him.”

Evan held out his phone. “Hawk sent this to me.” He walked closer. “This is the gunman from the hospital, do you recognize him?”

Levi took the phone in his hand. Then shook his head. “It’s not my informant...”

He studied the image a little longer. Then passed it over to Stone. “What do you think?”

Stone took it, his face darkening. “He was in Mexico.”

“He was there?” Evan asked in surprise. “He must have escaped early then. I didn’t leave anyone alive.”

“There was a group that disappeared as the double-cross happened.”

“What exactly were you doing down there?” Megan asked.

Levi studied her. “A large cache of guns was being exchanged for drugs. We wanted to make sure both were stopped.”

She nodded. “And did it get stopped?”

“The drugs were burned to the ground and the guns are still in the US. We need to find who in the US is moving weapons.” He motioned at the cell phone. “And how many of these men are crossing our borders freely.”

“Are these weapons being brought in from somewhere else?”

Levi nodded. “But we didn’t get the supplier. We had a line to tug on the

buyers and were hoping to cut that supply line of drugs off at the same time. The plan was to take the drug supplier captive and find those above him.”

“Did you get anyone?”

He shrugged. “We were there at the right time and there were some drugs, I doubt the full amount of the payment, but we were taken down almost immediately.”

“So your informant in the US double-crossed you?”

Levi stared at her. “Maybe. Or maybe he’s dead too.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re not going to be able to find out though, are you?”

His face thinned. “Not for a little while,” he said softly.

“If ever?” she questioned, not sure what he was meaning.

“I’ll find who did this. Four of us came home but there were women and children working with the drugs and the men killed them all. They shot them all dead.” Levi’s voice hardened. “I shot two of them but two got away for sure.”

“Four,” Stone said. “Four took off in the helicopter.”

“Then I have four to hunt down,” Levi said smoothly.

“We have four to hunt down,” Stone said in a hard voice.

Levi looked over at his friend. “Sounds like a plan. I’ll heal. You get on your feet and we’ll go hunting.”

Ice snorted. “How about you both get better then talk?”

Levi turned to study her. “I told you before the offer is open.”

She shook her head. “Not a good idea.”

He smiled a slow deep dangerous smile that made Megan suck in her breath. Ice appeared to be oblivious to that magnetic power. Except she stuck her chin farther out.

“What offer?” Mason asked. He studied Levi then Stone and gave a clipped nod. “Might not be a bad idea. Timing is right. But transitioning will take funding.”

“I’ve got backers.” Levi shrugged, the color fading in his face. “Looks like time is exactly what I do have.”

“And I have a lot more of it now, too,” growled Stone.

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EVAN MISSED THE gist of the subject but could see the undercurrents flowing around him. Then he understood. “Going private?”

Levi turned that potent gaze his way. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Not a bad idea at that. Big money in it. Less rules and restrictions.”

“Exactly,” Stone said. “And I need a new job. Apparently, I’m not going to be able to keep the one I have.”

“You will,” Mason said, “but it will be different...”

Stone snorted. “Like hell I’m going to do a damn desk job.” He turned to Levi. “You’re going to hire someone to do that shit I hope.”

“I thought you were interested in that position,” Levi said in a bland tone.

Stone glared at him. “Find me some beautiful chick that digs men with one leg and can do administration shit – now that would be perfect.”

“Women won’t give a damn about your leg,” Ice snapped. “If they do, they fall in the girl category and need to grow up. So do you. No more girls for you.”

“But I can have women? Right?” he asked with a big grin.

She smiled, a gesture filled with such love the men in the room were spellbound. Evan knew he sure was. “Tone that down, Ice, we’re only human,” he said with a teasing smile. “And that smile of yours is potent as hell.”

Immediately that gaze flattened and turned his way. “You’re spoken for so you don’t count.”

“And so are you,” Levi said in a low, hard voice.

She studied him then snorted and walked out, her parting shot, “Like hell.”

Chapter 20

MEGAN'S EYEBROWS ROSE as she watched Ice leave. She turned back to see the other men – except Levi – grinning. “Obviously there is something going on that I don't know about,” she muttered.

Evan laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “So what did you want us here for?”

Levi looked at Stone. Stone nodded.

Curious, Megan watched as she was assessed then accepted. Like an invisible tension layer had suddenly eased.

“His name is Pedro Watkins. He lives in San Diego and has ‘connections’ to the yards.”

“Any connection to the US Navy? North Island? Any military?”

“Not that we could find. But his cousin is doing the gun deals. That's who you need to find.”

“Name?”

“Miguel Watkins.”

“Strange last names.”

Levi nodded. “That's what we thought. No way to know if he's on the up and up or not or if he's dead but he's the American connection. Find him and you'll find the rest. Merk will send you the file I collected. See what you can do with it. For all our sakes.”

“You told anyone else yet?”

Levi shook his head. “Wasn't awake until now.”

Mason nodded. “We'll find him.”

“Good. Get him and haul him in. Get those damn guns off the street.” His voice deepened with anger. “When I'm back up and running I'll track the others down myself.”

Mason studied him. “Don't do anything stupid.”

Levi smiled with a boyishness that could charm anyone. “Don't you worry about me. I've been thinking about this for a long time.”

“Besides our time was coming to an end soon,” Stone added. “Things

were changing above us. We were being hamstrung by new rules and regulations, and of course bosses.”

Levi nodded. “Find this guy. We’ll handle the rest.”

Mason nodded. “Good enough.”

They turned to walk out when Levi called back, “Mason? Evan? If anything ever happens and you want to switch to the private sector...”

And he left it hanging. Mason nodded. “Not unless I have to but if that time comes, I’ll look you up.”

Markus protested, “I carried your fat ass out of there and I don’t get an invitation?”

Swede snorted. “Hell, I got the heavy load. You tried to pick Stone up lately?”

Stone chuckled. “I’m a good thirty pounds lighter now.”

“Blued steel, I told you,” Swede said. “That would be sweet.”

Levi said to Mason, his voice deepening, “If I haven’t said it yet...”

“You don’t have to. Just make sure there’s a place for me on the team if I ever need it.”

“In whatever shape you are in when the time comes, you have it,” Levi said. “Just because I can’t go back to active duty here, doesn’t mean my job is done.”

“Our jobs are never done,” Megan said. “Regardless of the direction we go in.” She nodded to the men, turned and walked out.

*

“ICE SAYS SHE’S a hell of a pilot. We’re going to need some of those coming up...” Stone said, only half joking.

How could anyone lock down plans when they were in the middle of a serious health crisis? Evan nodded. “She is and I’ll let her know.”

He said good-bye and walked out to find Mason and Ice in a heavy conversation with Megan.

“What’s going on?”

She shrugged. “I just wondered if that soldier was one of the men I saw at the hangar. From the HVAC company that we watched on the video tape.” She reached up and scratched her temple. “The thing is, there are a lot of

Spanish speaking people there so it could be nothing other than that.”

“Security should be able to do facial recognition and see if he’s on the base,” Mason said. “That shooter from Megan’s house snuck onto the base somehow.”

“And yet, what was it that came after us today?” Ice asked smoothly from beside them. “It wasn’t one of ours.”

“And it was old,” Mason said. “Nothing like what the military has now.”

“I know we have a lot of safeguards in place, a lot of security – double the normal amount now, but what if...” Megan stopped there. It sounded preposterous when she said it out loud.

“We’d know about it,” Ice said. “Everyone checks in all the time, you know that.”

Mason and Ice stared at her. “Even if they got one of the helicopters, what’s the point of going after the hospital?”

“Levi and his men.”

“And for what reason?”

“There are usually only a few that are worth killing over – love, money, power and...revenge.”

“So in this case...” Evan had been quiet up to now. “What do you think we’re looking at?”

“Love and revenge,” Megan said. “You heard him. Levi said he made sure he took out those that shot the women and children.” She stared at him. “What’s the chance one was the husband or son of someone important? And this is payback.”

“This is conjecture.” Mason’s voice was low, thoughtful. “But it falls in line with the betrayal of Levi. If we tug these threads then chances are good we’d know soon enough what’s going on.”

Chapter 21

A RMS CROSSED, MEGAN glared at Evan. “Surely there’s something I can do?”

“No, no and no,” Evan snapped. “You’re going to rest. That’s it.”

This safe house was comfortable enough, but she had no idea where they were or how long they were to stay. Sure they were safe but she was out of sorts. She wanted to do something constructive.

Megan stretched out on the bed in the main bedroom, her sore ankle elevated. She didn’t think it would work, but she was desperate to shut him out and the message he was determined to give her. No. No. And hell no.

Sometimes life sucked. This was one of those times.

And if she looked too tired to move, well it was because she was. They’d come here straight from the hospital, her mind buzzing with ideas. But there was little she could do. And even less he was willing to let her do.

Her damn ankle was also killing her.

Not that she was going to let Evan know.

“Here.”

She opened her eyes to find him standing with a glass of water and two of her painkillers. See, she didn’t have to tell him shit. He already knew. She struggled to prop herself up on one elbow then reached for the tablets. She handed the glass back to him when she was done and lay back down again. She never said a word.

She heard his footsteps walk away then return. Her laptop was placed on her belly.

“Ice said you’re great on computers.”

Her eyes flew open. She studied the look on his face. “And?”

“We could use someone doing research.”

“On what?”

“You have access to the flight logs?”

She narrowed her gaze. “Some of them.”

“And maybe you could hunt down your theory as to whether a flight was made off schedule. Ice has higher clearance if we need it.”

She frowned. "This could cost me my job.'

"We don't want that to happen, so just see if there's anything within the parameters of what you're allowed to see." He studied her face. "If you find anything then Mason or Ice can ask for more information."

That actually made some sense. "I can take a look. But no promises."

"Good enough," he said cheerfully as he walked back into the kitchen.

As she watched him leave, she couldn't help being suspicious that this was a "make work" project for her to feel useful.

And, it worked.

She was buried in information in a few minutes. She opened up a Word document and started taking notes. The trick was going to be to sort through the logs.

And see what no one else had seen. If that had been one of their helicopters then someone knew something about it.

An hour later, her head boomed, her foot throbbed and she leaned back cursing that she'd ever come up with the theory. How could she find that helicopter when she had no numbers for it? Or did she? No, it had been older, beat up, almost impossible to identify. Except it had been military at one time.

Her eyes flew open. Had it been decommissioned? Sold to the private sector?

That would explain why no one had a flight log for it. It no longer belonged to the military. What about the weapons? Not that it was hard to come up with those in today's market. She studied the list in front of her. They were the helicopters decommissioned in the last five years. It took much longer to sort through the list but finally she managed to narrow the options to seven older helicopters that had been sold on the private market on the West Coast.

On the scent now, she dug in deep.

*

IT WAS FASCINATING to watch her. Her single-minded focus was something he admired. Too bad she wouldn't put that same diligence into making a relationship with him work.

“Why are you staring at me?” She teased him with a quick grin but her eyes were speculative.

“Because you’re beautiful when you are so intent.”

She shook her head. “You are the one that’s beautiful. All the girls love you.”

“Maybe they do,” he said. “But I doubt it. Besides, I don’t love all the girls. I only love you.” And that’s not what he’d planned to say. But the word was out and he was damned if he was going to apologize for being honest. That was something he appreciated above all else. But he didn’t want to push her.

“Love,” she said in a faint voice. Her gaze locked on his. “You’re just saying that to unnerve me again.”

“Interesting, that’s your response,” he said with a light laugh, not sure what to do with the hurt sitting inside just under his heart. He’d have to take it out and deal with it at some time, but surely not now. It wasn’t possible to deal with it now. It would hurt too much.

She studied him longer and he stared back calmly. He shouldn’t have brought it up again. She wasn’t ready. He’d known that but he’d ignored it. To his folly.

“How do you know?” she asked, “that you love me?”

And he realized she was back to feeling insecure and worried that she wasn’t good enough. Couldn’t feel what others felt.

“I know that if you walk out that door, I’ll have lost something precious. That if you leave without me, I’ll have missed a chance I was waiting for years to come around again.”

She shook her head. “I never forgot you. But I always knew you had other things to do and other places to be. I wasn’t going to hold you back. I’d been interested for a long time,” she admitted. “So when we had that weekend together I was all about making the most of it, knowing it wouldn’t happen again.”

“We were different people then. You made a huge impression on me, and I found something I didn’t want to lose. But you were accepted into the program you wanted, you were leaving and before I really understood, you were gone.”

“It happened fast,” she admitted. After a moment she found herself asking, “Had you planned on seeing me again?”

“I went by your place only to find out you weren’t there anymore.”

She laughed, relief and joy coursing through her. “I wasn’t there when I was with you. I’d been staying with friends.”

He frowned then shrugged. “Whatever. The thing is you changed something for me. I did have relationships after you’d left as I had no way of knowing if you were coming back. Yet they didn’t feel the same. They didn’t make *me* feel the same. I wanted more.”

She shook her head.

“You can deny it all you want but these are my feelings, not yours.”

“No, it’s not that.” She glanced down at her laptop. “Part of the reason I was in the relationship with Peter was that I had found something with you that I hadn’t seen before too. I thought I’d found it again with Peter. I believed I’d found it with Peter. But not only hadn’t I, I didn’t want to let that idea go. And I think that was the problem. I wanted it to be the same. But I knew when I refused to look too deeply at it that I was only fooling myself. But it was easy. It was good. So it was comfortable.”

“And comfortable is deadly,” he said in a serious note. “You don’t change something comfortable until it becomes uncomfortable.”

She nodded. “And that point came to a crunch over the wedding date, and I couldn’t fool myself any longer. I cared about him, but I didn’t care enough to marry him.”

“And so you’re afraid that you will care for me but not enough.”

“No, I’m afraid that you spoiled me for anyone else but that our weekend was just a fantasy and that I made too much of it. That we weren’t living a reality we could ever recapture. That what we had wasn’t real.”

His heart had been running and jumping then hitting the brakes in shock as he listened. But at the end his heart slowed to a heavy strong pace. “You know what the answer is, don’t you?”

She winced but her gaze was steady as she stared at him. “Yes. I do.”

He tilted his head. “And what is that?”

“We need to spend another weekend together.”

And his heart jumped for joy.

Chapter 22

“I’M AFRAID OF disappointing you,” she admitted. “Of being disappointed.”

That smoky smile of his was slow to come but all the more powerful when it did. The magnetic pull was brutal.

“Damn you’re lethal,” she whispered.

His grin flashed. “But you’re still having doubts.”

Was she? Not really. It was a matter of getting past this moment of awkwardness. Somehow. And then she knew. She closed her laptop. There’d been nothing earth shattering there, just something they could ponder over, later. Much later.

Leaning back she slid her hands up his arms and wrapped them around his neck.

“Maybe you should show me how good it was. Maybe my memories are faulty.”

The corner of Evan’s mouth quirked up. “Oh, we can’t have that, can we?”

He shifted beside her and held her close. Then he gently lowered his head.

“Do you remember this?” he asked as he dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Or how about this?” And he kissed her temple. “Maybe this would help.” He slowly massaged the sore muscles on either side of her spine while dropping tiny kisses on her cheekbones, chin and nose.

She clasped a hand on either side of his head and tugged him down. “I might remember those, but I think the best memory...” And she gave him a sweet and smoky kiss.

He returned the kiss with a pent up passion that sizzled in it’s intensity. Then she found herself struggling to think at all. When he lifted his head it was all she could do to open her eyes and stare up at him.

“Is that what you remember?”

Somehow she was now stretched out on the bed, her shirt up above her bra and his hand cupping her breast. She did remember that. The complete

loss of her surroundings. The awareness of him and only him. Not only what he was doing but where he also was taking her.

She sighed happily. “Oh yeah, I do remember this.”

When he lowered his head this time it was as if he were branding her. Making sure she’d never forget his touch again. She’d been teasing before but hadn’t made it clear that’s what she’d been doing. Maybe it had bothered him or maybe he just wanted to know she was in this a hundred percent like he was.

She wasn’t sure she was. She wanted to be...

Then thoughts fled as he took her nipple in his mouth and suckled. Shudders wracked down her spine and her back arched into his touch. She couldn’t hold back the little whimpers escaping his pulsing movement.

She *had* forgotten.

How was that possible?

How could anyone not remember...not crave this joy...this sensation of need and heat and hunger all at the same time? She’d had a good sex life with Peter. It had been caring and loving but had missed the heat and passion of being with Evan.

Evan was like having a piece of brandy filled dark chocolate. A smoothness that promised a great combination then the brandy hit raising the experience to a whole new level. It said – it was okay – just let go. Enjoy the experience. Enjoy the ride. Peter had been milk chocolate all the way. Everyday, common, average.

And she’d responded in kind. They’d always cuddled a lot and the sex that had followed had been good because she’d enjoyed the cuddle. With Evan there would be cuddles – afterwards. But right now she couldn’t even imagine as her body twisted under his hands.

Please, her mind pleaded with him to give her the satisfaction she’d been looking for. To feel the sharp edge of passion that proved she was alive. He’d been the only one to give her that.

She’d really thought there was no choice but to leave him. He’d been around for a good time not a long time – so she’d thought. And she’d had plans. *It wouldn’t have worked* her mind had said. *There’s no way he’s for you* her subconscious had said.

And her inner spirit had wept for the loss of the man who made her body cry out and her heart sing.

He'd made her feel things. Want things. It had scared her a little. All new territory for her and he'd taken it one step – rather many steps – further than she'd ever gone before.

Peter had been safe.

Evan had been the opposite – dangerous, edgy, a daredevil.

And she wanted that again.

She stretched up to pull his head toward her, and he kissed her but not the deep drugging kisses she desperately wanted. He teased her with light tastes of his passion, raising her hopes only to pull away.

“Stop teasing,” she whispered.

“Impatient,” he answered.

“For you, yes.” She remembered that. Evan loved foreplay. He loved to watch her climax and be there to hold her through it.

“I don't want to be alone,” she said as she realized her jeans were gone and his fingers were playing along the edge of her panties. “I want you there with me.” She groaned as tension twisted her insides again. “Jesus, you're smooth.”

“No,” he said. “I'm not. My fingers are trembling. I'm scared to mess up. That if it's not perfect you will walk away and not come back.”

Her emotions hiccupped. “I won't do that,” she cried. “This isn't a performance you're going to be judged on.”

“Sure it is. You're looking for that fantasy.”

And she heard the insecurity, the fear that he had to be good enough or it was all over.

Ignoring her injury, she pushed him over until he lay on his back. She was down to a bra and panties and he was fully dressed. How seriously unfair was that?

She reached down and tugged his shirt up above his head. He helped her out and tossed it on the floor. She slid down so she was sitting on his thighs and quickly undid his button and the zipper of his jeans. She carefully avoided touching the bulge underneath and awkwardly tugged the jeans to the floor. She scrambled back up his legs and unceremoniously pulled his boxers off. He was laughing by the time she resettled in place. Until she reached out to grasp him gently in her hands. Then his breath gusted out of him as she stroked him up and down.

“I never had a chance to do this last time,” she whispered. “We were

jumping each other like rabbits, but it went by so fast I never had a chance to do everything I wanted to do.”

He opened his mouth and she shook her head. “Nope. Don’t want to hear it. I’m not saying I didn’t like it because that would be a lie. I loved it.”

He slid his hand over her hips, snagging her panties in his fingers.

“You’re still overdressed.”

“No I’m not,” she said. “It’s good this way.”

“No, I think the view would be better this way.” He rolled her gently to the side, always mindful of her injury, and her panties were gone. Her bra followed the same path. Flung to the far corners of the room. He rolled again putting her back on top. She let out a gusty laugh. “Smooth, so smooth.”

And she leaned forward and bit his nipple. He yelped so she did it again. He laughed the second time. She stretched out fully on top of him and stroked the hair back off his face. She cuddled his erection in the hollow between her thighs and gently rocked back and forth. A ruddiness slid up his neck as his eyes drifted closed. Just enjoying.

She kissed his temple. “Remember this?”

She found the curl of his ear and licked it gently, sending warm hot air inside.

“Remember this?”

He shuddered, goose bumps rising up on his arms. She shifted to drop kisses on his closed eyelids, his cheekbones and chin.

“Or how about this?” She slid a hand down between them and grasped the length of him gently. She pulled her knees up on either side of his hips and slowly, lightly rode the hard ridge.

He tossed his head from one side to the other, a strangled exclamation caught in the back of the throat as he held back.

She sighed happily as she rocked and swayed and gently let her body remember the perfection of being within his arms. His ability to let her do and be and have whatever experience she wanted from him. She slid further down his thighs, stroking and licking and kissing his hard body from his chin to his abs. When she came to his belly button she traced the outline with her tongue. He twisted beneath her, willing her to go where he wanted her. And she would, but on her terms.

She was having too much fun to make this happen any faster.

Only he had other ideas.

“I know you’re having fun, sweetheart, but you’re killing me.”

She lovingly stroked the sexy line of his hips, her tongue making tiny lapping motions on the bone. “Nah,” she whispered. “This is too much fun to be killing anyone.”

“Well, it’s been a little while for me,” he said apologetically, his hips lifting under her in a slow dance. “I don’t want to end this party before we’ve barely begun.”

Her motions slowed. It had been a little while? She slowly slid up until she could stare at him eye to eye.

“How long?”

He frowned but answered readily enough. “Since I heard you were back.”

Oh happy sigh. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. He flipped her over so she was the one on her back and whispered in that so dark and sexy voice, “My turn.”

And she groaned as he stroked and caressed and kissed until she was quivering with need. She widened her legs and tugged him over her. “I want you so damn much.”

“Not as much I want you,” he whispered. “It wouldn’t be possible.”

But she couldn’t think as her body took on a life of its own – just as it had before. She slipped into an altered state where she could feel so much more. Hear so much more and quivered from the emotions running through her.

He spread her thighs wide, and she widened them further. Waiting for him to take his place.

Instead, there was a breath of cool air as he shifted, and a warm tongue teased the nub at her center. She cried out as eruptions started deep inside her. He slid his huge hands down and under her hips and lifted her up.

When he moved up her body, she was barely aware of his actions. He pushed inside her, his motion slow, steady, and determined. She groaned as he demanded and received entrance. She twisted in his hands, forgetting how big he was. How careful he’d been. He remembered she had difficulty that first time. And even now in the heat of passion, he was careful to make sure she was okay. That he didn’t hurt her.

Ever.

She lay helpless in his embrace, filled to her core, shuddering. Waiting for him to move.

He gripped her hips and tugged her flush against him. The heat between

them should have burned the sheets. The air was already hot and sweaty around them.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice low, guttural.

She lay in a white heat – waiting. “Oh God,” she whispered. “Yes.”

And he started to move. Slowly at first as if gauging how she was handling it. She tightened her inner muscles and was rewarded with his harsh groan. And then he started to move for real.

She watched him, head thrown back as he pounded into her. Over and over again. Tension twisted inside, her breath catching in the back of her throat. She arched, riding the waves as they crashed through her body.

Thoughts fled as millions of tiny eruptions exploded inside.

Evan gave a strangled groan as he ground tight against her pelvis before collapsing down beside her.

And held her close.

“Remember now?” he whispered against her ear.

Tears collected in the corner of her eyes. “I never did forget,” she whispered. “I just figured I didn’t have a hope in hell of getting what I wanted so accepted second best.”

“Not any longer.” And he crushed her to him and held her close.

*

HE LOVED IT when she snuggled in close.

God he missed her. Missed this. She was back in town and back in his arms, right where she belonged. And he couldn’t be happier. Sure there was that smidge of insecurity...but he’d deal with it like he dealt with everything.

Her fingers slid across his chest and wrapped around the other side as she shifted in closer. She slid one leg over top of his and let out a long sigh.

“Happy?”

“Very,” she murmured.

He wanted to ask but no way in hell he was going to.

“It was,” she said. And fell silent.

He waited.

Nothing.

“It was what?”

“Just as I remember,” she whispered.

He glanced down at her to see her eyelids closed, her breathing soft and gentle.

“Good.” But he knew she didn’t hear him as her breathing deepened and she fell in a healing sleep. They hadn’t slept much when they’d been together before, yet it had been a mini holiday, not this respite from the horrors of the stress of their current nightmare.

She needed to sleep, to heal. That he could hold her, care for her, was an honor. He hoped it would become his right, but it wasn’t yet. His phone buzzed beside him.

He shifted until he could reach it.

Mason checking in. He confirmed all was well. Hawk and Shadow were on patrol outside. Nice. He couldn’t imagine not having his friends at his side. In this instance, they had the full power of the military behind them as well.

And yet no safeguards would guarantee their safety. He shifted her into a more comfortable position so she’d sleep without waking up sore in the morning. As much as he wanted to make love to her again and again, he knew she needed rest. He closed his eyes and willed his body to relax.

And heard movement downstairs.

Chapter 23

SHE WOKE TO Evan's dark voice in her ear. "Quiet, we have a visitor."

Her gaze widened as she stared at Evan in horror. *Again?* He removed his finger from her lips and placed it against his. "Shh."

As he slid from the bed to pull on his boxers, she realized she was in the buff as well and quickly scrambled off the bed to find her underwear and jeans. Grabbing up her t-shirt she tugged it over her head and followed him to the door. The house was dark. The bedrooms were the only rooms upstairs, with a railing that overlooked the living room, a huge room with a vaulted ceiling.

There was no sign of anyone. She followed him along to the stairway. How to get down without making any noise? He crept down three stairs and then using the railings, skipped the next one to end up a stair below.

She followed his example realizing he must know that that particular stair creaked. Downstairs he tucked up against the wall and peered into the kitchen. She followed his actions as exactly as she could and found herself now plastered against the wall between the bathroom and the kitchen. Still, she hadn't heard a sound.

But she trusted Evan.

And then a man bolted past her. She flattened into the wall as Evan tackled him from behind.

As soon as Evan went down another person slid out of the shadows and helped Evan.

At least she hoped he was helping. It was too dark to see but there was plenty of grunting and flesh pounding contact. Her hand found a light switch and she flicked it on.

And found Evan and another man she recognized from Evan's team, Shadow, standing over an unconscious man.

"Oh thank heavens," she muttered. "I was afraid you'd be the one on the ground, Evan."

Evan sent her a look that had her immediately holding up her hands

defensively in front of her. “Sorry. How could I forget? You’re SEALs and all,” she drawled in a mocking voice, but she grinned at him to show she didn’t mean it.

“Was he alone?” she asked Shadow.

“He was with another man who split off outside. Hawk went after him and I tracked this one inside.”

“Thank you. I hate knowing he managed to get inside while we slept.”

“And how did he?” Evan asked curiously. “I checked the security system before going to sleep and it was on.”

“It’s off now. So somewhere between then and now he managed to disable it.” Shadow shrugged. “I wanted to see how he was going to handle the security so I waited.”

Evan walked over to the system and nodded. “It’s been cut.”

“Still doesn’t answer how they knew we were here,” Megan muttered. “What’s the point of the safe house if these guys can find us?”

Evan nodded. “Good point.” He turned to Shadow. “Any idea how he found us?”

“No, but if he found it then someone else can too.”

“On that note, I’ll go and pack,” Megan said.

She turned and walked back upstairs, not impressed but as no one had been hurt, she’d adapt. She’d rather leave to find another *secret* location than stay and have a second visitor.

As she stood in the bedroom she realized she really didn’t have much to pack. Still, she collected the few items she had with her and then turned her attention to Evan’s bits and pieces. She packed everything and made the bed and was back downstairs in minutes.

She dropped their bags on the floor at the base of the stairs and walked to the kitchen.

The intruder had been propped on a kitchen chair and was slowly coming around.

She studied his slightly darker skin and black hair and realized he could be related to Levi’s Mexico problem. And how the hell she’d gotten caught up in this nightmare, she didn’t know.

She turned away to get a glass of water from the sink and spun back again. His face jogging a memory. She frowned. “He’s the man from my bedroom,” she announced.

“He is?”

“I think so,” she said apologetically. “Although a lot of it is a blur,” she admitted. “And I know that’s not what anyone wants to hear, but…”

Shadow studied the wallet in his hands. “No ID.”

“Of course not,” Evan said. “That would be too simple.” He cracked his knuckles and said, “There are other ways of getting information from him.”

The man’s eyes flew open.

He glared at her. “It’s all your fault.”

“My fault?” she asked in amazement. “What did I do?”

“You saw me and my partner at the hangars. Because of that so many things had to be changed.”

She blinked. “Oh.”

“What had to be changed?” Shadow asked quietly.

The man looked at him sideways. “The plan. We were only supposed to find out what was happening with Levi’s unit. Find out if they were still alive. And if they were we were to find out where they were staying so someone could finish the job.”

“And what job was that?” Evan asked, his voice, cold.

“They were supposed to be killed in Mexico,” he said in a low voice. “But he’s slippery.”

“Right, so you’re part of his US informant system and you betrayed him for more money,” Megan said in a dark tone. She hated to think how money ruled the world.

“We didn’t want to,” he cried, twisting the story. “But they made us. Levi saw too much and they wouldn’t play the game properly.”

“Right.” Like she believed that. “And the extra money was just extra sugar on top.”

“You,” the man snarled. “We were going to kill for free. But not on base. We were going to make sure they couldn’t find your body.”

Evan’s arm reached out but she held him back.

“I guess you suck at your job then, don’t you. First you insisted I get dressed, making it easier to escape through the bedroom window, then you missed shooting me several times,” she said calmly. “In your world I imagine that’s a death sentence for being such a fuck up, especially as your new employer knows what you did to your old employer.”

The man shook his head. “They need us.”

She smiled. “Traitors and petty drug dealers are needed by nobody. Your new boss has better people,” she snapped. “Not scumbags who sell out their own family.”

The man’s face darkened in anger. “I am someone. My cousin is someone. We run the guns and we don’t deal with shit like you – we kill them.”

“If you were the right people,” she jeered, not sure where all this was coming from but realizing the men were letting her do this on her own, “then you’d have hired someone to take care of me and wouldn’t have had to dirty your hands yourself.”

“This one is a pleasure.”

“Why, because I’m a woman? Because I saw you at the hangar? Because I’m better than you?”

“Because you’re a bitch that’s been lucky and made me and my cousin look bad.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that. You did that all on your own.”

And she walked away.

Sure enough it pissed him off right away. He lurched out of his chair. Evan slammed him back down.

“Get over here bitch,” he snarled. “You can’t say that and walk away.”

“Too late, I already did. Besides, you don’t run guns. You sell what... one, two. Big deal. It’s the big man above you we’re looking for. You, we’re going to throw into jail and let rot with the other scum.”

“You don’t know nothing.” He hopped to his feet to come after her, but Shadow shoved him back down. “Let me teach her a lesson,” he shouted at Shadow. “She’s a nobody.”

“You’re a nobody.” Megan laughed at him. “Just a little man with a little dick trying to play in the big league.”

And that did it. He yelled, “My cousin Miguel will deal with her like he dealt with Levi. He fixed it so Levi would die in Mexico. Both sides were tired of him. They fixed him good.”

“So good that he’s healing just fine in a private hospital, and you’ve got nothing but life in prison ahead of you.” She snorted. “What did you do, buy that helicopter on the private market? Did all the big guys have one so you had one too? But you don’t know how to fly it, do you? So you had to hire a pilot to do your shit. Only he’s dead now,” she said mockingly. “So you

fucked that up too.”

He grinned but it wasn't a nice grin. “Actually, it was a helicopter from our Mexican supplier and his cousin he wanted to get rid of. You did both of us a favor. And now we know where Levi is.” He gave a harsh laugh. “And you...well you think you've got me but it's a lie. You got nothing, my cousin is right outside and he's going to take you out.”

A scrape behind her had her twisting around to see, but she was slammed in the back by Evan as he threw her to the ground. A shot fired. She couldn't see who or what was hit. The door slammed open then shut as Shadow disappeared into the night.

Evan slowly slid off of her, allowing her to see the man in the chair – and the bullet hole in the dead center of his forehead.

“So they weren't gunning for me after all?” she asked in a low voice.

“Initially, yes. But right now? They were taking out yet another liability.” He shook his head. “Sometimes family is the death of us.”

*

EVAN HELPED HER to her feet. She hopped up carefully, her hand going to her side. She kept getting knocked back and forth through this business. He was sorry for his part in that. In a low voice, he asked, “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head and took a deep breath. “No, I'm fine.”

“You're holding your side,” he motioned to her hand.

“Instinctive reaction.” She smiled at him. “Not to worry, it's no worse.”

“Good. It seems like all I do is knock you down.”

“And save my life time and time again.” She reached up and kissed his cheek. “What about Shadow?”

“He's gone after the cousin.”

“And Hawk?”

Evan's face thinned into grim lines. “Hopefully he's fine.”

He helped her to a chair around the corner where she wasn't forced to stare at the dead man. “I have to take care of this,” he said. “Stay here where you're safe and out of the way.”

“And out of sight, just in case.” She nodded. “Got it.”

“Good.”

He walked into the kitchen and to the open door and peered out into the night. There was no sign of anyone.

He called Mason who brought him up to date. “Right. Stay there. Swede and Dane should be there in seconds. Hawk called them in about ten minutes ago.”

“I’ve got a dead man to deal with.”

“We will be there in five.” He hung up.

Evan tossed a hard look at the dead man then made his way back to Megan.

“Is a rescue coming? And someone to collect the body?”

He grinned. “We don’t need a rescue this time.”

She laughed. “As long as everyone realizes that the safe house has been compromised, then it’s all good.”

Chapter 24

MEGAN COULDN'T HELP but wonder if she should have stayed back East. She knew she could be in the military for another ten years and not see the action she'd seen in the last few days.

She studied the dead man and saw a shadow under the edge of his sleeve. She bent down and tugged the material back. She didn't recognize the tattoo.

Evan said from behind her. "It's a gang symbol. They run a lot of drugs."

"And guns apparently." She straightened. "I wonder where the hell they are getting them from?"

"Who knows? Guns are big business. There are many dealers out there."

"So guns down and drugs up." She nodded her head. "Hopefully Levi put one shipment into the shitter."

"He did, but that doesn't mean there aren't another dozen or so taking its place. Levi is going to want to get the men that did this to him in Mexico."

"Of course. If I lost someone I loved then I'd be tempted to commit murder too."

"Isn't that the truth?" He studied her. "But that's not today's problem. We need to put a stop to this."

"At least this man won't be climbing through my bedroom window any time soon."

He pulled her close and gave her a warm hug. "Never again."

She straightened. "I wonder if there is anything to eat here. My stomach doesn't remember dinner."

"I'd order something in but it's going to get a little busy here soon."

She winced and glanced at the dead man, her appetite fleeing. "Or maybe not. I'm suddenly not hungry anymore." With a wan look, she retook her seat, slumped against the wall and closed her eyes. Death filled her world right now.

A gentle hand stroked her head in the growing silence. "This will be over soon."

She gave a slight nod. "I know. I guess I'm just rethinking my career

choices.”

“Don’t let this nightmare be the reason for it. It could have happened – or something similar, for any number of reasons, anywhere, at any time.”

“Yet, my world hasn’t been the same since coming back West.”

“I’m delighted to have you home again,” Evan said with a gentle tone. He tilted her chin and gave her a hard kiss. “So you’re staying as I hate the weather back East.”

She snorted. “I have to stay because you won’t move?” She shook her head. “How fair is that?”

“Okay, so I might be persuaded to move into all that winter, but then I want a snowmobile to enjoy the weather.”

With a startled look she studied his face. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“About being with you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Did you think I was joking?”

“I thought you were just saying it but hadn’t really thought it through.”

“I’ve thought it through, and if you want to go back East then I’ll apply for a transfer. I don’t want to as my life is here, but you are also a major part of my life and if you’re going to be unhappy here, we can try it.” His grin flashed. “But full warning, I’ll be doing my best to get you to return here and as you know I can be very persuasive.”

*

A WARM PINK washed over her cheeks. He smiled. “But I’d never try to make you stay if you don’t want to. My friends are here and I’d miss it all but I’d make new ones. Your family is back East and that’s more important.”

She laughed. “Except as soon as I’d move back they’d move again too. Better I stay out here as they are planning to retire in California.”

“Perfect.”

At the sound of a car door closing he straightened and slipped to the front door. He peered behind the curtain. “It’s Dane and Swede.”

Evan watched as a second vehicle pulled up and Mason and Markus hopped out. Chase and Brett followed. Only Cooper was missing. Then he was likely hugging the shadows outside, keeping an eye on the place.

“Okay, the guys are here.”

“Good, does that mean we can leave now?”

“Soon. But we need to know where we’re going.”

The men walked inside, a hard silence in their gazes as they searched the house. When they arrived at the kitchen the dead man became the center of attention.

“Did you send a picture to Levi?” Mason asked, pulling his phone out.

“I sent one to Ice but haven’t heard back.”

Mason’s face thinned. He dialed and took a few steps off to the side. Swede and Markus left through the glass doors.

“Anyone heard from Hawk?” Evan asked in a low voice, hoping Megan wasn’t close enough to hear.

Dane shook his head. “No.”

“Damn it.”

Dane nodded. “Or Shadow at this point.”

Evan moved to the door. Dane grabbed his arm and nodded to Megan.

He turned to look. And found her staring at him, stricken.

“Hey.” He walked over and crouched in front of her. “The guys will be fine.”

“Will they?” she asked. “They came to help me, us. If they get hurt that would be so horrible,” she cried. “I can’t have that on my conscience.”

“And it isn’t. They *are* here to help. This is what we do.”

“No, you do *official* missions. Not shit like this.”

“Until we’re looking at shit gone wrong in our own camp. Then it’s a whole different story and becomes official very quickly.”

She shook her head. “If he hadn’t seen me at the hangar…”

“At least it’s the same guy and we’re not talking someone else.”

She nodded. She glanced over at Dane. “Have you heard from anyone in Levi’s group?”

Dane nodded. “Yes. We heard from Benji. All is well.”

“Thank God.” She studied the kitchen doorway as if she could see into the room where the body lay. “I should sleep better now. All that’s left is to find his cousin and hope he’s the informant that betrayed Levi.”

“Levi deserves that much,” Evan said. “Besides, this asshole is still trying to pick us off one by one.”

“How though?”

“Connections. Another cousin,” Dane looked up from his laptop, “has a

government contract for cleaning.”

“But everyone is vetted in these contracts,” Megan protested.

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean someone can’t knock off an employee and steal their ID. All employees have ID tags. But sometimes the security doesn’t look that close and the pictures are horrible anyway, so it’s not that far out of the realm of possibility. Especially if we’re talking family.”

Chapter 25

JUST BECAUSE SOMETHING was possible didn't make it probable. Like all societies, living on any military base had its fair share of issues. There were men transitioning from heading off to war and those coming home to those that never saw live action and were needed on base full-time to keep the wheels of justice moving. There were thousands and thousands of men and women here. And families who waited for their men to come home. It wasn't an easy life and bred problems like rabbits.

She hated to think of anyone targeting Levi or Evan. Somehow it was less concerning to think of them targeting her. Just the thought of losing Evan made her choke up. Dear God, she couldn't even begin to explain how she felt about him. That she cared and deeply was a given, but that fear inside screamed saying she couldn't give him what he needed.

She hated that. It terrified her. She wanted to be loved but she also wanted to love completely. And be loved completely. He was a good man and she thought he loved her, at least he cared for her. But what about herself?

"Megan?"

She shook herself clear of the worries and stared at Evan. "What?"

"We're leaving."

She blinked at him. "Okay. For where?"

"Hawk has checked in. Says the other guy circled around back. He only caught up in time to see him shoot his cousin here and then race off. Hawk gave chase but lost him."

"So where are we going?"

"To Levi. No one has checked in. We need to make sure they are safe."

"They haven't checked in?" she asked in alarm. "Someone said Benji had."

"That was a while ago. No one is answering now."

She nodded, dazed. "Surely the gunman couldn't have gone there this fast."

“We also can’t be sure he was operating alone. There could be lots of men.”

She stood up, gasping slightly. “Let’s go.”

“Better if we leave you here under heavy guard. I doubt the gunman would return at this point.” Dane studied her face. “Or better yet, leave you at the military hospital. The security has been doubled and you can have that side of yours checked over.”

“Been there done that and there’s nothing else that can be done for it but time to rest. The hospital would be my last choice of places to stay,” she said, really hoping that wasn’t going to be necessary. “I’ll stay here.”

“Maybe that would work, but with the extra security the hospital is the safest place.” Evan appeared torn.

“She’ll slow us down,” Dane said bluntly. “I’m not doing this to be mean, but you are injured and a liability.”

“No, you’re right.” She looked around. “It’s better I stay. I’m also one of the gunman’s targets,” she added. “I wouldn’t bring that to the hospital. It’s not fair to those people. If I’m a target, better I’m alone where no one else can get hurt.”

“I don’t want to leave you.” Evan glared at her, more angry at the circumstances than her.

“Why not? With all the security, I’ll be fine. He’s not likely to return.” She smiled brightly. “And Dane is right. I’ll just slow you down.”

She stood up and walked over to him. “Now stop being a mother hen and go,” she said. “The house is already surrounded by gawkers so it’s not as if anyone can get me out of the crowd.”

“It’s actually out of a crowd that many people are snatched from.”

She threw up her hands, walked over to the kitchen and took a drink of water. She was always thirsty these days. And there was no convincing Evan she was going to be fine here.

She could hear the men discussing the issue behind her. She spun around. “Look, the ambulance just arrived and another vehicle full of military police. So I’m fine.”

The men turned to leave. Only Evan stopped, turned and walked back to her. He tilted up her chin and said in a low tone, “Be here when I get back.” And he kissed her.

“And if I’m not?” she challenged him, her eyes deep and dark. “Then

what?"

"You'd better have a damn good reason." He turned and walked away. "And yes I love you. Even if you are prickly and stubborn."

She flushed as men standing in the doorway heard. "I don't love you back," she snapped.

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't." She glared at him.

He laughed. "You're protesting too much."

Damn it. She was too. "You're making me crazy," she muttered.

"That's okay. I love you anyways."

She spun around and stared out the window, her cheeks burning. What was wrong with her? She'd basically had a shouting match like a two-year-old.

*

"SHE DOESN'T SEEM TOO willing," Dane commented as they got into his truck. "You sure you're on the right track?"

Just the thought of going down this pathway to find out she didn't care was going to kill him. "I sure hope so," he said. "We have a history and it was fun, but when it was over I thought I could just move on," he admitted. "Boy was I wrong."

"But you can't go back. Life moves in one direction only."

Evan nodded. "It does but that direction needs to move forward with her. She's insecure. Her last relationship broke up because of her not wanting to set a wedding date."

Dane's face lit up with understanding. "And you're hoping that she hasn't been able to forget you and that's why she couldn't go ahead with marrying someone else."

There was an odd silence.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"No it's not, but there's definitely a level of fantasy to this." Dane shifted gears and took the truck around a corner. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"Neither do I," Evan admitted. "But something Markus said recently applies to me." His voice deepened. "It's already too late."

“Sorry man, that’s tough.”

“I don’t want what we just had. I want more. I want what you have. What Markus found.”

“Understandable. She’s different. She’s capable. Fearless even. She’s a great match but you can’t force what’s not there.” He pulled into the private hospital and parked.

They walked to the front door. And all the lights went out inside.

Chapter 26

MEGAN WASN'T THE type of person to stand around and do nothing. But in this instance there wasn't anything she could do. Except watch as the safe house was processed and the body checked over and removed. She knew Evan had spoken with two of his teammates before he'd left.

"Anyone could stand guard," she said, walking up to them. In a teasing voice she asked, "What did you do wrong to be put on babysitting duty?"

Both men straightened when she spoke to them.

"Nothing," the tall blond said with a smile. "It's an honor to be here."

She scrunched up her face. "A special request from Evan I suppose?"

"He's a friend and you're in trouble," the second man said quietly. "No special request required."

"And who am I speaking with?" she asked, studying the two men's faces. As opposite as could be. The blond had a hefty scar on his cheek and bulging biceps but he was rocking the tough badass look.

Except she couldn't seem to see anyone but Evan in her world. Stupid to fight it really. She was hooked. Had always been hooked. She just wasn't necessarily ready to be caught hook, line and sinker.

And why that was she didn't know.

"Chase and Brett," the second man said, pointing first at the badass and then at himself. He was as much a baby face as she'd ever seen. Except he had that tall elegance of a man who rocked a GQ suit. So damn different.

"Then thank you, Chase and Brett. I appreciate the help." She frowned. "Has there been an update on Levi?"

They shook their heads. "Not yet."

"Right. Well I'll go back up to the bedroom with my laptop and see if I can come up with anything helpful." She gave them a clipped nod, grabbed her backpack, and walked upstairs. Her ankle was starting to throb again. She'd been on it too long. Time for more pills. She thought one of the men followed, but surely it was safe to be alone in her room. A nap would be good. Except with all the shit happening in her life she wasn't sure she'd be

able to. The painkillers might knock her out though.

In her room, she lay down, dragging her laptop to her and considered the latest news. She opened her document and added in the new bits and pieces. Now that they knew the identity of the man downstairs, the pieces were starting to fall into place.

Then gun runners had come to find Levi but she'd seen them.

They decided to leave no witness so killing her was simple and efficient and made sense.

The leader in this enterprise thought his cousin could handle Megan alone so he'd gone after his real target – Levi, but so far he'd escaped capture. And that was a little worrisome.

Still, the shooter had been seen again and again. And this answer sure beat a traitor amongst them. The company with the HVAC contract on base had better be looking for another line of work as getting their contract renewed wasn't looking so good.

She entered all the notes, closed the laptop, then snuggled lower on the bed.

Her eyes were already falling closed. She curled up in a ball and tried to forget the chaos going on downstairs.

She'd seen enough death today.

*

EVAN STUDIED THE front door security system of the private hospital. They could see it was off. The question was why? Was it connected to a power outage or something more sinister? Evan studied the interior. The nurses still walked along the hallway and there was emergency lighting running along the floor as the generator worked to keep the basics functioning. Dane pushed against the door but it was closed. And locked. With a hard look at each other, they slipped around to the closest window and checked for access. The elevators would have been compromised with the power outage, but they still had to get in to gain access to the stairs. They kept moving around the building. Dane gave a low hard exclamation. Evan raced to his side and found a small circle cut out at the emergency exit door. Right. Cut off the power, gain access to the back and you were in. Nice and simple. And too

damn easy.

They moved inside and upstairs. They passed no one. And outside of the nurses on the main floor they saw no one else. It was in the wee hours of the morning and chances were good there was only a skeleton staff on, but they should have seen someone.

On Levi's floor, they opened the door to sounds of guns cocking.

"It's Evan and Dane," Evan said quickly.

"Step into the hallway," Ice said in a low hard voice.

Evan, knowing she was struggling to identify him in the half-light walked forward, his weapon out but his arms up showing he wasn't planning on shooting her.

"Ice, it's me."

She studied him for a moment then nodded. "Dane?"

Dane stepped out. "Here. You okay?"

She nodded. "So far. But we got word that someone is after Levi. Now the power is out. The police are on their way but we're ready if someone attacks."

"That's what we heard too. So here we are," Dane said adding, "they gained access through the side door."

"There's evidence of an intruder," Evan said. "We came in the same way but there's no sign of anyone."

Benji and Ice exchanged hard looks. Benji nodded to one of the other men. "Go take a closer look."

"Or we'll find him on his way up," Benji said. "If he's here, we'll find him." At his motion, the two men walked to the closest set of stairs and disappeared.

"And where's Megan?" Ice asked. "Or is she downstairs?"

"At the safe house," Dane said.

"The one that was compromised?" she asked in surprise. "Interesting choice."

"There are good men working there," he protested. "Besides, she wanted to stay."

"Give her distance and that girl will put it to good use." She turned and walked back toward the rooms. She nodded at the man standing guard and opened the door to where Levi lay. Walking in behind Ice, Evan caught Levi easing back and pulling his hand out from under the sheets.

Of course. He was armed. In his situation Evan would want to be too.
“Trouble?”

“Not yet,” Levi said.

“And yet you’re not answering communications?”

Levi shook his head. “We’re afraid someone is tracking the phones. Benji just bought us new ones.”

“Someone could have let us know,” Evan complained.

“We’re not sure who knows what at the moment.” Levi eyed him. “Just being careful.”

“Tell him,” Ice said from the doorway. “We only found out a few minutes ago.”

Evan’s gaze switched from one to the other. “What? Tell me.”

“A man was found on base, stripped to his underwear and unconscious. Taken to the hospital an hour ago where he was identified as Brian Manchester.”

Evan waited for him to continue. “And?”

“He’s military police.”

“Shit,” Dane said.

Evan froze. “So the shooter is wearing a military police uniform?”

He pulled out his phone to call Megan. Then realized he hadn’t given her his old phone yet. His heart racing, he called Chase.

And got no answer.

His feet were already moving to the doorway. He called Brett next. And got no answer.

“What’s the matter,” Ice called.

Evan spun to realize she’d followed him to the stairs and that Dane was at his side. “I left Megan in the safe house with a dead body and a half dozen military police.”

She gasped. “Oh no.”

“And she has no phone. And the two SEALs with her are not answering.”

“Hurry.” She held up her phone. “I’ll contact Mason.”

Evan nodded but didn’t waste his breath answering. He was already running down the stairs. He had to get back to her.

He couldn’t afford to lose what he’d just gotten back.

Chapter 27

SHE WOKE UP slowly. An inner disquiet of something wrong. The house was silent. Had the men all finished their work and left? No, it was too silent. She sniffed the air. It smelled...off.

Shit.

Moving as soundlessly as she could, she slipped to her feet and hobbled to the window. Damn it. Another second story window. Her ankle ached at the thought. She lifted the window and peered out into early morning. And of course below was a cement patio. She massaged her temples as she considered the shitty option in front of her. Nothing to break her fall and nothing short of a sheet to help her get to the ground in one piece.

A stair creaked. Damn it. She knew that stair.

She took a deep breath and raced to the bathroom and locked herself in. She searched for a way out. Another window, smaller but almost close enough to get to the small balcony attached to the spare room. Below was a grassy slope. Much better for landing. She wiggled out ignoring her ribs screaming at the awkward movement and the stitches pulling hard. When a sharp stab hit her she figured she'd ripped another one and swore.

Finally, she was hanging by her hands and shuffling to the railing on the side when she heard pounding on the bathroom door. She lunged for the railing and slipped, catching the vertical bar and sliding down to where it ended at the floor of the deck. The movement too hard and too fast and too painful to hold on. She lost her grip, sending her crashing to the ground.

At the last minute she managed to hold back her scream of pain.

She lay there for a second then her mind screamed, *Run*.

Scrambling to her feet, biting her teeth, she bolted for the back fence. It was high but she clambered up, panic driving her movement, she reached up and threw herself over. And landed on something hard. Shudders wracked her body. She lay still waiting for the shock to recede long enough for the orders to get through the blitz in her brain.

Move. Move. *Move*.

And she was off and racing across the street. She didn't know when her legs failed her, but she felt like she'd sprinted for twenty miles. When she hit the end of her rope, she was done. As in she splatted on the ground, sobs wracking her frame. Her ankle screaming in agony.

Dear God, when was this going to end?

She rolled onto her back and stared at the gray sky and the pale rosy tint and tried to catch her breath. Sobs poured forth and her body trembled with fatigue. Her mind was still sorting through the fading haze of panic.

Then the rain started.

She lay letting the cool drops hit her overheated skin as she tried to figure out what she was going to do from here.

When she sat up and looked around she realized she'd been instinctive even in her wild flight. She'd seen this area, been here before on her way to North Island. There should be heavy security yet she lay here like a dead man, and there was no one around to see her.

It took more effort than she wanted to get to her feet only to crumple to the ground again, crying out when she put weight on her ankle. It hurt ...she stared at her leg, which was swollen and purplish looking. Now she'd done it. She had to let Evan know where she was – somehow.

And what had happened to the men left behind to guard her?

Or, and this made her cringe – had she run for nothing?

That would be the worst.

No, her mind immediately rejected that. The worst would be if she had been attacked or taken captive. There were so many things worse than being embarrassed. She lay back down and waited to be rescued.

*

“SLOW DOWN, EVAN!” Dane raced behind him. “There could be someone outside waiting for one of us.”

“Maybe, but not likely. They're going to be at the damn safe house attacking Megan.”

Dane raced ahead. “I'll drive. You keep trying to raise someone at the house.”

Evan sucked his breath in, reached for control and got into the passenger

side. He called both Chase and Brett again but got no answer. They might have had their phones taken away from them, but he doubted that would happen while they were still conscious. It wasn't in their training to do so. Unless...fighting back was going to hurt Megan.

His heart raced and he clenched his fingers as he tried to calm the panic in his soul. They weren't far away. But it seemed like they were going to another state. Thick silence filled the cab as Dane drove to the house.

They were two blocks away when he heard the sirens. Dear God, please let them not be going to the same place. Please.

The ambulance turned onto the street in front of them. He gritted his teeth as they turned into the driveway of the safe house.

Before Dane had parked Evan was out and running. Only to have several men grab and hold him back. A heated exchange followed.

Dane grabbed Evan and forced him back several feet. "Easy. She's not there."

Evan froze. "What?"

"She's not in there. The house was gassed. We found two military police and the two SEALs. They are being treated and will be fine. A third military police officer was seen at the house and is now missing – presumably he's the cousin we're looking for."

Evan shook his head. "Did he take Megan?"

"I didn't say that. And knowing Megan I wouldn't jump to that conclusion so fast either." Dane motioned to the side of the house. "We can't go inside. Let's see if she managed to escape."

"We left her in the living room."

"Doesn't mean she stayed there. In a house with strangers and a dead body, she'd have gone back to her room."

Evan raced through the back of the house and studied the ground.

"She jumped and fell." Dane pointed out the scuffed up ground and the soft imprints on the lawn as they raced to the fence. Evan jumped the fence and picked up the trail on the other side. Only they ran to the pavement and the road was dry and clear. He could see she turned left at high speed but he didn't know how long or how far she'd gone.

"I'm going after her," he called back to Dane.

"Stay in touch. I'll see if there is anything else to find here."

Tracking wasn't instinctive for Evan – not like it was for Shadow and

Hawk. But he'd learned to be darned good at it, and that would be enough. It had to be.

Chapter 28

SHE STRETCHED AND rested, stretched and rested. And still didn't see anyone. If she could borrow a phone she could call for help. She hadn't planned to run as far or as blind. Most of the men on base were in better shape and could run longer than she could. What if the killer had just stayed behind her and waited until she ran out of energy? She'd have no fight left in her then. Hell, she had none now. She could barely move for the tremors wracking her legs.

Her gaze landed on a bench under a tree off to the side. She contemplated the distance and her ability to reach it. It wasn't a park area or a walking trail, but it was a solid looking piece and she was desperate to find a safe place to wait. Yet, her mind wouldn't stop circling. With a heavy sigh, she hopped and hobbled to the bench where she sat down on the wood and leaned back. Her ribs had gone silent. Maybe that was good, but her ankle was making the most noise now, and her heart. It was still slamming inside of her chest.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

And dozed, surfacing every few minutes to make sure she was safe then falling under again. Until she heard a cough.

She woke up and bolted to her feet and cried out, but her sore muscles already bunching up to take off again.

"Whoa, easy."

She was snatched up and held tight. She couldn't even struggle she was so tired.

"Take it easy, Megan. You're safe again." Evan stroked her back up and down slowly, just holding her, calming her and...maybe himself. "I've got you. Take it easy."

Finally, she recognized it was him and wrapped her arms around him tight. "You're not leaving me again," she cried in a low voice. "Whenever you do, something horrible happens."

"I won't. Never again until this is over."

She shuddered. "Not even then."

With the last of her waning strength she burrowed close. He was sweaty

and hot and she loved it. All of him. He'd come after her. To find her when she couldn't find her way back. Oh God, if he had, so could the asshole.

She pulled back and looked around. "The asshole could still be out there."

"He could be," Evan admitted. "He knocked the men at the house out with gas. They'll be fine but they are pissed."

"I'm so sorry," she cried. "If I had left with you then they'd be safe."

"Maybe or maybe not." He tugged her closer. "We can't second guess what anyone is going to do. He's been methodical and determined so far."

"So he's going to try again," she said in a dull voice, hating to know that this asshole was going to be after her until he was caught. "We need to find him first."

"We're working on it."

She nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

He helped her back to the bench and sat down with her. "Let me call for a ride. We need to get you off that ankle."

Just the reminder of her ankle brought the pain to the forefront.

Oh God, that hurt. She shuddered under the waves of pain.

They both studied the purplish swollen joint. "I'm going to be off work for longer than a few days now aren't I?"

He nodded. "You'll be at least ten days getting this back to normal. I want it X-rayed again to make sure you haven't done more damage."

It looked bad.

He pulled out his phone and checked in with Mason. She listened, leaning against his chest as he arranged for a vehicle to pick them up, ending with *she needs to go to the hospital again*.

Again. That was way too many times in the last few days. She closed her eyes, willed herself to step back from the pain, retreating further into the darkness in her mind.

*

EVAN SLIPPED HIS phone into his pocket. He checked out Megan's breathing and smiled to hear the slow steady sound. She was falling asleep. Perfect. To think of her alone in the bathroom...having to make that decision to jump... Dear God. He'd known it had been wrong to leave her behind. But it had also

seemed like the best answer. Now however... Not happening again. Not until this asshole was taken down.

He searched the area. This was one of the more deserted corners of North Island with a few empty storage buildings on the side. In terms of disappearing it wasn't bad but if she were caught here, that was a different story.

A truck drove up a few minutes later. Followed by a second truck. He smiled to see his friends step out. They raced to his side. He held up a finger to let them know she was sleeping. They slowed and surrounded the two and never said a word. He stood up slowly, Megan cradled against his chest and carried her to the passenger side of the first truck. Dane was driving. In the back and not getting out were Chase and Brett. He studied their angry faces and nodded. "She's fine."

"She's not if the hospital is the next stop," Chase said, keeping his voice low.

"Look at her ankle," Evan explained. "It was sprained before she fled."

Everyone looked at the ugly joint and turned to get back into their vehicles.

"Let's get going." Dane hopped in and turned on the engine. He drove off toward the hospital. Evan leaned his head back. "Thanks for coming."

Dane gave a curt, "Always."

A few minutes later, Evan opened his eyes to see the private medical hospital.

"I'm not sure she should be here," Evan said. "We know the place has been compromised."

"They have beefed up security and done a full sweep of the building. They are expecting her. Ice set it up."

Right. Megan mattered to her too and here Ice could keep an eye on her as well. Handy that Ice's father was the director of the hospital.

Evan carried Megan inside. She was still sleeping. The good thing about a private hospital was that it was...well...private. She was taken directly into an observation room and checked over while Evan did the paperwork. Then she was X-rayed. As he lifted her off the X-ray table, refusing to let the orderlies do it, she woke up.

Chapter 29

SHE CLUNG TO EVAN as he lowered her to the wheelchair.

“Welcome back,” he whispered, crouching down beside her. “You’re in the same hospital as Ice and Levi, and we’ve had your stitches checked over and X-rayed your foot.”

“And?” She rubbed the sleep out of her eye. “Is it broken?”

“No idea but it’s in pretty rough shape.”

“It feels it. But I don’t want to stay in the hospital.”

“Not much choice at this point.”

She clutched at his hand. “No, we can’t risk making this place a target,” she pleaded. “These people are safer if we don’t stay.”

She turned to look at Dane and Chase, both standing guard at the doorway. “Tell him that. We can’t have innocents involved in our mess.”

Dane pursed his lips as he stared at her. “And where do you suggest we go?”

Her head lolled to one side as she tried to think about the options. “I just need a safe place to rest and heal.”

“And that’s a problem, remember? They seem to be able to track us.” Chase looked at Evan.

“Then ditch your phones as Levi and his group did for that exact reason,” Dane said. “Benji brought new ones for them.”

Evan pulled his phone out of his pocket and held it up for everyone to see. “It hasn’t been anywhere but on me in days.”

Megan opened her eyes to find she was back in the waiting room and realized they’d been surrounded by the rest of his team. Evan’s words tugged at a memory. And she froze. “Not quite. Remember in the hangar – your phone dropped and one of Fred’s mechanics handed it back to you.”

“One of Fred’s guys?” Mason asked from somewhere in the crowd. “Evan, explain.”

“I went looking for Stone’s lucky piece and while scrambling around the machine I lost my phone somewhere. When we were leaving one of Fred’s

men brought it to me.” Evan was already taking his phone apart and held up the interior with the tiny tracker inside. “God damn it.”

“I’m contacting Fred,” Mason said in a hard voice. “Did you recognize the man?”

“No.” Evan looked at Megan.

She shook her head. She didn’t think so either.

Approaching them, the doctor said, “We have the X-rays and the foot is in pretty rough shape. She—”

But the group raced to the front door. Evan pushed Megan with the others surrounding them, protecting them. They opened the front door and raced outside.

Shots rang out.

The men scattered.

Evan picked her up out of the wheelchair and raced to the side of Dane’s truck. He opened the door giving them a partial shield but scrunched low to peer around the front of the truck.

She wrapped her arms around him, her hand landing on his holster. “I wish I had a weapon,” she said.

“I’ve got one,” he admitted. “Can’t reach it like this though.”

She tried to shift but he held her firm. Tucked up as she was there was no way he could get at it.

“Don’t move,” said a low ugly voice – from inside the truck.

She stared at Evan in horror. Dear God. So he had been tracking them. And caught them.

Evan stiffened beneath her. A muscle pulsed in anger along his jawbone. He was pissed. He wasn’t going to be able to reach his gun given their positions.

“Now get into the truck quietly,” the voice continued. “You call anyone or bring any attention to the two of you and she gets the first bullet in the back of her head.”

Evan gave a curt nod.

Megan could feel the holster under her fingers. She worked to get it free as Evan stood and turned toward the truck. She managed to pull the weapon out, twisted in Evan’s arms and fired – one clean shot – in the center of the asshole’s forehead.

“How about you get the first bullet, asshole?” She lowered her arm. “You

know something, maybe I should go back inside. I'm starting to not feel so good."

And her head lolled to the side.

*

EVAN RACED HER back inside the hospital. He didn't know why but she was unconscious again. Mason met them at the door and opened it. "She shot him in the head then collapsed," he cried, racing inside. "Help her."

The doctor came running, and she was taken back to the examining room.

Evan was unceremoniously pushed out and the curtains closed in front of him.

He stood and stared at the white cloth wall in frustration. Chase walked over and slapped him gently on the back. "She'll be fine."

"I don't even know what happened," Evan said, running a hand over his face. "Damn, I know she's exhausted and her ribs and her damn ankle, but what might have *just* happened, I have no idea."

"Maybe nothing," Chase said. "It could be just a cumulative effect and she collapsed."

That made as much sense as anything. Evan turned and walked back outside to find most of the men standing and studying the dead man.

"That's Levi's informant," Mason said. "Levi just ID'd his photo. He can rest now."

"No, he'll heal and go after the Mexican half of the operation."

There was a contemplative silence.

"Can we count this as over now?" Hawk asked, standing between Swede and Shadow. Evan was glad to see him and the others. At least they were all safe.

"Yes," Mason said. "Now for the cleanup."

Evan turned to face the hospital. "I need to see how she is."

"Go," Mason said. "Find out and let us know."

Evan walked back inside to find the doctors waiting for him. "How is she?"

"She's fine," the doctor reassured him. "The foot is in rough shape, several stitches on the ribs have ripped and she's banged up. She's exhausted

and extremely dehydrated. But she will be fine.”

“Thank God,” he whispered. “Is she awake?”

“Yes, but we’d like to keep her overnight.”

“No,” came Megan’s thin voice from the other side of the curtain, but there was an edge of steel running through it.

Several other men came into the hospital to see what the verdict was. Megan was still behind the curtain so couldn’t see. “If the doctor wants to keep you here then you should stay,” Evan snapped.

“Too bad. He can cast my ankle or whatever is required but I’m not staying.” And she ripped the curtain back and glared at them.

The doctor tried to interject. “It would be best for your health if we kept you in bed for a day or two.”

She snorted. “If someone is going to keep me in bed for a day or two it will be Evan.”

Silence.

Then raucous laughter. She stiffened as if realizing what she’d said, but she stuck out her chin and glared at the men filling the room – all sporting big grins.

Evan gave her a beaming smile and said, “I accept.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Accept what?”

“The honor of keeping you.”

She stared at him in confusion. Then flushed bright red as she connected the men’s Keepers nickname to the conversation.

“Temporarily?” she asked in a low voice, locking her gaze onto his and trying to ignore their fascinated audience. “I’m not a prize.”

“Neither am I, and you already know I want you for as long as you are willing to give me. If that’s temporary or forever then that’s what it is. No pressure.” He gave her the most loving smile he could muster. She looked so lost. So alone and so damned scared as she studied his face.

“What if I can’t?” she whispered, her gaze locked onto his.

“I suggest we walk that path and find out,” he said in an equally low voice. Hating the insecurity in her eyes, he’d do anything to make her feel better. To help her make this choice. To have her feel – know – the truth inside herself like he knew inside himself. They were right together. So damn right.

She just needed to see it too.

“But make a choice.” He took a deep breath and whispered in an even lower tone of voice, “Just know that I love you and I trust in you. In us.”

It took a moment as she searched his gaze. Then a smile bloomed from deep inside the back of those wonderful eyes and when it dawned fully on those plump lips it was breathtaking. The doctor beside them gasped when her smile widened.

“Then I choose forever,” she whispered. “It was always you.”

And damn if his heart didn’t melt in a big sopping puddle. He swooped down, snagged her up in his arms, spun her around then crushed her gently against his chest. He lowered his head and kissed her with all the joy and pent up longing in his heart. “Finally.”

She smiled up at him and tugged his head toward her, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

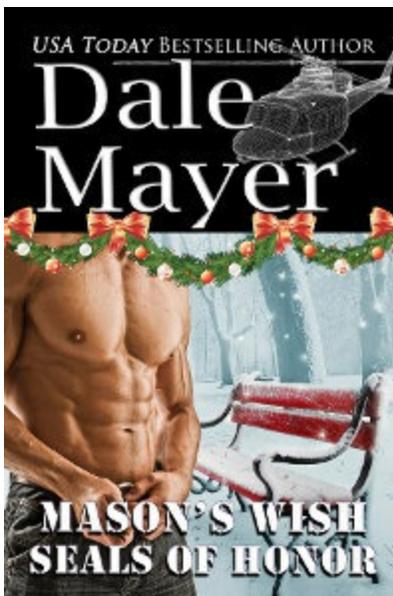
Cheers broke out all around them.

This concludes Book 8 of SEALs of Honor: Evan.

[Book 9 is available here.](#)

Mason’s Wish: SEALs of Honor, Book 9

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Author's Note

Thank you for reading Evan: SEALs of Honor, Book 8! If you enjoyed the book, please take a moment and leave a short review [here](#).

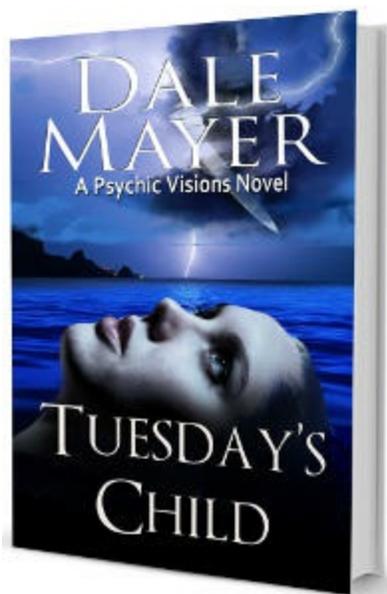
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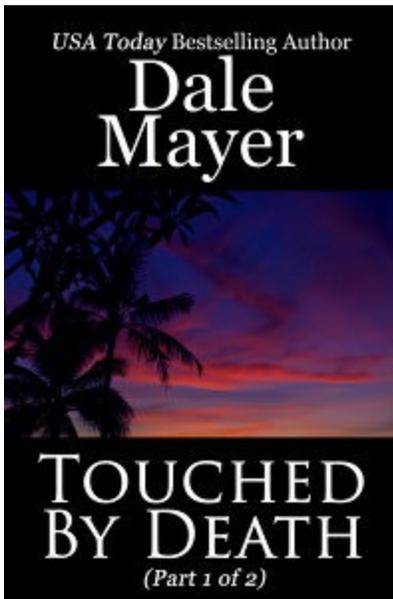
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A year later, determined to face her own issues, she returns to Haiti with a mortuary team to recover the bodies of an American family from a mass grave. Visiting his brother after the quake, independent contractor Dane Carter puts his life on hold to help the sleepy town of Jacmel rebuild. But he finds it hard to like his brother's pregnant wife or her family. He wants to go home, until he meets Jade – and realizes what's missing in his own life. When the mortuary team begins work, it's as if malevolence has been released from the earth. Instead of laying her ghosts to rest, Jade finds herself confronting death and terror again.

And the man who unexpectedly awakens her heart – is right in the middle of it all.

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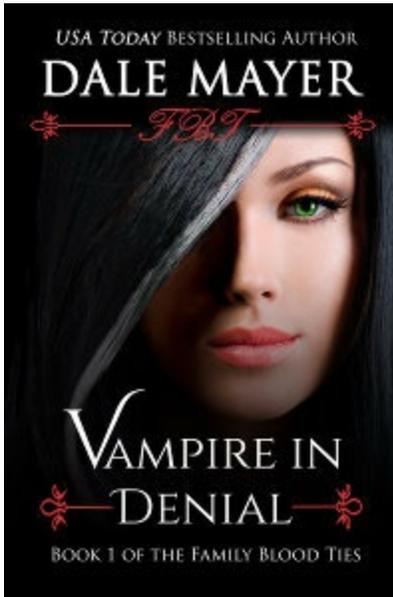
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Blood doesn't just make her who she is...it also makes her what she is.

Like being a sixteen-year-old vampire isn't hard enough, Tessa's throwback human genes make her an outcast among her relatives. But try as she might, she can't get a handle on the vampire lifestyle and all the...blood.

Turning her back on the vamp world, she embraces the human teenage lifestyle—high school, peer pressure and finding a boyfriend. Jared manages to stir something in her blood. He's smart and fun and oh, so cute. But Tessa's dream of a having the perfect boyfriend turns into a nightmare when vampires attack the movie theatre and kidnap her date.

Once again, Tessa finds herself torn between the human world and the vampire one. Will blood own out? Can she make peace with who she is as well as what?

Warning: This book ends with a cliffhanger! Book 2 picks up where this book ends.

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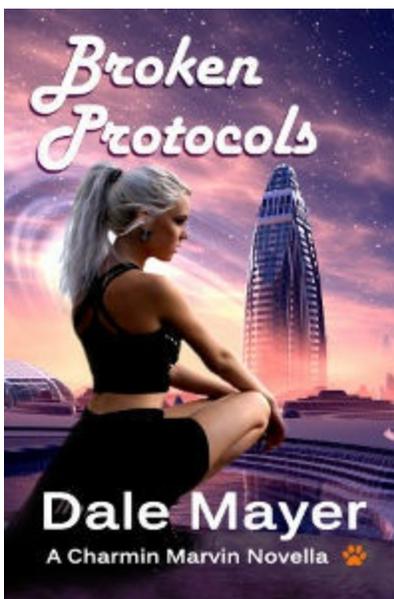
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Dani's been through a year of hell...

Just as it's getting better, she's tossed forward through time with her orange Persian cat, Charmin Marvin, clutched in her arms. They're dropped into a few centuries into the future. There's nothing she can do to stop it, and it's impossible to go back.

And then it gets worse...

A year of government regulation is easing, and Levi Blackburn is feeling back in control. If he can keep his reckless brother in check, everything will be perfect. But while he's been protecting Milo from the government, Milo's been busy working on a present for him...

The present is Dani, only she comes with a snarky cat who suddenly starts talking...and doesn't know when to shut up.

In an age where breaking protocols have severe consequences, things go wrong, putting them all in danger...

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About the Author

Dale Mayer is a USA Today bestselling author best known for her Psychic Visions and Family Blood Ties series. Her contemporary romances are raw and full of passion and emotion (Second Chances, SKIN), her thrillers will keep you guessing (By Death series), and her romantic comedies will keep you giggling (It's a Dog's Life and Charmin Marvin Romantic Comedy series).

She honors the stories that come to her – and some of them are crazy and break all the rules and cross multiple genres!

To go with her fiction, she also writes nonfiction in many different fields with books available on resume writing, companion gardening and the US mortgage system. She has recently published her Career Essentials Series. All her books are available in print and ebook format.

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EVAN: SEALS OF HONOR, BOOK 8

Dale Mayer

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