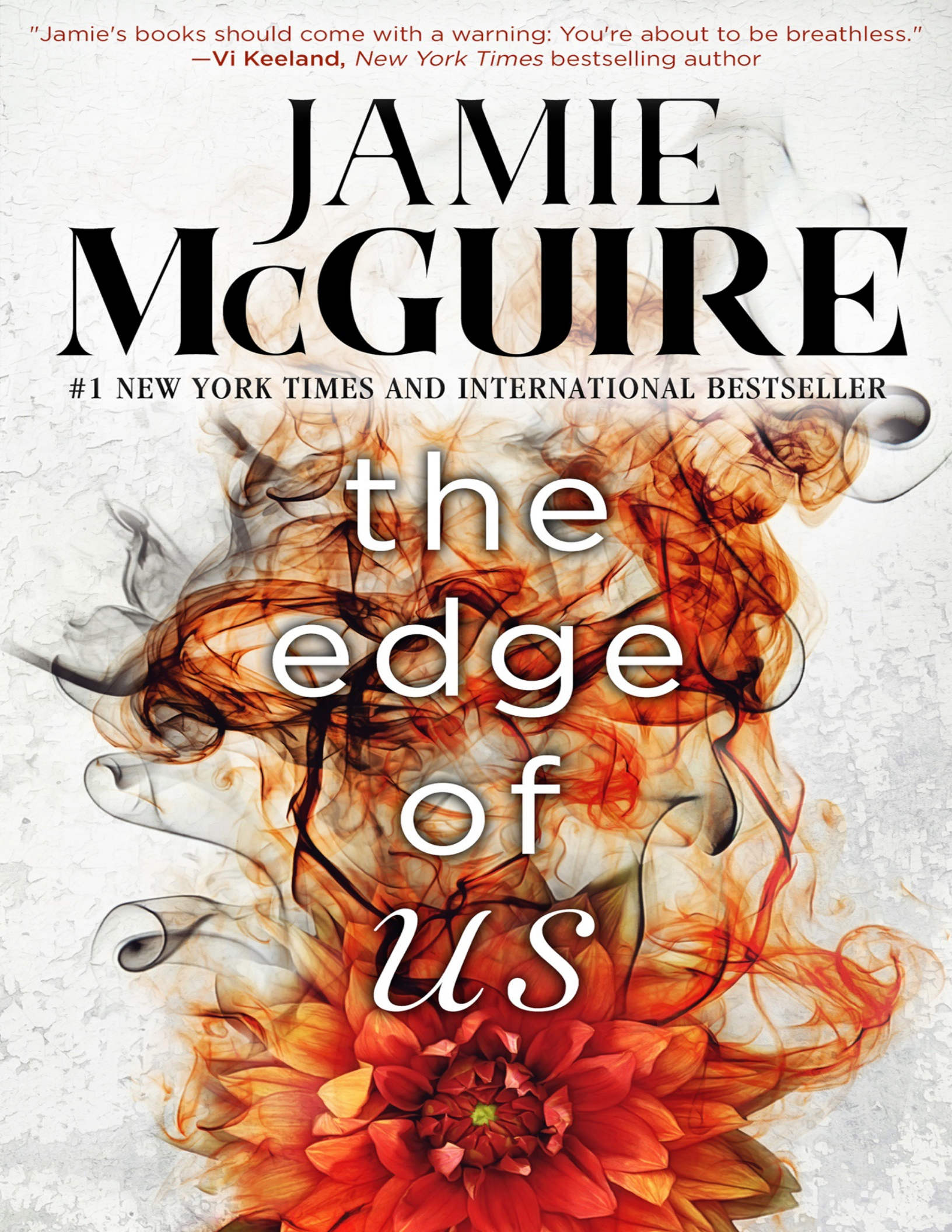


"Jamie's books should come with a warning: You're about to be breathless."
—Vi Keeland, *New York Times* bestselling author

JAMIE McGUIRE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES AND INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



the
edge
of
US

*The
Edge
of
Us*

JAMIE McGUIRE

OceanofPDF.com

The Edge of Us
Jamie McGuire
Copyright ©2019 Jamie McGuire

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Formatted by AB Formatting

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Epilogue

Also by Jamie McGuire

Acknowledgments

About the Author

OceanofPDF.com

*To my right-hand woman, Jessica.
Thank you for loving bad-ass women as much as I do, and thank you
for being one.*

OceanofPDF.com

Wear your tragedies as armor, not shackles.
- Unknown

OceanofPDF.com

chapter one

ashes, ashes

Naomi

The modified Jeep truck that had been behind me the last thirty miles was the only other vehicle besides mine on that dark stretch of two-lane highway. I pulled into the only gas station I'd seen in more than two hours, stopping in the narrow lane of concrete between the store and its two pumps. The store clerk was visible behind two large panes of glass, and I waved to her when I hopped out. She was someone's mother, late forties, probably trying to get a kid through college, probably named Barbara. She was watching something intently on the small television on her side of the counter. She pushed up her square glasses, but they slid back to rest on her full cheeks, comfortable in her air conditioning while sweat began to bead on my skin.

The Jeep's loud mud tires sprayed gravel onto the tiny gas station's cracked cement lot as it passed, its taillights two glowing dots getting smaller until they were swallowed by the dark Utah sky. Heat rose from the concrete and surrounded me; the comforting, stale air reminded me of home, even though the sun had set hours before and I was well on my way out of the desert.

The outdated gas pump clicked as each number turned over, echoing against the silence. The moths gathered around the lot lights, fighting for space in the only warmth they could find. *Just like Vegas*. I looked up, appreciating the stars above. A few years before, I'd retired from the Marines and landed in Vegas. It was loud and busy, serving

its purpose for a widow who wanted to stay distracted, but Vegas wasn't for the good kind of star gazing, so it took only one phone call from an old friend to talk me into driving to the mountains of Colorado for a job.

The clerk was so focused on the television that she barely acknowledged the Jeep's return. She couldn't know what was about to happen, but I did. Her hands were in the pockets of her white scrub jacket, having no idea the next person to walk through her door would plant a deep seed of fear she'd carry with her.

I topped off Matt's old Chevy truck and hung up the pump, opening the driver's side door to grab my wallet; purposely slow, deliberately cumbersome, waiting for what was next. As I expected, a large hand took a fist of my dark hair and slammed me cheek first into the seat. His already hard prick was poking into my hip, a low gurgle for a laugh bubbling in the back of his throat. He was over six feet tall, but he wasn't trained. He wouldn't have been able to keep hold of me after one defensive move. I rolled my eyes.

"Eddie," a voice called from the other side of my truck. "What are you doin', man?"

Eddie pressed his hips into my ass. "Just go get the money. I'll be done in a second." His buckle flicked open. "Hi, pretty."

"How's it going?" I asked, my voice muffled against the upholstery. Eddie's body paused, left thirsting for the fear in my voice that would never come.

He yanked me upright, holding my face next to his. He smelled of cheap cigarettes and even cheaper beer, but he wasn't drunk, just a road trip snack for a fuck up like him traveling from one dead end job to another.

"You're not even going to scream for help, huh?"

"I don't think I'm going to need it," I said, looking up at the stars. I grinned and closed my eyes, feeling relief as his rough hands fought to keep me close while he exposed himself. It had been a long time since I'd been able to unleash my anger on someone. Just a few more

seconds...

“You’re going to like this,” he said, his voice turning soft. He was a second-rate thief, but a veteran rapist.

“I doubt that.” I chuckled. “Do women even enjoy this when they’re drunk enough to *want* to fuck you?”

Eddie pushed my face down again and jerked at my cargo pants. “Let’s find out.”

The door of the gas station chimed, and I reached back, grabbing Eddie by the bare balls. He cried out as I twisted, making a sound unique to the howl of a man when his tender, wrinkled basket of nerves were vulnerable and pulsing with pain. I grabbed his shoulders, head butt him once, and while he was still stunned, turned with him until he was closest to the truck.

“Women,” I said, kicking the driver’s side door, slamming him between the door and the old metal frame. “Don’t,” I said, kicking it again. “Enjoy. Being. Raped!” I kicked the door after each word.

The clerk screamed, and I throat-punched Eddie before he fell to the ground, giving me the space to reach under my seat for my Glock 29. After a short jog to the front door, Eddie’s best friend forever had already made it to the wrong side of the counter, pointing his pussy Ruger 9mm at my sweet Barbara.

I slipped my handgun in the back of my pants and held up my hands as I walked in. “That bag on your head,” I said, nodding to the oversized, wrinkled Walmart sack with eye cutouts. “It reminds me of something. I can’t quite put my finger on it...”

“Who are you?” he asked, pointing the gun at me.

“He has a gun!” the clerk cried. I looked down at her name badge. *I’ll be damned. Her name is Barbara.*

“Thank you, Barb,” I deadpanned. “Now please get on the floor.”

Barbara nodded, her salt and pepper feathered hair moving with the quick bobbing of her head until she was out of sight.

“Who are you?” the man yelled, pushing his gun at me.

“C’mon. Do you really care?”

“Where’s ... where’s Eddie?”

“Outside.” I began to reach for an endcap full of candy. “Don’t shoot. Just stay calm. I’m moving slow ... just need a stick of gum and I’ll be out of your hair.”

In the same two seconds that I reached, the man looked at my free hand, and I grabbed my gun and shot him in the knee. Slightly disappointing, but I did have to get back on the road. I kicked his gun down the aisle that ran along the refrigerators, and then leaned over the counter, speaking to Barbara with a warm smile, louder than usual to be heard over the screams from the would-be armed robber. The floor was getting slick with blood.

“You have a mess to clean, I apologize.”

“Oh, no ... no worries,” Barbara said, the nervous nodding continued. Her hands were shaking. Her face was pale.

“Be right back,” I said. I jumped over the puddle of crimson, jogged over to one of the fridges, grabbed her a water, and came back to lower it behind the counter.

“Take a sip,” I said. She complied. “I’m not going to hurt you. Call 9-1-1. You got any zip ties? I was going to slap some on these naughty boys so they don’t bother you before the cops get here. Cool?”

“Cool,” Barbara said, trying hard for a normal smile. She reached into a drawer and handed me a few white plastic strips.

I tied the would-be robber’s bound wrists to the first refrigerator door, removing the bag from his head once I finished. I held out the wrinkled plastic. “I finally remember what this reminds me of. Eddie’s ball sack when I squished his testicles. Did you know you can fracture a testicle? It’s true.”

The man blew a snot bubble from his nose as he blubbered.

I returned to Barbara, handing her the cash for my gas. “Feeling better?” She nodded. “I have to get going. You okay?”

She nodded again, her eyes glistening. “Thank you.”

I looked at the ceiling. “Any cameras?”

She pointed with a shaky finger. “Just that one, but it’s never on.

I'll make sure, just in case."

I winked at her, and then started for the door before she called after me. "Oh, miss...? Um ... go ahead and take the gum. It's on me."

I smiled at her and reached for some Bubble Yum. "Thanks, Barb."

Back in the driver's seat, I blew a pink bubble half the size of my face, and it snapped just as I pressed on the gas pedal, flinging gravel all over Eddie who had already thrown up on himself a few times before I'd tied him to the gas pump. I loved that men vomited when they got hit in the nuts. It was just a little extra gift after exploiting their greatest weakness.

The rest of the drive to Colorado Springs was long, but uneventful. My back hurt, my ass hurt, but I'd been determined to make the drive in one day. My cell phone had displayed Trex's number just five days prior, and I knew what he wanted before I'd answered. He knew I'd say yes before he'd called.

Trex stood on the front porch of my new home, smiling at me as I pulled into the drive. We were both a replacement, second place for best friend after Matt died, but I would honor their friendship until I found my way back to my husband again.

"Welcome," he said with a Cheshire grin.

"Hey," I said, stretching as soon as I stepped out of the truck.

"You won't believe what was on the news earlier. Two men were found bound at a gas station in Utah. The clerk was hiding behind the counter and didn't see what happened to them, but she knew they'd tried to rob the place—at about one a.m. this morning she said."

"Interesting."

He glanced at his watch. "You made good time."

"I did."

"You should call Spenser. She's texted me three times."

"Just because she thinks you have a cute ass."

He made a face. "Did you even tell her goodbye?"

I frowned. "She helped me pack. You clearly didn't answer her texts or you would've known that."

“I just don’t want your family thinking I stole you again.”

“They’ve never felt otherwise.”

“I’d like to get on their good side, you know. It’s dangerous not to be.”

I shrugged.

Trex touched the open driver’s side door as if it were gold. I didn’t have to ask. I knew seeing Matt’s truck opened old wounds.

“I’m selling her,” I said.

“You’re selling Beatrice.”

I nodded.

“Why would you sell Beatrice? Matt loved this hunk of junk.”

“New start, right? Isn’t that what you sold me on the phone?”

Trex let my words simmer, and he silently conceded. “Want me to go with you?”

“No, but you can help with these boxes.” I climbed into the truck bed, handing Trex the first box I touched.

He peered in. “Is this everything?”

I shrugged. “You said they furnished the house.”

“They did, but—”

“This is everything,” I said, putting my pack on my back and grabbing my duffle.

“They’re saying it’s been abnormally hot for this time of year,” Trex said. The box he held simply read MATT in black marker. The tape was pulling loose in some places, folding over in others. It had been packed up long before I loaded up for this trip. “Where should I...?”

I nodded down the hall. “You can put it in my closet, wherever the master is.”

Trex’s gaze lingered on the box in his hands, knowing it was all we had left of Matt.

I examined the living room.

“It’s a small two-bedroom, just like you asked,” Trex said, returning.

“Good. We can put everything else in the spare bedroom for now.” I

passed through the living room, by the kitchen and dining room to a hallway. A full guest bath was on my left, and I turned right into the room I assumed was the spare. There was another room at the end of the hall.

Trex switched on the light, and the ceiling fan began to circle slowly. “Bianca said the utility is through the kitchen.”

“New girlfriend?” I asked, putting down the box in my hand, then went to the dining table.

Trex chuckled, following me. “No. Bianca is the boss’s assistant. She said there’s a new washer and dryer. New carpet too, and granite.”

“Granite?” I repeated, lighting a cigarette. I was quiet for a while, and Trex let me stay there. Matt talked about buying a real home when he got back and remodeling it. It both excited and scared the shit out of me. Neither one of us had ever wanted to stay in one place too long. It was weird the things that reminded me of him. In that moment, it was granite, and how we’d spent hours in home improvement and design stores. We looked at so much granite. So many light fixtures. Brick. Cabinet pulls. Stains. Front doors. Faucets. Time invested in a future we’d never have.

“Granite’s nice, right?” he asked, pulling me back to the present.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if the place was a shithole. We’ve spent the night in far worse settings.” We’d used rocks for pillows and each other for warmth, staying awake to listen for the enemy, whoever that happened to be in the moment. But the difference between this house was it wasn’t the apartment I shared with Matt. “It’s not the apartment in Clovis,” I said. “It’s perfect.”

“I thought you liked New Mexico.”

“I did.” The cigarette between my fingers had nearly burned down to the filter, leaving a husk of ash.

“Never felt the same after, did it?” Trex asked, already knowing the answer.

The apartment I’d shared with Matt felt particularly small the night he died. I didn’t know what it meant at the time—for the walls to close

in, to feel a sudden loneliness I couldn't shake.

When the Marines in dress blues arrived at my door, I couldn't be angry with him. Matt would've only left me for one thing: a sacrifice. I often wondered what that moment would feel like, if I'd fall to my knees, choke out sobs, or if I would be strong. I was none of those things. I was just numb.

I attended my husband's funeral and then felt myself burn away, just like the husk of my cigarette. The only way to rectify my utter failure was to take his place. I wanted to be the woman Matt always thought I was, so two summers later, I saw Trex again, this time as a member of his unit. Two months after that, sitting in the back of a 1950s Russian-made pickup truck at two in the morning plugging Trex's bullet holes with my fingers, I finally felt like me again.

Now, I was standing in my new house, my full duffle bag digging into my fingers, and my camo pack pressing my already damp shirt against my back, Trex following me in with another box.

"Thanks for letting me help," Trex said, putting down the cardboard in his hand.

"Yeah," I said, setting down the last of my things, "don't make it weird."

"I'm guessing you've already put away Vicky and the gang?" he asked. Trex was referring to my Glock 29. Instead of pets, I bought firearms. I cleaned them and named them and treated them like family. I also had a Ruger named Chuck Norris, a Beretta named Cecil, and a twelve-inch tactical bowie hunting knife named Walter. He was matte black with a fixed blade and had gutted at least four hostiles.

"Oh. Damn. I got you something. He jogged out, and a few seconds later, back in, setting down a store-bought pie onto the oval dining table. "Housewarming gift."

"The new gig is enough."

"Just eat the damn pie." Trex knocked on the tabletop. "It's not bad, eh?"

"I was expecting used furniture from a frat house. This is nice

stuff,” I said, scanning the room. A gray sofa separated a walkway between the living space and the dining area. The kitchen was big enough for an island. “Did they find you anything yet?”

Trex shook his head. “I’m staying at the Colorado Springs Hotel. I think I’m going to buy.”

I arched a brow. “Buy?”

He shrugged. “There’s no limit to how many times you can start over, right?”

“So you’re serious about this normal life thing?”

He rested his hands on his hips. “This is as close as people like us will ever get, Naomi. Where else will we find a cushy nine-to-five that pays this much?”

I shook my head. “I still can’t believe they let you choose your own team. You must have in at least five blow jobs at the top.”

“Six,” he said, walking down the hall and switching on lights. “Come see the master!” he called.

I followed him, glancing at a guest bath in the hall before winding up in what was now my bedroom. The one I shared with Matt wasn’t even that nice. “Who are these people?” I asked, looking up. The walls were gray, the woodwork white. The matching king-sized bed sheets and comforter were folded back.

“Deep state?” he said, just as surprised at the turn-down service as I was. He looked at the three short roses in a round vase on the chest of drawers and flicked a dangling pink petal. “Pink roses, Nomes.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Peter? No.” I shook my head.

“He’s always loved you,” Trex called after me. “He’s a senator now, isn’t he?”

“Junior senator.”

I walked down the hall, sitting at the table because I was too sweaty to sit on the new couch. I used my shirt to wipe the sweat from my face.

Trex set a glass of ice water in front of me, gulping down the one he’d poured for himself, then sat it on the counter. “I have to go. I’m

joining the downtown gym.”

“Aw, that’s cute,” I teased. Trex fake-punched my arm. “Where’s a good place to get a couple beers?””

Trex thought about it. “For you? McCormack’s Pub.”

“See you at work,” I said.

The door closed, and I was alone again.

The first twenty-four hours after Matt’s death was harder than anything I’d ever experienced. I moved home to be with my parents, immersing myself in the grueling routine of training my father’s militia, working long hours just to keep from feeling the debilitating sadness that came when I was alone. Everyone who said pain became easier with time had lied. You have no choice but to let it roll over you, strangle you, chew you up and spit you out, and then continue with life.

I walked into the spare bedroom, pulled Walter from my utility pants, and gently cut into Matt’s box. One of his flak jackets were on top, so I draped it over my shoulders, hugging the fabric to me.

“Going out tonight,” I said. “It’s not the same without you. Nothing is. It never will be.”

I was going to sell his truck, put his box in the attic, and then try to start over again.

chapter two

live bait

Naomi

The green neon light spelled out the words McCormack's Pub, illuminating a sign that hung over the door. The bar was a small rectangle of aged brick on a corner in a questionable part of town, struggling not to look rundown in a neighborhood full of homeless shelters and check-for-cash traps.

Without another outlet, I welcomed someone, anyone to take it a step too far just so I could beat his ass. People didn't alert the cops in places like this, and if I was honest, recruit training and my later grueling missions were stress relievers that I'd only missed since walking away. Screw being normal or mentally functional. *What does that mean anyway?* I can have tits and be angry, not smile, get in a brawl. I was never the girl to wear skirts and toss my hair when a boy was around. I wasn't even the girl next door. I wasn't sure what kind of person that made me, but if landing a punch once in a while could make the pain go away, whatever. *I choose violence.*

I stood with my back against the bricks, puffing out the last hit from my cigarette, then went inside. The bartender was cleaning when I approached the bar, thick around the middle, bearded, red-cheeked; he could have been a young, tawny-haired Santa. I held up the butt of my cigarette. He held up a trash can.

"You can't smoke outside the entrance. It's like fifty yards or some shit."

I arched one eyebrow, and Santa began to laugh. "I'm just fucking

with you, lady. What are we drinking?”

“A beer. Whatever’s good and local.”

“If you like a good IPA, Butcherknife Brewery has Amputator. Their Hefeweizen ale is a good late summer beer.”

“Surprise me,” I said, sitting on a stool near the center.

“Bottle? Draft?”

I stared at him, bored.

“You look like a bottle girl to me. I’m Jerry. Passing through or transplant?”

“The latter.”

“Welcome. I think. You don’t seem so happy to be here.”

“I am actually. This is me in a good mood.”

His blue eyes widened, pushing against his full, flushed cheeks as he popped the top off an Amputator and pushed it toward me. “Scary.”

“Yes.”

He chuckled. “What brings you to the Springs?”

“New job. What about you?”

“Born and raised.”

“You like it that much?” I asked. I didn’t know too many people who were still stalled in their hometown. Mine was Sasabe, Arizona, just north of the border, and I couldn’t wait to get out and see something else.

“Got my girlfriend pregnant senior year. Gave up a football scholarship to get married and raise a family.”

“Congratulations,” I said, raising my beer.

Jerry paused and squinted his eyes. “I can’t tell if you mean that.”

“Do you get your family by on this job?”

“I’m part owner of this place, believe it or not. Four years and still going strong. The locals like it even if it is run down. I know,” he said, probably in reaction to my expression. “I look like one of the employees. My wife tells me to wear a button-down shirt or something with a collar. She teases me all the time. She’s lucky she’s gorgeous.” He chuckled.

“How long have you been married?”

He looked across the room, seeming to scan through a hundred happy memories. “Eleven years.”

“What would you have done if you’d gone to college?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Played football, joined a frat, figured it out.”

“You saved yourself a few nights of blackouts, lying in your own vomit, STDs, MIPs, DUIs, loans for classes you don’t need for a degree you probably wouldn’t use—if you finished at all. You have a beautiful family, and you’re a successful entrepreneur. Congratulations.”

Jerry nodded, considering my answer. “Thanks ... what’s your name?”

“Naomi.”

His smile was something I hadn’t come across often enough. I was happy for his wife, happy for his kid, and hoped he went home that night not feeling like a reject of life after all. No one should feel like a failure because their plans changed.

I sucked down the last of my beer, and Jerry already had another one ready to go. Just as I took the first cold sip, a group of men and one woman pushed through the doors. I turned to face forward, pissed at myself for getting to know the owner. Now any scuffles would need to be taken outside.

“Jerry!” one yelled, pointing at my new friend. They were already drunk.

“The hotel should really stop serving you guys. Stavros knows you come here shit-faced,” Jerry said, still smiling. He shook his head, keeping his voice down—not that they could hear him. “Hotshots fighting the canyon fire,” he explained.

“Oh. Is that why the sky looks like Satan is throwing a party in Heaven?”

Jerry didn’t appreciate my analogy, but he got over it. “It’s been burning for a week or so now. They’re all at the Colorado Springs Hotel.”

“I have a friend staying there too.”

“So you’re not new?” Jerry asked, surprised.

“We came here together. Both doing the same job.”

“What job is that?”

“Security.”

Jerry was unconvinced. His eyes scanned the curves of my arms, deciding in the moment I could pass for security. “So you’re military?”

“Used to be.”

“What branch?”

“Do those look like they came from the Air Force to you?” a woman said, gesturing to my arms.

Jerry laughed out loud. “Hey, now. My brother is Air Force. He’s pretty mean-looking.”

“Terrifying, I’m sure,” I said, taking a swig.

The woman ordered a beer, then slid onto the stool next to me. I scanned her quickly before facing forward. Didn’t want her thinking she was about to make a friend. She was about my size, wider in the hips, wearing a dirty, once-white tank top and olive-green coveralls tied around her waist by the sleeves.

She nodded once in my peripheral, so I did the same without making eye contact.

“Logan Reese,” Jerry said, clearly disappointed. “It’s been a while. I thought you’d finally listened to me to quit hanging with those goons.”

“Don’t call me Logan in front of the guys,” she snapped.

Jerry smiled. “Why not?”

“Because Sanchez took a twenty-two-year-old stripper home last job, and it’s become a running joke.”

“What is?” he asked.

“Her stage name was Logan.”

“Your fault,” Jerry said. “You turned down a perfectly good job offer in Tucson.”

“It wasn’t perfect actually.”

“Because of the job or that you didn’t want a new partner?”

“I have a new partner,” Reese said. “Bobby is new, remember?”

“New to you,” he teased.

Reese rolled her eyes and took a drink. “I like hanging out with the guys, even if I had a choice,” Reese said. “I work with them, and I work too much to meet anyone else.”

Jerry sat a bottle of beer in front of her after popping the cap. “You escaped tonight, huh? How’s your partner?”

“Who cares?”

Jerry rested his elbow on the bar, leaning toward her with a sly grin. “Word on the street is you do.”

She narrowed her eyes at him before taking a swig.

“So,” Jerry said to me, “Reese is an aviation mechanic for the US Forestry Service.”

I raised my bottle to her, and she did the same.

“You a Marine?” Jerry asked.

“You figured that out all on your own?” I asked.

He chuckled, immune to my barb. “Did you see any action?”

“Wanna see my scars?”

Jerry laughed again, and Reese did too. I wasn’t sure why strangers thought I was so amusing. It was usually either a nervous thing or they found my bluntness refreshing. Either way, humans were attracted to people who treated them like shit, and I didn’t understand it. Almost as if they needed the approval from someone they knew didn’t offer it very often, whether they knew it or not.

Jerry left me for a moment to serve the hotshots. He firmly told them they’d only get one round, and then he would be cutting them off. They booed and whined, but ultimately agreed.

“So,” Reese began, pausing after I sighed. “You just here to drink then?”

I took a sip.

“Okay then.” She took a swig and watched her friends. Most were on the small dance floor with women who could’ve been their mothers. I shook my head and turned to rest my elbows on the bar. I was

already friends with the bartender, and the hotshots weren't arrogant, misogynistic pricks—so far. Not looking like a promising night to blow off steam. *Fuck.*

“Hey,” a man behind me said. He was breathing hard from dancing. I turned to see his unassuming grin. He had a full but kept beard, his round, brown eyes matched his hair. He was good-looking, but I could tell he was nice. *Why bother?*

I turned back around.

“She’s just here to drink,” Reese said. “It’s not just you, she won’t speak to me either.”

“Oh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

I could feel him walk away, and an old, familiar twinge in my heart made me pause. I’d never thought twice about hurting anyone’s feelings before, not sure why I cared now.

Jerry watched the man for a moment, then crossed his arms and pressed his lips together, trying not to laugh. “That’s Zeke. He might be the best of them.”

“Is. *Is* the best of them,” Reese said.

“You’re a good one too,” Jerry said. He nodded toward her while smiling at me. “She mostly works on the helos.”

“Because Bobby tears the shit outta them like everything else,” she grumbled. “But Zeke is worth talking to.”

“I don’t care,” I said, taking another swig. Jerry looked at my left hand. I lifted my fist and then my middle finger, showing him my wedding band. Jerry seemed confused, and I rolled my eyes. “I’m married.”

“That’s the wrong finger,” Reese said.

“Is it?” I said, putting down my hand.

Jerry nodded. “Okay. I won’t try to set you up with Zeke then.”

One of my eyebrows shot up. “Do you play matchmaker a lot?”

“Just for them.”

“Not that we ask,” Reese said.

Jerry shot her a look. “You haven’t. Keeping it all in-house.”

“Shut up,” she said quickly, taking another drink.

“Are you their pimp or something?” I asked.

Jerry’s laughter made his middle shake. “No! No. Just for them—the Alpines. They’ve come in here for a couple of years now. They’re all good guys. I just want everyone to be happy, I guess.”

“You know who’s a good guy, Jerry?”

He paused, waiting for my answer.

“You.”

His face lit up with an appreciative smile as he nodded once and walked away, seeming happy that he’d completed his mission to soften me up.

I finished my beer and then headed outside, taking in the not-so-fresh, smoky mountain air and lighting a cigarette. I pulled my phone from my back pocket to call an Uber when I noticed a few of the hotshots and Reese standing outside, some smoking, some not.

“Damn it!” one said, trying to get his lighter to work. “Is this the only one we’ve got?”

“Hey,” I said, tossing mine to the man next to him—the one Jerry called Zeke.

“Thanks,” Zeke said, handing the lighter to his friend. He looked back at me twice while they lit their cigarettes.

A group of men younger and rowdier than the hotshots passed by, heading for McCormack’s front door.

“Look at the tits on that one,” one of them said.

“Tater tots.”

“Anything more than a handful is too much.”

They all laughed.

“Now those I’d motorboat until I ran out of gas,” another said, referring to Reese.

“Hey, c’mon,” Zeke said, letting his hands fall to his thighs. He looked genuinely disappointed.

The new gang of men stopped, and one stepped forward. “What’d you say?”

“I said quit being an asshole,” Zeke said without hesitation. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.” His fellow hotshots perked up, but Zeke didn’t seem to need them.

“You calling me an asshole?”

Zeke looked around. “Who else would I be calling an asshole, genius? Of course I’m calling you an asshole. You don’t talk about women like that. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I do whatever the fuck I want.”

Zeke laughed once. “So what you’re saying is you’re not an asshole, you’re an unapologetic asshole.”

The man stepped forward again, just inches from Zeke’s face. They were about the same height, but Zeke and his colleagues were a solid month into fire season and leaner.

“Say asshole one more time,” the man said, nose to nose with Zeke.

“Kick his ass, Heath!”

“You don’t want to do this, Heath,” one of Zeke’s friends said behind him, a chuckle behind his words.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Zeke was apparently a bad ass, and I was about to see a show.

One corner of Zeke’s mouth went up, and he stared straight into his adversary’s eyes as he spoke just one word, “Asshole.”

The man swung, but Zeke ducked. I put away my phone and settled in to watch. The hotshots and the assholes were cheering for their friends, but mostly a lot of attempted swings, bear hugs, and shoving was happening. Zeke pushed Heath away from him, then got in a couple of good punches, but every time he swung, he left himself wide open for an attack. Heath was slow and clumsy, but he hit harder than Zeke, but even after a few knocks to the side of the head and jaw from Heath, Zeke remained focus. They weren’t stopping anytime soon, and I didn’t want Zeke to take another punch over me.

I rolled my eyes, threw down my cigarette, mashed it with my boot, then walked over to where the boys were brawling. They’d slowed down, but neither were going to quit.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, holding up my hands.

Zeke stopped. Heath didn't, landing another blow to Zeke's jaw. Zeke spun a half turn and stumbled toward his friends.

I grabbed Heath's wrist, and he looked down at my hand, surprised at my strength.

“I said whoa.” I stomped on his toes, kicked him in the nuts, uppercut him as he leaned down in reaction and then turned, elbowing him in the ear. He was down, in the fetal position, writhing while holding his nuts. “Don't get up.”

“You bitch!” he wailed. He leaned forward, attempting to stand. I held him down with my boot on his chest. He grunted.

“Just rest, sweetheart.”

One of Heath's friends grabbed for me, but I moved to the side before he could make contact. Another came at me, but Reese tripped him, and he landed on his face. I could see Zeke from the corner of my eye punch another of Heath's friends, and I was glad. It was a fun challenge holding down Heath and beating the hell out of his cronies at the same time, but a challenge nonetheless.

The rest of the hotshots joined in, and within seconds, Heath's friends were stumbling away. Heath stood and took a swing at me. I purposefully didn't move, instantly feeling the sting of his knuckles against my jaw.

“You son of a bitch!” Zeke said, rushing him.

Before Zeke could reach him, I reared back and followed through, allowing all of my anger, grief, and adrenaline to flow through my arm. Unfortunately for Heath, I'd harbored years of it.

Heath fell straight back, his head making an audible thud when he hit the ground. The hotshots covered their mouths and jumped or stomped, yelling *Oh!* in unison.

Heath was carried away, and the hotshots circled around me while also holding Zeke back from chasing after them.

“I'll kill you!” he yelled.

“Easy,” I said, gently slapping his cheek a few times. “I'm fine.”

He quit struggling, watching his friends congratulate me. “You sure?” he asked. Regret weighed down his expression.

“Of course,” I said while I brushed off my shirt. I grinned. “That was fun.”

“Yeah, it was!” Reese said, her eyes bright.

Zeke wasn’t amused. Instead, seeming more concerned over my jaw. “We should get you an ice pack. And a beer.”

“And a championship belt!” Reese said with a smile.

“After you,” I said to them, gesturing to the door.

Zeke nodded, then I followed him inside. We sat at the bar, sore but victorious, and Jerry eyed us all.

“What the hell happened out there?” Jerry asked, unhappy.

“Ice,” Zeke said simply.

“And beers,” I said.

Jerry wasn’t happy about getting the boys and Reese another round, but he nodded and turned, packing dish rags with ice and handing them out like goodie bags. The hotshots filled the stools around me, hyper and happy, chattering to Jerry and each other about the scene outside.

I held the ice pack against the side of my mouth, the dishrag getting stained with my blood. It had been a long time since I’d seen it. Morbid or not, I’d missed it. I’d bled for my training, for my friends, for my country, and now I’d bled for Zeke.

He wasn’t as happy about the brawl as the others, scowling at me.

“What?” I asked, defensive.

“Who are you?”

“Naomi.”

“No,” Zeke said, his head shaking. “Who *are* you? How did you learn to do that? That’s more than just your run-of-the-mill self-defense.”

I sipped my beer.

“Okay then,” he said, facing forward.

He turned to listen to his friends reenact the fight again, watching

them for ten or so minutes. I was surprised that he didn't try to speak to me again. Zeke sipped on his beer, his back to me as if I wasn't there. He didn't seem angry, just that he wasn't going to force it. I sort of appreciated that about him, even if he was a wanna-be knight.

I finished my beer, set it down on the bar, then stood, fishing in my pocket for cash.

Zeke held up his hand. "I got it, Jerry."

Jerry nodded to me. "Take care of that jaw."

I nodded back, using my phone to call an Uber as I made my way to the sidewalk. I leaned against the brick, the throbbing in my face forcing a smile. It had been a good night after all.

chapter three

nine to five

Naomi

I'd been sitting at the rectangular table in a small meeting room for less than ten minutes before Bianca brought me a blank manila envelope. I peeled up the metal prong with my nearly non-existent fingernails, opened the top flap, and let the contents slide to the table. A name tag, a small octagon-shaped pin with my name and some numbers on it, a notebook of policy and procedures, a partial map of the facility, a signed check with SIGNING BONUS typed in the memo and what appeared to be a key card were inside.

I was going to the bank straight after work to deposit that check. It was just over what I owed for the olive-green Toyota FJ I'd traded Beatrice for.

"Welcome to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex. I'll explain it all when the others get here," she said, seeming annoyed.

I couldn't figure her out. She wasn't in uniform—meaning she was a civilian—but she had to be the only one in the Complex. I wondered what qualifications she had to have such a trusted position with the man in command, General Tallis. He was a five-starred hard-ass war machine. Even my father respected him.

The door opened, and Martinez walked through with his typical swagger, a smile already on his tan face. I stood, and he immediately one-arm hugged me. "Naomi! You too? I didn't figure you taking a contract security job. Who else?"

"Harbinger, Kitsch, and Sloan."

Martinez's smile instantly vanished. "Trex brought in Kitsch?"

"He trusts him."

"Yeah but ... how is he? Have you heard?"

I glanced back at Bianca, who didn't seem to care about our conversation, and then simply shook my head. "The same."

Bianca stepped forward with another envelope in her hand. "Dr. Othello Martinez, welcome to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex."

"Thanks," he said with a wide grin.

She handed Martinez his package, and he promptly dumped it onto the table just like I had, pushing each item around with his finger. None of it kept his attention long. He was high strung, sometimes juvenile, but he knew his shit and he kept his head in a fire fight. He'd saved Trex's life more than once. He was the only one of us who stayed in the Corps longer than a year after Trex left. He'd been in South America, fighting drug lords and killing sex traffickers. Martinez was always looking for a higher calling, and when he finally retired, Trex's offer came at just the right time.

Martinez sat his black medical bag on the table next to his mess, only looking up when Harbinger walked through the door. "Holy shit!"

Harbinger managed to crack a smile. The silver-haired father of two boys, Henry and Miles, had more on his mind. He was the only one of us with children—the only one of us who wanted that burden. We saw what Harbinger went through to be there for his sons, both to keep in contact with home, and to survive the night in the perilous situations we were sent into so he didn't scar them for life.

"John Harbinger," Bianca said, handing him the tan package. "Welcome to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex."

"What's this?" he asked. He peeked inside, and I smiled. Harbinger wasn't the kind to dump his things on the table. That was why he was Trex's second in command.

"Some necessary items. I'll explain when Kitsch arrives. I trust you're settling in? The kids are attending school today?" Bianca asked.

Harbinger nodded. "It's a good school. Their first day was

yesterday. They both brought home a friend and played the Xbox until dinnertime. It's ... it's really good actually, thank you." The crooked expression on Harbinger's face was meant to be a smile, but he spent his energy to be normal for his family. He'd seen too much to interact with others as if he hadn't danced with the Devil to get out of Hell. I shook his hand, knowing even a half-hug could ruin the rest of his day.

"Trex said Caroline has been so happy," I said.

"She has. We've been dreaming about an opportunity like this for a while."

"By opportunity you mean walking halls for a living?" Bianca asked.

Sloan held his gun to his chest. "As long as we get to hold one of these and be home by dinner, I'd say that's a pretty good gig."

Bianca offered a soft smile. "I know the general will be extremely pleased to hear it."

The door slowly opened, and for the first time Bianca shifted, seeming uncomfortable. Kitsch closed the door behind him, taking off his hat.

"Kitsch," I said, walking over to him. "So good to see you." I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave him a full squeeze, and he returned the gesture, then we quickly resumed a professional stance.

Bianca touched her ear then handed Kitsch his envelope. "Good morning. Welcome to the Complex. If you'll excuse me, I'm expected at the gate."

"Where's Trex?" Kitsch asked. He was the stoutest and the shortest of us. Trex's bulldog in the group, Kitsch barked orders and made sure we stayed in line.

I shrugged. "He's either late or they asked him to report later than us."

"The latter," Harbinger and Kitsch said in unison.

"You were here first?" Kitsch asked, his eyes meeting mine. They were still the same, the kind but tired eyes of the friend I remembered. It was strange to think he was so lost.

I nodded. "Couldn't sleep. Did you?"

He shook his head. "Tossed and turned. Karen probably wanted to kill me."

The air in the room shifted, and the silence that ensued felt heavier than the dishonesty I was about to display. "How're the kids?"

Kitsch smiled. "Emily's almost outgrown her car seat, you know. We're looking for booster seats now. That's a thing, I guess. And Dylan's talking about football this year."

I shook my head and patted his shoulder. "Time flies, man."

He nodded, and I turned to glance at the strange look on Martinez's face. He understood, he wouldn't argue. We all played along, but the question was how long we should allow it.

The door opened again, and we all greeted Sloan. He was tall, lanky, and a bigger smart ass than Martinez, but he was a hell of a sniper and teammate. I looked around for his package. "You're too late for the official greeting."

He looked down at his watch, giving me a side-hug. "Damn. It's ten 'til."

"The only thing I did was not die," Trex said from the other side of the door just before stepping through with Bianca.

"Fuck me in the ass," Martinez said, standing from the table he was just leaning on. Trex took a hug from Martinez, Kitsch, Sloan and then shook Harbinger's hand.

Bianca took us on a quick tour, describing each section. The corridors were basic phonetic alphabet: Alpha, Beta, Charlie and Delta. I was surprised to see fairly quickly into the tour that Bianca wasn't the only civilian, far from it. Labs were bustling with men and women in white coats sitting in front of tech I'd never seen. We came across two sets of thick blast doors, and rooms full of airmen with patches on their sleeves that read CMAFE, doors guarded by soldiers in uniforms I didn't recognize. The further we dug in, the staler the air became.

The white painted walls became steel tunnels. Weeping pipes ran

along the curved walls and ceiling, and my boots clanged against a metal grid that made up the floor. A low hum churned throughout the corridor, interrupted by the intermittent dripping of water sliding down the already damp rock walls.

“Doesn’t feel right,” Martinez said.

“Easy,” Trex whispered back.

“What you’re feeling is a combination of frequency and vibration experiments and the way it affects the mountain. You’re not wrong,” a woman said from behind us. We turned to face her. She was older, a mess of blonde, frizzy hair, yet unexpectedly elegant, wearing peach-hued plastic glasses on the tip of her nose. She held her hand out to Trex, and he took it. “Dr. Sybil DuPont.”

Kitsch sniffed. “Doctor of what?”

“Astrophysics,” Dr. DuPont said.

Our team traded glances.

The Complex was supposed to be a military base. I could understand NORAD being housed there, but a think tank? “What’s an astrophysicist doing here?” I asked.

“It’s classified,” Bianca said.

After a lot of unnecessary banter, Bianca checked her watch. “Let’s continue the tour. We have eight and a half minutes before we turn back to meet the general.”

“Doctors,” Trex said, nodding before following Bianca farther down the hall.

Harbinger kept close and leaned in when he spoke. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Trex inhaled, trying to process his frustration. “Not sure yet. But I’m going to find out.”

“You’d better,” he said, pulling his rifle close.

We were shown corridors Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta, and then taken upstairs to meet the brass. Bianca’s attitude changed the moment we stepped through the threshold.

“And this is the NORAD Operations roo...” she audibly gasped.

“Good morning, Senator Bennett. I thought you were in D.C. What a nice surprise.”

“Is it?” he said, turning to face us.

I froze, trying not to reveal my shock to everyone. Peter Bennett was standing in the center of the room in a fitted dark-blue suit and matching tie. His charming gaze only stayed with Bianca for a few seconds before his steel blue eyes found me. Peter was from Sasabe, Arizona like me, but my father was militia, and Peter’s was a politician. We always found our families on opposite sides of issues, but Peter and I were determined to stay together.

Peter was my first love. Peter was my first everything—including my first broken heart.

Bianca stood taller. “I’m pleased to introduce you to Senator Peter Bennet. He chairs the Complex’s oversight committee, and he visits occasionally.”

“More than occasionally,” Peter said, flashing his grin that always won over the fairer sex.

Trex wasn’t impressed because, being best friends with Matt and then me, he knew exactly who Peter was.

Bianca breathed out an awkward laugh and played with her hair as if she were a smitten teenager, and I shot Trex a wry smile. I couldn’t judge her. I’d been there.

Trex rolled his eyes. Prom wasn’t the last time Peter tried to get me to go on a date with him. We’d kept in touch after high school, and the focus of the conversation was always him trying to convince me that we were meant for each other. Even after Peter broke up with me because he was engaged to the woman his father wanted him to marry, his now-wife, Paige. Even after I’d met Matt. Peter had shared his fear more than once that if we didn’t find a way to end up together, he’d miss his soul mate the rest of his life.

Peter was far out of his element. Soldiers made him skittish. He had followed in his father’s footsteps and tried and failed to write a few bills to limit militias like my father’s. Despite those setbacks, he’d been

climbing the ranks in Washington quickly. Except for me, Peter had a knack for figuring out how to get what he wanted. He was more than ambitious; he was obsessive, and his presence in the room at that moment was suspicious.

“Peter,” I said, stepping out from behind my team.

He smiled, looking more relieved than surprised. “Naomi.”

“Bennett,” Harbinger said. “As in Speaker of the House Bennett? I’m guessing that’s your father?”

Bennett straightened his tie. “You are correct.”

“You know him?” Martinez asked, not at all quiet.

Bianca shot me a glare. Her feelings toward me had gone from dislike to a one-sided competition.

I shrugged one shoulder. “We’ve met.”

Bennett couldn’t have looked more heartbroken, and Bianca was unhappy. She cleared her throat. “Shall we go? We don’t want to keep the general waiting.”

As we cleared out, I looked over my shoulder at Bennett once more before we left the NORAD Operations room for the elevator.

Sloan fell behind, and I waited for him. He took the chance to lean over and whisper to me. “Who is he again? The guy in the suit.”

“He’s from Sasabe, like me.” I breathed out a laugh. “We were all homeschooled, you know, the militia brats. The kids from public used to come out and dare each other to get close to our walls. My dad caught Peter trying to sneak into the compound one night. He’s not exactly brave, but he’s always had balls. Does that make sense?”

“Stupid enough to think he wouldn’t get caught?” Sloan grumbled, spitting something from his lips.

“Peter was the politician’s son—the very one who’d caused so much trouble for us. It was a tense four hours until Peter was released. I brought him dinner. We talked. We snuck around to see each other after that.”

“So he’s your ex? Like a high school sweetheart?”

“Yep,” I said with a sigh.

“Quite a coincidence that we end up here under him.”

“Yep.”

We were introduced to the general and then quickly dismissed.

No one spoke while we retraced our steps back down corridor Charlie, through the blast doors, and to the administrative offices. Bianca left us in a large conference room alone.

The white walls were blank except for a few cracks and a line of portraits of old men with a lot of stars on their shoulders. The paint seemed to be the original coat, the bookshelves nearly empty, the large rectangular oak table with far fewer chairs than it could accommodate.

“Did they bring us here to die?” Martinez asked, looking around.

“It’s where Dr. Philpot is going to make you a candlelight dinner,” I said. I mouthed, *He’s into you*.

“Fuck off, Nomes,” Martinez said. He tried to make the words sound firm, but I knew Martinez would take a bullet for me just like the rest of the team. Just like Matt had sacrificed himself for them. His face softened. “How do you know that jackass upstairs?”

After a few verbal shots fired, we got back to work.

We met with the general, and then we walked the halls. We got familiar with the lab coats, the space dorks, and the brass. First days were never boring in the military, but that wasn’t true anywhere else. Not even in a military installation, it seemed.

After a long day walking and talking with Trex about the desk clerk at his hotel, I stepped outside and had to shield my eyes until they adjusted to the sunlight. I felt sorry for the people who never left the Complex.

“Okay. Let’s call it a day,” Trex said.

Gravel crunched beneath our boots as we left Bianca standing alone at the entrance, if we didn’t count the half dozen MPs.

Trex shook hands, fist-bumped, and side-hugged my team good night, then climbed into his truck, letting out a sigh.

I perched my arm on top of the open door of my new car with a smug smile.

“What?” Trex asked.

“Is she there? The girl? At the hotel?”

“Yes, Nomes, she works there.”

I ribbed him a few times, and when his patience ran out, I threw him a bone. “Good luck, Trex. I hope she’s the one.” I smooched at him and winked, then closed the door behind me, settling into my seat and starting the engine.

It was then the darkness began to spread in my insides. Trex was going home to who he thought could be the love of his life. I was going home to the quiet, the nothing, and I wasn’t looking forward to it.

Sloan leaned into my window, both elbows on the ridge of the door. “You okay?”

I sighed. “Sure.”

“Seems like the run in with Bennett rattled you a little,” he said.

I turned off the ignition and sat back. “I don’t get rattled.”

“Not when you’re getting shot at, but Bennett rattled you.”

“He...” I hesitated, but Sloan shot me a look, and I knew that he expected me to continue. “I grew up in a militia compound, Sloan. My parents were soldiers 24/7. Mom’s idea of affection was high-fiving me on the gun range. Peter was my comfort, okay?”

Sloan waited for more.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “He was the hug, the soft side that I needed as a kid for a long time. He was my outlet when I wanted to cry. He let me show weakness.”

“He’s a huge part of your life then? Why didn’t we know about him until now?”

“Because he was. *Was*. Our families were the Capulets and Montagues.”

“Who?”

“Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet?”

Sloan shrugged, clueless.

“Our dads were enemies. They went toe to toe a lot, being government and militia.”

Sloan's face screwed into disgust. "You'd think they'd work together."

"Nope." I sighed. "We snuck around to be together. Peter is my childhood."

"So it just never worked out?"

"When he called to tell me that he was engaged to Paige ... all to make his dad happy. To further his career. Not even he wanted to do it, but he still did. It crushed me. Every part of me that Peter brought out shut down."

"So that's why you're such a hard ass."

"He doesn't get all the credit," I said.

"Touché. Well, you ended up with Matt, so it worked out."

"Yeah," I said.

"Oh, I didn't mean ... shit, Naomi..."

"It's fine. See you tomorrow."

"Naomi..."

I backed out and headed home, fighting the urge to turn toward McCormack's every half mile. The only thing I wanted less than facing the quiet at home was to need a crutch to make it through every tough moment. There was never an answer at the bottom of the bottle anyway.

chapter four

oblivion

Zeke

“It’s fine,” I said, wincing when Jubal held an ice pack against my eye. His silver hair was mashed on one side, a tell-tale sign that my shenanigans had woken my captain up—again.

“You’re lucky the Maddox boys were elsewhere, Zeke. We could’ve been a quarter of a crew down because you were all in jail.”

“But we’re not.”

“All over a girl.”

I glared up at him. “There were two.”

“But you weren’t trying to impress Reese.”

“That’s not it. It was just the right thing to do.”

“Explain that to the brass and see how far that gets ya,” Jubal said, putting my hand on the ice pack and walking away. “We’re on the mountain in twelve hours. Get some rest.”

“Yep,” I said, swinging my legs onto the mattress. “Wait,” I said, sitting up. “It’s our turn already? I thought we were like fifth in line?”

“Just a day job, cleaning up.”

I let my head fall to the pillow. “Damn it, Jubal, we’ve got ground crew for that.”

“Wind’s being a bitch. They need us there for pop ups.”

I nodded. “Can you hit the light?”

The room went black, and I tried to imagine anything else but Naomi, the woman who fought like Rocky and looked like Mila Kunis and Michelle Rodriguez had a baby.

Five a.m. came quick, and Jubal was as unhappy as the chief to see my eye still swollen.

“The fuck is that?” Chief asked. I leaned back when he went to touch it. He pulled back his hand. “Tell me that wasn’t in town. And that no cops were called.”

“Nothing to worry about, Chief,” Jubal chimed in. “All taken care of.”

Chief nodded once, then turned to address our crew. “Wind kicked up some embers. It’s not our tour, but we’re helping to stamp out spot fires. We’ve got a twelve-mile hike to the black, so load up. I want to be at fire camp by sunrise.”

We climbed into the crew buggies, riding in near silence until Taylor switched places with Watts and nudged me. “What happened to you?”

“McCormick’s Pub. Some douchebags were being disrespectful.”

Watts smiled. “Turns out she could’ve taken them all. She just about did if Zeke hadn’t got in her way. She kinda fights like you, Maddox.”

Tyler turned to me, his brows creating deep lines on his forehead. He prided himself on being unbeatable. “Who’s this?”

“A girl. Fuck off, you’ve got one,” I said.

“Everyone but the driver,” Fish laughed.

Tyler jerked up his chin once to get my attention. “She’s a bad ass, huh?”

“I think she’s married,” I said.

The guys let out a collection groan of disappointment.

“What about the blonde at the desk? Darcy?” Taylor asked.

“Darby,” I said. “She’s sweet.”

“You’ve got competition,” Sugar said. “I’ve seen that Trex guy eyeing her.”

“Don’t we hate him?” Runt asked from the back.

The Maddoxes were both frowning.

When the buggy began to bounce and the engine noise turned up a notch, I knew we were close to fire camp. The driver slowed to a stop and called for us to bail, so Sugar opened the door, and we filed out. I grabbed my chainsaw, Ragnar, wrapped it quickly, and carried it over my shoulder—motor up—in one hand, my Pulaski axe in the other hand.

The returning hotshots walked to fire camp in a line, their faces streaked with soot and sweat, their shoulders sagging from exhaustion.

“Who’s that?” Runt asked.

“The Geronimo Hotshots,” Tyler said. “Those guys are Apaches.”

“No shit? Like for real? All of ‘em?” Runt asked. He was the youngest of us, and the youngest Chief had hired for the Alpines. He had big shoes to fill, but he was a natural swamper—a partner to clean up after the chainsaw-swinging sawyers, and he was willing to do whatever it took to pull his weight.

“For real,” Taylor said.

The fresh team was already loaded up in the helo to be dropped off as close as the wind would allow, but we would be hiking in.

Bobby, the new helo pilot, waved to me as he lifted his machine in the air. I nodded up once, glad he was there.

We waited quietly while the chief spoke with one of the brass. Jubal was already frowning, disagreeing about something, pointing to the mountain.

“Well, fuck. That doesn’t look good,” Pup said.

“Shut your hole,” Tyler said. “We go where we’re told.”

Pup nodded once.

Chief shook his head then walked over to where we were gathered. “Six minutes for safety,” he announced. We circled around him for the safety briefing.

Chief had to talk over the blades of the helo whipping up the wind

and ground behind us. “Nineteen clicks to the first black. Aerial Detection reports four pop ups at last count. Aerial Recon reports that the northeast pop up is an active crown fire. Keep your eyes open and radios on. We’ve got to stay ahead *and* behind this time. Any questions?”

We shook our heads, then Chief led us past fire camp up a trail the line of returning hotshots had just come down.

“Hey,” Watts said, catching up to me. “Did you get a chance to call Jenn?”

I shook my head. “It just freaks her out. I only call before every other or every third tour now. Lots of calls in-between.”

“What did your sister think about that veggie casserole?”

“She liked it.”

“How’s she liking college? Still hating it?”

“She’s better now.”

“What about—”

“Watts?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m on the job. Shut the fuck up.”

“You got it.”

We continued up the trail, the tops of the mountains hiding above a veil of smoke. The Aspens were green, their leaves blowing in the same gentle breeze that could get any crew up here killed. The smell of smoke was already heavy, overwhelming the wildflowers and the crisp mountain air with the stench of death. Trees, animals, insects—everything that was once thriving and growing—instantly bursting into flames, withering, and burned to a crisp. Fire was loud, sucking all the oxygen, heat creating wind, a living, sentient being growing with every victim it consumed.

We were here to stop it, to strangle the flames slowly, to save whatever was left by standing between life and death. That seemed normal to me. I’d been living in oblivion my entire existence.

Nineteen of us completed nearly twenty clicks before we stopped

for water and found a high point for Chief and Jubal to scout a good spot for us to dig in.

“Black there,” Chief said, pointing out the crispy remains. Spot fires at two and three o’clock, five and eight. “Jubal and Bucky, take your team to the back.” He pointed to the first captain, Fish. “Your team’s at two o’clock.” He pointed to Sage. “Take your guys to the three o’clock. Sawyers and swampers on the canopy.” He pointed to me. “Your guys with me. Slick, your team’s at three.” Taylor, Runt, Puddin’ and I stayed with Chief.

I adjusted my pack, tossed my chainsaw onto the other shoulder, and checked that my drip torch was secure. Chief frowned at the darkening sky and the steep ridge ahead. I knew exactly what he expected of us. Taylor, Runt, Puddin’ and I were quickest with the saws.

Everyone had been trained, they knew what to do, and most times we did it without being told or communicating at all. I was five trees in when I heard Chief yelling over the radio.

“No, damn it! I said quadrant four!”

Chief motioned for us to run, and we sprinted north, a helo dropping red sludge where we were just standing. Half of us dove out of the way. Getting hit with the fire retardant from that height and speed wasn’t fun and working soaked in that shit wasn’t either.

The chief was yelling a string of expletives into the radio, and we regrouped.

“We’ll have this one snuffed out by noon, and we can help the others,” Taylor said.

I ripped Ragnar’s pull cord and got back to work.

Another tree went down, and I took off my helmet and wiped my brow, looking up at the smoke lingering above us. The wind had changed a little

“Get that helmet on, Zeke!” Chief barked.

Just as I followed his order, a large branch cracked, the noise splitting the air around us, and my line of sight connected the impact

point to where Chief was standing.

“Chief, move!” Taylor yelled.

I took off in a sprint, my strides twice as long to make it in time. I dove for the second time that morning, this time tackling Chief to the ground. He landed flat on his back, the huge branch hitting just inches from the soles of my boots. I rolled off, looking up at the haze above.

Chief groaned, the air knocked out of him.

“You all right?” I asked.

Taylor, Puddin’, and Runt ran up to us.

“Holy shit!”

“You okay?”

“That was a close one!”

Chief struggled to get to his feet, forbidding any of us to help. “Thanks,” he grumbled. “I’ve thought about going out lots of ways. Smashed by a tree branch the size of my mother-in-law wasn’t one of them.”

I breathed out a laugh, and Taylor, Runt, and Puddin’ laughed so hard they were grabbing their knees.

“All right, all right. Back to work,” Chief said, hobbling to a new spot.

“Hey,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “Are you really okay?”

“Going to be sore as shit tomorrow,” he grumbled. He looked up at me, the hardness gone from his eyes. “You just saved my life.”

I watched his focus return to the job, and I smiled at him for just a few seconds longer before going back to mine. Saving lives was part of the description for a thankless job, but keeping each other safe was what kept us coming back season after season.

“Zeke,” Chief called back. “Thank you.”

Well. Not thankless after all.

chapter five
shook

Zeke

Brad and Jenn smiled back at me from the iPad display, their happiness to check in with me frozen for a minute while the shit service found its way back to our barracks.

Jenn's tan from their weekend at Tybee Island made her eye makeup seem to glow. Even with bright pink lipstick, her smile was sweet.

"I think we froze again," Jenn said just before their image began trying to keep up with the sound.

"Can you hear us, Zeke?" Brad asked.

"Yeah, loud and clear. Sorry about that," I said.

"They're not working you to death, are they?" Jenn asked, two small lines forming between her brows. She fluffed her golden, already poufy curls that complemented Brad's circa 1992 beige silk button-down. They were both stuck in that decade, and I loved it.

I rubbed the back of my neck. The truth was, the job was physically exhausting, and it could very well mean death, but I couldn't tell her that. Jenn had spent her time making sure I survived my teen years. Now that I was an adult, she hadn't learned to let that go.

Brad didn't require being shielded from the truth because he was a firefighter too. Even though I was a hotshot fighting wildfires, the risk was the same. Brad just didn't have to hike up mountains to get to work every day.

"You look skinny, Zeke. Does he look skinny to you?" Jenn asked

her husband.

“I’m fine, Jenn,” I said, amused. “I always start thinning out this time of year.”

“Fire season has barely started,” she said.

“Conditioning, you know that,” Brad said, nudging her playfully with his elbow.

“I’ve worried about you since the day you walked through our door,” Jenn said.

“And I love you for it,” I said.

Jenn seemed sad, turning to look at Brad. “Do you remember how gangly he was? Skin and bones and teeth and pissed at the world.” She looked at me. “Thirteen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, trying to stay focused. I’d heard the story so many times, but she loved to tell it.

“You’ve been with us since you were thirteen, and still it’s like you’ve always been part of our family. And if anything happened to you...”

“Jenn. Like you said, it’s not even fire season yet. Give it a week or two before you form a stress-induced ulcer.”

“Okay, I’ll change the subject,” she said. “Have you heard from Gabby?”

“The flight attendant? Not for a year,” I said with a chuckle.

She didn’t think it was as funny as I did. She started to speak again but was cut off.

“Who is that?” a voice called from the hallway. “Is that Zeke?” Footsteps piled into Brad and Jenn’s bedroom.

My sister Kara poked her head into view. “Zekers!”

“Hey!” I smiled.

“Yeah, thanks for stopping by before you reported in,” Oliver said. “When can you come back?”

My foster siblings stood behind him, all with big grins on their faces.

“After the season’s over. Did Sam get to Maryland all right?” I

asked.

“Yes,” Jenn said with a sad smile. “He’s all settled in and loves his new job. They’ve got a great apartment.”

Brad chuckled. “What we do for the women we love.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Dumb.”

From then on, my siblings took over the conversation as they always did—which was why Brad and Jenn snuck away for a few minutes to chat with me before they were found. They talked over each other to fill me on their summers, who was swimming, who was fighting, dating. Our family was big and crowded, loud and full of love. No one had ever made me feel the way Brad and Jenn and my brothers and sisters had. Sometimes it felt like they’d loved me before I’d even come into their home, but still, it wasn’t home. As many times as I’d tried to shove it down into the big black hole I’d created as a young child, the need to belong was still there.

“When are you going to bring a girl home, Zeke?” Kara asked.

My eyebrows shot up. “Me? Uh ... that’s a good question. I dunno. Not exactly on my radar for the next eight or so months.”

“He’s still stuck on you-know-who,” Kara said, unimpressed.

My heart panged in my chest as I tried to laugh it off. “Becca? Definitely not.”

“Sure,” Kara teased.

“We were kids. That’s over,” I said.

“Okay, kids, leave Zeke alone or he won’t call home anymore,” Brad said. He leaned toward the camera. “Have you met anyone?”

“I...” I began. I winced before saying the words, closing one eye—as if that would make it easier. “I did meet a girl the other night.”

Brad and Jenn traded glances. I could tell Jenn was trying to keep her excitement inside.

“Is it the same girl from the hotel?”

“No, that’s Darby, and she’s a friend.”

“Where did you meet her?” Brad asked.

I chuckled. “The bar. But she’s ... different.”

“He has that look,” Kara said.

“No look,” I said.

Oliver poked his head into view. “Definitely has the look.”

“Oliver!” Jenn laughed.

“Tell us about her,” Kara said.

“She’s talking to another guy here at the hotel.”

“Oh, snap!” Oliver said with a smile.

Jenn frowned. “Oliver, enough.” She looked at me, concerned.

“It’s fine, Jenn. It really is. He’s a good guy. They belong together. I should uh... I should go,” I said, scratching the back of my head.

The kids groaned but understood. We said our goodbyes, and then I yanked out my earbuds, tossing my phone onto the bed and walking to the lobby to see the guys engaged in an intense poker game. The Maddox twins were winning—as usual.

“You working out tonight?” Jubal asked. He was standing next to the round table watching everyone lose their money to the Maddoxes. If he didn’t have such a weird name we could’ve come up with a better nickname for our captain, like Hollywood or Silver Fox. He crossed his arms, his silver hair and tan skin made him look like a damn GQ model. He’d been married to the same woman for years, and they had a few equally beautiful children. I tried not to hate him because he was such a good guy. Maybe that was why no one wanted to give him a nickname. That, and Jubal was just fun to say.

“Of course he is,” Tyler said, still staring at his cards. “He always does after he talks to his parents.”

“You want some company?” Jubal asked.

“Nah, I’m good,” I said. “The gym here is the size of a closet anyway.”

“Oh, sorry then. It’s time for me to workout too,” Jubal said.

“Right,” I grumbled.

He followed me down the far hall to the very end. There was one machine, a chin-up bar, one treadmill, a few bands and mismatched free weights, but I’d make it work.

Jubal was true to his word. After fifty-five minutes, he didn't say a word while sweat poured down my face and dripped off my nose onto the floor, my arms shaking. I growled as I pushed my body up from the floor. I'd ran, I'd worked every muscle until my body begged for mercy, and then I'd kept going.

After all that, I couldn't shake her. Naomi was mean, crass, and not my type at all. She was the complete opposite of Becca, who was tall, her limbs long and elegant. Becca looked more like a ballerina, and Naomi could probably kick my ass. I was ready to get back on the mountain. The fire line would fill the parts of my mind focusing on Naomi.

My arms stalled halfway, shaking under the weight of my torso.

"Hey!" Jubal yelled.

I fell on my face and rolled onto my back, panting. "What?" I snapped.

"Don't overdo it, Zeke. We have a full day tomorrow."

"Good."

He tossed over a towel, and I used it to wipe my face. My t-shirt was soaked on both sides, my back was already cooling off, wet against the fabric and the floor mat.

"I'm glad I don't have to remind you to sanitize the equipment, because you sweat the most," he teased.

"Because I workout the most," I said.

"You're not wrong," Jubal said. "Well, it's probably a tie between you and Sugar." He leaned against the machine. "How are your parents?"

"Good," I said, too tired to correct him.

"And the brood?"

"The siblings are all good too. Sam just moved to the east coast. Kendra is a senior in high school. Kara is a sophomore in college this year. Everyone else is just plugging along." I only gave him the highlights. We were too many to update anyone on all of us unless they specifically asked.

“How does Jenn feel about Sam moving?”

“About the same as she did when I left.”

Jubal nodded. “How long has it been?”

“Since I left?”

“Since you’ve heard from Becca.”

I made a face. “You know the answer to that.” I stood, sanitized the equipment, wiped off the remaining sweat on my neck and arms, and tossed the towel into my basket in the utility room as I passed. The washer was shaking, mid-spin cycle, as if it was trying to forget the love of its life too.

“It gets easier,” Jubal called across the room. “Heard you met a girl and she’s pretty ... impressive.”

I crossed my arms as I leaned against the doorjamb. “You all gossip more than my siblings.”

He threw his head back and laughed out loud. “I guess we do.”

Jubal had been promoted to captain the season before, and there was no better man for the job. He was also a great therapist when it was called for. He’d steered me straight more than once.

Jubal’s cell phone rang. He walked out into the hall and stood with our superintendent, Chief. Chief was the opposite of Jubal: balding, faded brown hair, a large, misshapen nose, and he towered over us, even the Maddox boys, at nearly six feet six. He looked every bit a leader, and we all trusted him implicitly.

I showered and put on a clean pair of shorts, stopping just short of my bed when Jubal walked out. Everyone turned to listen to him speak.

“The Queens Canyon Fire has been upgraded. Everyone get your gear and let’s head down.”

“Is that Colorado Springs?” Watts asked.

“Yep. Let’s go,” Jubal said.

Everyone smiled. We ended up at the Springs a lot, and, more importantly, we had a good relationship with the owner of the Colorado Springs Hotel—who also happened to be the hotel bartender.

I pulled out my pack and began shoving my personal effects—my uniform, playing cards, toiletries, boots, wallet, keys and cell phone. I snapped my helmet onto the fabric loop at the top then made a bee-line to the truck bay. In as little time as it took me to pack, I wasn't the fastest. Half the crew were already in place and ready to roll.

"I have a good feeling about this one," Tyler said, grabbing my shoulder.

"We know why you love the Springs," Sugar said. "You ain't foolin' no one." His voice was deep enough to match his size. His arms were as big as my head, his chest equaling two of mine. He joined the Alpines because he couldn't pass the float test for the Coast Guard. Muscles don't float.

Watts was the last to load up, and the engine rattled as we pulled away from the barracks.

Watts reached up and grabbed the radio, yelling, "Colorado Springs!"

The rest of the squad celebrated with him. Everyone but me. The Colorado Springs Hotel was the last place I saw Becca, the last time I felt true happiness, and it was the last place in the world I ever wanted to return to, even for a fire. I wanted the whole town to burn.

chapter six

albatross

Naomi

The Complex was twice as old as I was, but I had to hand it to the cafeteria, it was better than a lot of restaurants in the Springs and an exponential improvement on the typical military-grade slop. Peter may have been a junior senator and the executive representative at the Complex, but he controlled the budget and had always been a foodie. He was likely behind the impressive menu. I wondered what else he was behind. The furnishings of my new house, the turn down service the first night, the roses—all slightly creepy if he'd requested it and stage five clinger creepy if he'd done it himself. Peter hadn't tried to contact me since I'd arrived, even after he'd seen me upstairs the day before, so either his wife was in town, he was back in D.C., or he was giving me space.

The guys were still in the cafeteria stuffing their faces. I was changing, getting ready to use the hell out of the Complex's gym. Sports bra, t-shirt, shorts, socks, sneakers, badge. I pulled my hair back and jogged down Charlie corridor to the last door on the right before the second elevator bay. Colorado Springs was dry, but the Complex air had a humidity that was hard to explain. The air was thick, settling on my skin, and it made me sweat more than usual. By the time I reached the gym, the hair at the base of my neck was already damp.

Trex had joined a gym downtown, making little sense since the Complex's state-of-the-art facilities were free. It had been almost a

week since I'd worked out, so I hit the weights hard, my sweat dripping on the floor after the first set. A wall of mirrors made my isolation even more obvious. The gym was large, and my every movement, breath, and grunt echoed, bouncing off the white walls and cracked ceiling.

So much for giving me space.

"Naomi," Peter called from the doorway.

"I don't remember you being so creepy, Peter," I said, throwing down the bar in my hands. The weights slammed against the padded floor, reverberating through the room. My muscles felt like Jell-O, shaking every time I moved. It was the only thing besides throwing punches that made me feel like I didn't need to crawl out of my skin.

Peter looked down, revealing his perfect part and side-swept hair. He hadn't changed much, except for the splashes of white above his ears, not that noticeable against his light brown hair. Unlike most people in his life, I knew him as a boy, as a teenager, and the white hair was different, just like the wrinkles around his eyes when he smiled.

"What happened?" he asked, straightening his tie before he returned his gaze to mine. "Your face."

"Training," I said.

"I haven't seen you since the—"

"Yeah. I know. I've been good," I said, nodding. I didn't want to talk about the funeral. I didn't want to talk about Matt to Peter at all. It was a collision of world's I wasn't mentally prepared to tackle anytime soon.

"I should have asked you if I could come," he said, taking a step forward. "If I'd known..."

"It wasn't about you, Peter."

Peter frowned, blinking. "Right. Of course. How stupid." When he couldn't stand my silence, he spoke again. "Crazy, isn't it? That we both end up here?"

"You were surprised?" I asked, arching one brow.

“No ... well, of course, I found out. Nothing happens here without me knowing about it.”

“You didn’t bring me here?”

“There was a short list. Your team was the most qualified.”

“So you didn’t bring me here?” I repeated.

His lips formed a hard line. “Do you really think it’s up to me in a place like this, Naomi?”

“Yes.”

He chuckled, stepping closer. “Well, it’s not. There are committees, the general, military HR. A lot goes into this.”

I nodded, taking off my lifting gloves. “It was good to see you, Peter.”

I began to walk past him for the showers, but he grabbed my hand, slipping his fingers between mine. I looked down, and he did the same.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Naomi...” he whispered.

“You’re still married,” I said. “And so am I.”

He nodded. My slick skin easily slid from his grasp.

I scrambled to the shower stall, and then to turn the knob, standing under the cold water still dressed, visualizing the invisible hurt Peter’s skin had left on my mine rinsing away. No other man had held my hand like that since I’d met Matt, and all Peter succeeded in doing was bringing back memories of when I could touch my husband. It was almost too much to process. My back slid against the cold tile, my knees bending as I slowly lowered to the floor. The icy water was easy enough to concentrate on, helping me focus through memories of trudging thick jungle in rainy season, so soaked my clothes felt like extra skin. My chest ached worse than my muscles. Five minutes to sink into despair, and then I forced myself to stand and dry off; to pretend I wasn’t weak enough to be wrecked by the smallest, tender touch of a man.

“Hey,” Trex said as I stepped out of the gym and tightened my belt. “You’re with me.”

We were sent out to the perimeter to pick up some mouthy kids for trespassing, then we split up to walk the facility. Trex asked me to go with him, so we headed down together, watching each other's backs like always. I trusted my entire team, but with Trex, I felt invincible. Maybe that wasn't a good thing, but we'd been through so much together, it didn't seem so farfetched.

We entered Echo corridor, and I didn't wait to start the boring conversation I knew I'd been brought along for. I was a girl, so my guys automatically thought they could talk to me about other creatures with vaginas—as if I had any clue what normal women were thinking. I grew up with an AR-15 in my hand.

“So? The girl...” I began.

Trex didn't hide his relief. “Yeah. I ended up staying up and talking with her. Then when I finally went to my room. I couldn't sleep for shit.”

“Why's that?”

“Her ex, man. He put hands on her. She ran away, came here with nothing. She knows no one. No family, really. Her dad and brother were killed in an accident a few years back.”

I sighed. His perfect woman sounded like an albatross—a phrase for burden that my cousin Spenser used often when she found herself stuck with a green team during one of my father's training exercises. If it was anything but war, Trex wanted nothing to do with complicated situations or burdens, and that seemed to describe this woman's entire life. “Sounds like a lot of baggage, Trex. Are you actually attracted to her, or are you trying to save her?”

When Trex spoke about her beauty, he didn't sound like himself, and I couldn't help but let my WTF flag fly.

I stopped, unable to hide my concern. It was like she'd put a spell on him. “You really like this chick. How much time have you spent with her?”

He didn't stop with me, instead strolling by as if I wasn't calling him out. “Like, none. It's the stupidest fucking thing ever.”

I shrugged. “You can’t control chemistry, T-Rex. You can’t explain it. Hell, Matt was a cowboy. Quiet. I could have a conversation with an inanimate object as easily as I could with him. He wasn’t funny. Wasn’t particularly interesting or a show-off. Not my type at all.”

“So why’d you fall for him?”

I felt that familiar tingle in my lips, the smile only Matt could trigger. “Because he was a good man, humble, he didn’t play games... and he had a nice ass.”

Trex chuckled. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. I mean, yeah, it was nice that he knew his way around a rifle and he wasn’t intimidated by me at all. We had a few things in common. But he had his moments. Occasionally, he was charming. It really came down to him being interested in me, the way he treated me, and something else I can’t explain. Has to be chemistry. Or maybe we were meant to be.”

“You were definitely meant to be. I’ve never seen a man love a woman the way Matt loved you, Nomes.”

I looked up. “He’s up there somewhere, still loving me, just like I’m down here, still loving him.” Trex didn’t say anything, so I changed the subject. I didn’t like to stay in my feelings too long. It was as painful as it was comforting. “It doesn’t have to be anything specific, Trex. You can like her for no reason. You can even like her a lot for no reason. Maybe it’s just that you don’t know the reason yet.”

“Thanks, Nomes. I knew you’d help me figure it out.”

I didn’t want Trex to get stuck in a bad situation, but I also hadn’t seen that look on his face before. I’d seen it on the faces of my cousins, fellow Marines when they’d come back from leave, and Matt a few weeks before he proposed. Love did weird things to people—it even began too soon for our own damn good.

We reached a T and turned right. Something didn’t feel right, and I held my rifle closer to my torso. It bothered me even more that I couldn’t pinpoint why I felt so on edge.

“I think it’s those experiments they were talking about,” Trex said.

“I’d always heard it was a bunch of space and missile nerds here.”

“I think we can safely dismiss that theory.”

We stopped at a large door, a red and white striped banner stretching across the middle, along with a half dozen warning signs. Trex held his badge against the black square on the wall, frowning when it blinked red. A second later, a single, low-toned horn sounded.

We both took a step back, a small screen near the badge reader lit up, revealing a group of armed men.

“Back away, Trexler,” one of them said through a speaker. “You’re unauthorized for this area.”

“Oh. This is Deep Echo? It’s uh...not that deep,” Trex said.

“I’ve experienced deeper,” I added.

Trex and the man started to get into a pissing match, so I tugged on Trex’s vest.

“Let’s go. We’ll discuss it with Bianca.”

Trex followed me back the way we came, and it took a few minutes for either of us to speak, a positive because I had a feeling we were still being watched. After the air around us returned to normal, I felt the grip on my rifle loosen. “What the hell was that? Deep Echo?”

“I don’t know. Above my pay grade, apparently. You want to grab a beer after work?”

I shrugged. “I kind of just want to change into some sweats and veg out in front of the television.”

“I have a TV.”

I looked at him with a pained expression. “Are you asking me to your hotel room, boss?”

His face screwed into disgust. “Why do you say that shit to me, Nomes? You know I hate it.”

“Because you hate it,” I said, popping a piece of gum into my mouth and chomping. He hated that too.

We returned to the locker room, unpacked, and debriefed. My phone buzzed, my cousin Spenser’s silly face filling the screen. I tapped the auto-answer that I’d call her in a bit and said goodbye to

my team.

Hey, I texted her when I got into the FJ.

I'm coming in a couple of weeks. Do you have room? Spenser typed back.

Yeah. Of course. What will you do while I'm at work?

The usual.

Prostitution, gambling, and maybe rob a bank or two?

That place you work at is top security, right? Maybe I'll take a crack at it.

Not funny.

:) See you in a few.

K. See you soon.

I put away my phone and headed out of the Complex, already eager for Spenser to be there. The thought of going home would be so much better knowing she would be waiting for me at the end of the day. I almost turned the FJ toward McCormack's but decided to get home and finish unpacking to make the house presentable for Spenser. She wasn't particular about anything but her men and her guns, but I didn't want her thinking I was down again. She worried about me too much as it was. That was probably why she was coming so soon after I left.

I perched my arm on the open window frame, letting the smoke-laden air blow through my hair, chewing on my thumbnail, letting my mind wander until the moment I saw a black Maybach parked in front of my new house.

The FJ revved before I cut the engine. I stepped out, crossing my arms and staring at the sad man sitting on my porch.

"There are two things wrong with this. First, the Maybach is not going to win you points with your constituents. You should be driving a Ford Hybrid. Second, you shouldn't be here. You're lucky someone hasn't called the media."

Peter lifted his head. If I hadn't dreaded the empty house the whole drive home, I would've made him leave, but by the look on Peter's face, he didn't want to leave, and I didn't want to be alone.

Peter and I had lived a few blocks away from each other our entire childhoods through high school, but we might as well have lived on different sides of the world. He had that Montague appeal, even though I was no Juliet. Our fathers hated each other, so we did what any kids would do: we snuck around, we were our first kiss, our first everything, we drank and smoked together, woke up in one another's arms and defended each other when we got caught. The more they tried to keep us apart, the stronger our bond grew.

"Please don't send me away," he said.

I walked past him, into the house, leaving the door open. I searched the cabinets, knowing I hadn't been to the grocery store yet. "I don't have anything to offer you except pretzels and a half-drunk bottle of Fiji from the drive over," I called to the door where Peter stood. "I just came home to change."

"Can I come in?"

I stepped out into the dining room, meeting Peter's gaze. "Tell me why you're here first."

"To see you."

"Why else?"

"That's it."

I frowned. "What would Paige say if she knew you were here?"

"She'd probably leave me," he said, his shoulders sinking.

"If it makes you so sad, why did you agree to hire my team?"

"I told you—"

"And you lied."

Peter's jaw ticked under the skin. He'd never won an argument with me before, and his frustration was familiar in a way I couldn't deny was comforting.

"What do you want, Peter. I have to change and head to Trex's."

Peter hesitated then approached. "I want to hold your hand," he

said. "Touch you. Anything."

"Negative."

He sighed. "Do you have any idea how much I've missed you, and how hard it is to be this close to you now?"

"Not my problem," I said, crossing my arms.

He looked at me, his cheeks flushed. "You were my best friend. You love me. You miss me. I know you do."

I stared at him for a moment then shook my head. "Never like I loved Matt. You were a crush, Peter. That's all."

"So you're finally talking about him in the past tense? Took you long enough."

"I will punch you in the throat."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Yes."

"Fine," he said, making his way to the door. I knew he would stop at the threshold, and he did.

Peter's shoulders sagged, and he returned to me. "I'm glad you're here, in a sick-to-my-stomach, crack addict kind of way."

"Thank you."

He walked into my kitchen and opened the empty fridge. "Do I need to send someone to the store for you?"

"No," I said, shaking my head as my expression screwed into disgust.

Peter laughed once, walking past me, briefly touching his hand to the small of my back. "Good night."

"Bye, Peter."

His smile faded. "Again."

The doorknob clicked as he pulled the door shut, and the engine of his Maybach snarled, and then he drove away.

I went to my bedroom and peeled off my work uniform, exchanging the cargo pants for heather gray sweats, the button-down shirt and tactical vest for a green USMC sweatshirt, and my boots for sneakers.

Trex was in the lobby when I arrived, but talking to Darby, so I sat

at the bar.

“I’m guessing a beer? Local?” the bartender said.

“Fat Tire. Bottle,” I said, watching Trex stand awkwardly in front of the blonde bombshell behind the front desk.

“You know Trex?” the bartender asked, popping the cap and setting the bottle on the bar in front of me. He was wearing a white shirt, black bowtie, and vest. Too fancy for a hotel lobby bar.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a swig.

“I’m Stavros. Welcome to the Colorado Springs Hotel Bar.”

“Naomi,” I said.

“You’re not his girlfriend, are you?”

“Colleague,” I said.

“I believe that,” he said, eyeing me as he went about tending the bar.

“Ho-lee shit,” Watts said, sitting next to me. “Zeke isn’t going to know what to do when he sees you here.”

“Why?” I snarled.

“Did you come to see him?”

“No,” I grumbled, taking a swig.

Watts winked and elbowed me. “I’d bet that you did.”

“You’d lose.”

“Zeke?” Stavros said. “Now that makes sense.”

“I know, right?” Watts said. “He’s headed down. We just got back earlier this afternoon.”

“How was it on the mountain? Slowing down, yet?” Stavros asked.

Watts shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Hey,” Zeke said from behind me. I didn’t have to see his face to know he was shocked to see me.

“Didn’t you know, buddy?” Watts asked. “She joined the welcome committee.”

“Not funny,” Zeke said, sitting on the other side of me. “You here to see Trex?”

“What’s the welcome committee?” I asked.

Zeke shot Watts a scowl. "You don't wanna know."

"I do actually. That's why I asked," I said.

Watts leaned onto the bar with his crossed arms. "It's a group of women who naturally start forming at the hotel during political fires." He nodded toward a corner of the room with a dozen women smiling and chatting with hotshots.

Zeke rubbed his face. "Christ, Watts, you make us look like douchebags."

"I'm here to meet Trex if he can quit being a twelve-year-old boy with a crush for two seconds," I said. "And I don't think you're a douchebag."

Zeke grinned, cautious. "Good."

I pointed to him, looking at Stavros. "Get him whatever he gets."

"What about me?" Watts asked.

"No," Zeke and I said in unison.

I chuckled, and we met eyes.

"I was uh..." he trailed off, still staring at me. "Going to pick up some food. You hungry?"

I looked around him at Trex. "I was supposed to eat with Trex, I think."

Zeke held up his finger then jogged to the front desk. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and Trex and Darby both looked at me. Trex waved, looking sheepish.

Zeke nodded then jogged back. "I got their order. Let's go."

"We're going?" I said, chugging my beer and setting it on the table with a twenty.

"Good night," Stavros said.

"Have fun, kids," Watts said.

Zeke flipped his middle finger, then grabbed my hand, leading me out to his truck. He opened the passenger door and waited, making a face when I didn't sit.

"What?" he asked.

"This isn't a date."

He shrugged. “*I know*. Why do you have to make everything so complicated? I’m starving, babe, let’s go.”

Babe? We’re not together, why is he calling me pet names? And why am I not pissed about it?

I rolled my eyes then sat, checking my cell phone just as Zeke closed my door. He jogged around and sat behind the wheel. He dug into his console and handed me a brochure menu, then called ahead to Oka Ramen and placed everyone’s order but mine. “And one more, hold on...” He looked at me, patiently waiting.

“The Spicy Tan-Tan Noodles,” I said, placing the brochure back into his console.

“Good choice.” He put in my order, then put his phone away. Before he backed out, though, he fussed with the radio, settling on some backwoods country station.

“Can I call you sometime?” he asked, still staring at the radio display.

“Toss me your phone,” I said. He processed my words for a couple of seconds then pulled out his device, placing it in my hand. I looked down at the simple black phone. It was heavy, maybe the first smart phone in existence. I paused, almost changing my mind. God, that reminded me of Matt. Didn’t care about technology as long as it did the bare minimum of what he needed.

“Did you forget your number?”

I programmed my name and number then soft-tossed it at him. Zeke must have caught it because I didn’t hear it hit the window.

He didn’t say anything else, but seemed happy, driving with me next to him, singing to the same weird honkytonk shit Kitsch and Sloan listened to. He turned up the volume as if it wasn’t blasting already.

His hand met the steering wheel to the beat at every stop light, and again as we rolled into the parking lot of Oka Ramen.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, pushing open the driver’s side door.

“Here, let me give you some—”

He closed the door, smiled and winked at me, then jogged inside.

“Cash,” I finished. I waited, looked around, watched cars go by, wondering what the hell I was doing. Zeke was so comfortable around me—which threw me off—and he didn’t seem intimidated by me either. He was quickly becoming part of a very small category of men I could stand to be around.

He didn’t speak much on the way back, instead glancing over at me once in a while with a content grin. When we parked, we gathered the bags and carried them in together. Zeke’s grin grew wider, and I knew it was because just hanging out was ... good, normal, natural. We didn’t have to try or fuss or worry. We just were.

The hotel doors swept open, and I followed Zeke in. The other hotshots stared for a few moments at Zeke’s large sacks, and Darby’s eyes grew as wide as saucers when she saw us coming.

“I’m suddenly starving,” she said, reaching to help Zeke. She dug into the bags, looking for her order.

“That one’s yours ... and this ... and this...” he said, handing her the other items.

“Thanks, Zeke,” Trex said, taking his own Styrofoam bowl. He peeled back the lid and steam rolled out. “You eating with us?” he asked. “We can go over to the table and sofas in the corner where the television is.”

“I’m actually going to go upstairs,” Zeke said, pointing up.

“How much do I owe you?” Trex asked.

Zeke waved him away. “You can get it next time.”

I didn’t want him to go alone since he’d not only made a food run but also paid. “I’ll go too,” I said.

“Yeah?” Zeke asked, his eyes sparkling with hope and surprise.

“See you later,” I said to Trex then waved to Darby. She was already eating, stuffing noodles in her mouth.

Zeke carried a sack in each hand, taking the first six stairs two at a time before slowing down. “Sorry. Habit,” he said, continuing up.

He turned right, stopping at the last door on the left. After

fumbling with his key card, he held it against the black rectangle under the lever, waiting for the locking mechanism to click. The hinges complained with a high-pitched squeal as he opened the door and held it open just as he held his breath waiting for me to come in.

I didn't realize until then that walking through his threshold was a bigger step than it should have been, and I stood frozen in the hall.

His eyebrows shot up. "Changed your mind?"

"No." His question and my pride and spite fueled me to move forward.

His room wasn't what I expected. No dirty clothes laying on the floor, no empty beer bottles on the corner table, and the familiar pungent stench that lingered when more than one man resided in a small space was absent.

"Well?" he asked, watching me walk slowly as I scanned the room.

"It doesn't suck," I said, sitting in the desk chair. "What do you think?"

"It's several steps up from sleeping on the freezing ground."

"Yes, it is."

"You've done that?"

"All seven continents, but it wasn't always cold. Sometimes I'd want to sleep naked just to keep from soaking my clothes with my own sweat, but tropical climates tend to breed bugs and parasites."

Zeke made a face, handing me my food. "The cold ground suddenly sounds pleasant."

I chuckled, digging into my food.

We didn't speak while we stuffed our faces. The silence was comfortable—as quiet as it could be with Zeke slurping noodles into his face.

"Can you tell me more?" he asked.

"No."

He chuckled. "Didn't think so. It's pretty cool, though, having such a bad ass right here in my room."

"You're kind of a bad ass too, right? Hike up mountains and put out

fires with dirt and tools? And you're surrounded by a whole team of them."

He sat up a bit taller. "Thanks. I wasn't sure if bringing my A game would even help."

I couldn't help but smile. "Help?"

"You know ... with this," he said, gesturing to the space between us. When I didn't answer, he closed one eye, already cringing at what he was about to say. "Is that a maybe?"

I wasn't sure what it was about Zeke. He was a man and childlike, his deep voice contrasting his silliness, his strong, calloused hands opening doors for me. He was no pussy, but he had a soft inner core. Maybe too soft for me. Still, I couldn't help but tell the truth.

"Maybe."

He scooted forward on the bed, looking at me from under his brows. "C'mere."

I didn't move.

"You don't have to be such a hard ass with me, Naomi."

I remained motionless. I wasn't trying to be a bad ass. I was scared shitless.

"Okay. I'll come to you, if that's what I have to do." He leaned forward and grabbed the arms of my chair to steady himself as his lips touched mine.

My heart pounded so loudly I was sure he could hear it, because I could feel it throb in my ears, my chest, and between my thighs. His mouth parted, and his tongue slipped inside. The way he moved was both careful and purposeful, his hands turning soft as they cupped my jaw.

He smelled and felt too good. His arms were a vulnerable place to be, so comforting and calming it was most definitely inviting pain to infiltrate just to sometime in the not-too-distant future shatter me from the inside out. His mouth moved against mine, and instead of leaning closer, allowing myself to melt into his embrace, I leaned back. Falling for him was a mistake.

He blinked, confused.

“Um, thanks for tonight,” I said, standing and straightening my shirt.

Zeke leaned back, staring up at me. “Thanks? Did I piss you off?”

“No,” I said, gathering my trash.

“Leave it. I’ll ... I’ll take care of it later, just ... don’t leave.”

I took a deep breath and met his eyes. “I have to. Good night.”

As I rushed outside to the FJ, my phone buzzed.

Come back, Zeke texted.

No.

Please?

No.

Okay. I hope we’re still good. Thanks for having dinner with me tonight.

I couldn’t respond. There was nothing I could say to make him—or me—feel any better.

The FJ revved as I pushed the engine to the limit to get me home as quickly as possible. It was both a relief and lonely when I walked through the door. I tossed my keys into the shallow bowl on the entry table then turned on the kitchen light, sighing at the dirty dishes in the sink.

Despite wanting so badly not to care, I kept checking my phone for a new text. When the notification finally sounded, it wasn’t Zeke.

She’s perfect, Trex texted.

I smiled. Shut up.

She wants space.

Then give it to her.

He didn’t text back, so I started the dishwasher and got undressed for bed. The moment my head sunk into the pillow, my phone lit up.

I have to, don’t I?

Yes.

Fuck.

Go to sleep, you pussy.

Fine. See you in the morning.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter seven
dark and daylight

Naomi

Our entrance to the Complex slammed behind us as we made our way to the parking lot, boots crunching loosened gravel that needed more than just a little repair. Trex walked ahead, quiet like he had been for days. I opened the door to the FJ, watching him slam his gearshift into reverse and his truck surge forward. He'd had a permanent scowl on his face for nine days. He tried not to talk about Darby, failing every two hours or so. But he was giving her the space she'd requested.

"I've never seen him like this," Martinez said.

"Give him a break," Harbinger said from between his door and his truck. "He's in love and has no clue which way is up."

Martinez frowned. "He needs to get his shit together. He barely ate today. How long has he known this chick?"

"Like two weeks. Maybe," I said, watching Trex speed toward the Complex exit.

"What the hell?" Martinez said, disgusted.

"Leave him alone," Kitsch said. "You know as well as the rest of us he's been talking about this girl since he was a kid."

"That's just ... weird. He's never met her," Martinez said.

"But he knew she was out there," Harbinger said. "And he believes Darby is her. That's a pretty big deal."

Martinez rolled his eyes. "It's been nine days. He'd better get laid or something. I can't take much more." He turned to me. "You've been

pissy too.”

In truth, I hadn't spoken to Zeke since he'd kissed me. He'd texted me a couple of times, then he had to go up on the mountain. I tried not to dwell on it, but I hadn't been kissed like that in a long time. Trex helped keep my thoughts occupied while he whined about Darby, but I was in a vicious cycle of trying not to think about Zeke, thinking about him, pissed off that I was thinking about him, and then back to trying not to.

Martinez's gaze caught mine. “What?”

With a pleading look on his face, he nodded toward me. “You should take one for the team. You probably need to get laid too.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“You haven't been laid in a while either. Why don't you volunteer?”

He shrugged. “Because I'm straight.” He jutted out his lip. “Isn't Trex your bestie? Fix him.”

“You best stop looking at me, Martinez,” I said. “Like, right fucking now.”

“Martinez!” Kitsch growled.

Harbinger cleared his throat. “That's just disrespectful.”

Sloan kicked him in the ass—hard. “Didn't they teach you any fucking manners in the Navy?”

Martinez laughed, hard, the whole way to his car and until he backed out of the lot.

“Prick,” I said, glaring at his taillights until I couldn't see them anymore.

“You've been a little off today, Nomes,” Kitsch said. “Something up?”

I shot him a half-grin, appreciative that he'd noticed. “It's Becky's birthday today.”

“Becky...” Kitsch thought for a moment. “Your mother-in-law?”

I nodded. “Grief is weird, isn't it? Her birthday is messing with me, and I got through Matt's just fine.”

“You should go out. Have a beer. Call her first. It'll make you feel

better. I'd go with you, but Karen's pissed about the drain. I gotta get some Drano or something."

"Did you tell Bianca? They're supposed to be taking care of shit like that," I said.

He shook his head. "It won't take but a minute. I can snake it if I have to. I don't want a bunch of strangers over there working on it anyway. I promised the kids I'd watch a movie."

I nodded once, and Harbinger and I traded glances. Karen, Dylan, and Emily were killed in a car accident, hit head-on by a sleeping truck driver during one of our deployments. Kitsch refused to believe it, or to go back for their funerals. He never went home again and carried a folded, worn photograph of his family in his breast pocket through four continents and an entire war. I couldn't blame him. I talked to Matt for the first two years after he passed. We'd had full-on conversations while I cooked dinner, while I took a shower, and while I lay in bed because I couldn't stand to be alone with my thoughts. Being alone sucked, but the constant one-sided conversations made it harder.

"Good luck with the drain," I said, opening the driver's side door of my FJ. I thought about Kitsch while I exited the Complex. I wondered about his evening, if he'd drink himself into oblivion until he couldn't feel anything anymore, or if he'd settle in on the couch with his invisible kids, ignoring Karen's bitching about the drain. I would be envious if he could see and hear them, and that recognition made me turn toward McCormack's.

My keys jingled around my index finger as I entered the bar. Because it was still daylight, the dimness and neon lights inside seemed off, artificial. The music wasn't too loud to have a conversation, the tables and chairs mostly empty except for the two poor bastards who were trying to drink themselves to death the last time I'd come in. It wasn't time for the party atmosphere yet.

Jerry stood behind the bar drying a mug with a dishtowel. He smiled at me, recognition lighting his eyes. "Hey slugger. Beer?"

“Yep,” I said, sitting.

“IPA this time?”

“Sure.”

He sat the bottle in front of me, and I took a swig. He started off with small talk but realized quickly I wasn't in the mood for chitchat, so he pretended to check on the silver-haired drunks at the other end.

I was half-way through my second bottle when Zeke walked in with a stunning, curvy blonde and a few of his buddies.

Zeke's gaze met mine for a few seconds before he checked to see if the blonde had seen the exchange. She didn't. They stopped at a high-top table near the dance floor, and I faced forward, determined not to stare. Every time their laughter carried over to my stool, I had to resist the urge to turn.

Jerry stood in front of me, wiping down the counter next to me. “What's going on with you two?”

“Who two?”

“You and Zeke. You fighting or something? One-night stand?”

My nose wrinkled. “Fuck you, Jerry.”

Jerry chuckled. “He keeps peeking over here is the only reason I ask.”

“No idea,” I said, standing. “Smoke break?” I asked, tipping my pack of cigs toward him.

“I don't smoke. And I'm the only one here. If I left the bar unattended Gerald and Pat would raid the whiskey.”

I popped a cigarette in my mouth. “Be right back.”

“He's watching,” Jerry said, just above a whisper.

“Don't care,” I said loudly, pushing through the door.

The sun was lower in the sky, and more cars were pulling into the lot across the street. A few couples walked in, the men noticing me, their girlfriends trying not to. Not one of them knew what a gift it would be to touch each other, to wake up in the morning with a warm body beside them. I hated them for it.

“Hey,” a man said. He was one of Zeke's friends from nearly two

weeks before. "Look, guys. It's Rocky."

They all greeted me, following one another in line into the pub, except one.

"How's the jaw? That bastard hit hard, and you took that punch like a champ. I've never seen anything like it."

"Go away." I said, blowing out a puff of smoke.

He chuckled. "Damn. I just came over to introduce myself. I'm Randon Watts. We're in town for the Queen's Canyon fire. We're out of Estes Park."

I took another drag.

"Zeke said your name is Naomi."

"Did he?" I asked. I looked at Watts. "I'm not interested in men with arms smaller than mine."

Randon paused, surprised at the insult, and then rolled his eyes and nodded. "Yeah, okay. I trim down a lot during fire season. Can't take much on the helo at regular weight. You try hiking up a mountain for endless miles every day."

"I've hiked mountains. And jungle. And desert. You're barking up the wrong tree, Watts. I can eat alphabet soup and shit a more interesting conversation than this."

Watts frowned. "Damn. You're mean as fuck."

"Yes. I am. Go away."

He hesitated. "Are you military?"

I took a final drag and pinched the cherry off my cigarette, taking it inside with me when I left Watts standing alone.

Jerry held up a small trash can, and I tossed my cigarette butt in.

Just before I sat, Watts leaned against the bar beside me. "Wanna dance?"

"Not interested."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Not interested."

Jerry smiled, amused at the exchange. "Watts has a sick fascination with women who don't want him. You're not getting anywhere with

this one, Watts. She doesn't care that you look like Zac Efron."

Watts ran his fingers through his gelled hair. He was pretty, and I was sure other women enjoyed his attention, but *High School Musical* and *Baywatch* were terrible movies, and I wasn't impressed.

"I'm going to catch a table over there," I said. "Alone."

Jerry waved at me, and I walked over to a high-top table fifteen feet away from Zeke and his date. Watts had at least distracted me for a moment from my strange curiosity with Zeke's friend. She looked different than when she first came in—pale, exhausted.

Jerry was clearly trying to talk Watts out of any future attempts at speaking to me, but he was undeterred. I pulled out my phone and texted Trex.

I'm at a dive bar downtown. Save me, T-Rex.

From boredom? Because it's not that you can't handle yourself.

Yes. Two drinks in and it's still not fun. And the men here are annoying af.

K. Be there in 15.

Make it 10.

I sent Trex's phone my location then watched Watts strut over. I rolled my eyes. "Don't make me mess up your face."

He leaned an elbow on the table. "It would be a shame, wouldn't it? Don't worry, I've seen you fight. I don't want to piss you off, I just want to talk. You're interesting."

"Not on purpose."

"That's what makes you so interesting."

Watts set a beer down with the lid still on it, then he lay flat a bottle opener.

I caught Zeke looking at me. He looked away, carrying on a conversation with the blonde.

“Where are you from?” Watts asked.

“No.”

“Okay ... just your name then. Naomi...”

“No.”

“Naomi No. Has a ring to it,” Watts said. I was getting the feeling he was more entertained by my rudeness than if I’d gotten on my knees and blew him.

“Want to see a ring?” I said, outstretching my hand and showing him the gold band on my middle finger.

The door yanked open, and Trex burst through, looking around and seeming relieved when his eyes settled on me.

I smiled at him, resting the fist of my free hand on my chin, the other still blatantly telling Watts to fuck off.

“Hey,” Trex said, huffing. “This is it? This is why I risked a reckless driving ticket?”

“Is she uh...?” Watts began.

“Of course!” I said, finally letting my arm fall to my thigh. “I must belong to him because I’m not interested in you.”

“Who said you weren’t interested in me?” Watts said.

“Me,” I said. “Twice.”

“Watts,” Trex said, shaking his head. “You don’t wanna rock this boat.”

“Is she your sister?” Watts asked.

Trex and I looked at each other. I was half Armenian and tanned by almost a lifetime in the desert sun, my dark hair brushing my shoulders in air-dried waves; Trex was a white boy from Kansas. We couldn’t have looked more different.

“Seriously?” Trex asked, just as baffled by Watts’ conclusion as I was.

Watts sat. “I’m just trying to figure you guys out. Maybe you’re adopted, I dunno.”

“We work together,” Trex said.

“Trex,” I scolded. Watts needed exactly zero information about me.

“Didn’t you notice the wedding band?” Trex asked. “She’s married, man, beat it.”

Watts looked down. “It’s on her middle finger.”

“Does she look like a conformist?” Trex asked.

Watts shrugged and stood. “She’s fucking beautiful. If she doesn’t want guys thinking she’s single, maybe wear it on the correct finger.”

I glared at him. “Or believe me when you walk up and the first thing I say is *go away*.”

“You’re right. I apologize,” he said. He nodded to Trex once then walked away.

I used the bottle opener to pop open the top of the beer in front of me and took a swig.

“Why do you wear it on your middle finger?” Trex asked.

“I lost weight after Matt died. It doesn’t fit on that finger anymore.”

“Get it sized?”

“No. Matt picked out this ring. It stays the same as he remembers it.”

“Must have been hard for you to move here.”

I shook my head, wishing smoking was allowed inside. I put an unlit cigarette between my fingers to help. “That part was easy. I couldn’t look at that apartment one more day. I didn’t realize it until I got the letter. Then I couldn’t pack fast enough.”

I glanced over at Watts. He was talking to his buddies but happened to look over at me at the same time. Darby began to walk toward us then saw Trex’s hand on mine. She turned on her heels and returned to Zeke, standing with her back to us.

“Shit,” Trex said, standing.

“What?”

“You know what she’s thinking. Go—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Trex was already walking toward the small crowd of hotshots gathered with Darby and a few other

women who'd joined them.

Trex put his hand on the small of Darby's back. She turned, a perfect smile on her face. She might have fooled Trex, but I could tell she was pissed off. I was happy for him. She liked him too.

Trex greeted her, and after a short exchange, Darby looked past Trex to scan me for a few seconds.

Trex and Darby returned to my table, both looking like they were about to throw up.

"Nomes, this is Darby," Trex said.

I smiled wide. "It's Naomi, actually. So you're the famous Darby. Nice to finally meet you."

Trex's eyes lit up. He knew immediately what I was doing.

"Hi," Darby said, holding out her hand to shake mine. "So you work in the Forestry Department?"

"No," I said, still smiling. She wasn't getting shit out of me. "You work at the hotel?"

Darby glanced at Trex. "Yes."

She was pissed, thinking Trex was at the bar with me—gross—but I had to butter her up. Trex could thank me later. "You're as beautiful as he said you were. Wow."

"Thank you." She said the words as if she'd heard them a million times. She probably had. She was stunning. No wonder Trex was so into her. But it looked like he had some competition. She was there with Zeke. "So ... what do you do?"

"I'm an independent contractor," I said. It was the truth. That way, later when Trex ended up having to beg her forgiveness for lying, I wouldn't be the bitch friend who'd helped him lie.

"Oh, okay. Well, it was nice to meet you."

"Would you like to join us?" I asked before Darby could walk away. "I know Trex would love it."

Trex looked at me in disbelief. He had no clue what a kick ass wingman I could be when I wanted.

"I'm here with friends, but thank you. I know Watts would

appreciate it if I offered to have you join us.”

“We were just here trying to distract me from my dead husband but thank you.”

Trex closed his eyes, and I tried to care, but sometimes I just couldn't help myself.

“Oh. Oh, goodness, I'm so sorry,” Darby said, stunned. Her eyebrows shot up.

“Nomes,” Trex said. “I'm sorry,” he said to Darby.

“I can see why you're friends,” Darby said with a smile. “You do prefer bluntness.”

“Naomi is certainly that,” he said. “But that's not it. Her husband, Matt, was a good friend.”

I wasn't prepared for Trex to say Matt's name, and I had to swallow back the typical smart-ass remark that would hide the unique pain I felt when someone spoke about my husband in past-tense.

“I should um ... I should probably get...” Darby's expression changed, and she sat in Trex's chair, placing one palm flat on the table.

“You okay?” Trex asked, grabbing her arm. The color drained from her face, and she stared at the table. She couldn't have been drunk. I hadn't seen a glass in her hand since she'd arrived.

“Yeah, just dizzy,” she said. “I'll be fine.”

“You don't look fine,” I said. “You look like you're about to—”

Darby leaned over and heaved, the water she expelled splashing on the floor. Trex and I watched in shock and confusion.

Zeke and Watts rushed over.

“Darby?” Zeke said, taking her arm.

Watts saw the puddle on the floor and held the back of his wrist to his nose.

“Don't be such a pussy. Go get a towel from the bartender,” I said.

“What the fuck, Zeke?” Trex barked. “You bring her to a bar when she's sick?”

“She's sick?” Zeke asked. “I ... I didn't know.”

“You knew she was puking in the hotel lobby earlier,” Trex said.

Darby heaved again.

“Was it something she ate?” I asked.

Zeke shook his head. “She hasn’t eaten anything. She hasn’t felt great all night.”

“So you bring her here instead of taking her home?” Trex growled, grabbing his shirt.

“Stop. Stop! I’m okay,” Darby said, her head still down.

The guilty expression on his face made me feel an unexpected empathy for him.

“Nomes...” Trex said, pleading my forgiveness. He wasn’t asking to leave. I knew he’d take Darby home whether I was okay with it or not.

“Yeah, go...” I said.

Jerry walked over to scope the damage. “Oh man,” he said, disgusted at the puddle on the floor. “I should be used to puke by now, but...”

Zeke shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Grab me a mop and a bucket, Jerry. This is my fault. I’ll clean it up.”

“Cool,” Jerry said, leaving without hesitation.

“Paper towels and a trash can too,” I called after him. I looked at Zeke. “I’ll help.”

“You don’t have to,” Zeke said.

I shrugged one shoulder. “I know.”

“It’s not what it looked like, you know. We already had plans ... before,” he gestured to the space between us, “and I hadn’t heard from you, so...”

“Yeah,” I said, waving him away. “I don’t care, it’s fine.”

His shoulders sagged, deflated.

Jerry arrived with the mop, bucket, rags and trash bags.

“Thanks,” he said, turning away quickly.

“Don’t mention this to Darby,” I said. “She’ll be embarrassed. Just pretend it never happened.”

He nodded. “True. I didn’t think about that.”

I shook my head once, bending to my knees. “Anything I can do to

help.”

Zeke kneeled next to me. “Seriously. It’s not like that.”

“Seriously,” I said, beginning to wipe up the mess. “I don’t care.”

OceanofPDF.com

chapter eight

clean

Zeke

Naomi went to get a new bucket of water because the one we had been using was full of Darby's vomit and God-knows-what-else that had already saturated the bar's tightly-woven carpet over the years. I tried not to think about the fact that my hands were dark and sticky, thankful the lights were dim so I couldn't see exactly why. I scratched my nose with my forearm, then swore under my breath when my hand brushed across my jeans, but my knees were already wet so it didn't really matter.

"Hey," Watts said, kneeling next to me. "You know she's married, right? She wears her ring on the middle finger."

"Why the middle finger?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but imagine what kind of man she married. That's a hard pass, brother. I don't want you getting assassinated."

I nodded, not really paying attention.

"How did it go tonight with Darby?" he asked.

"About as well as it ended," I said. "She was tired, wasn't feeling great, but she insisted on going anyway."

"What was that?" Naomi asked, setting down the bucket of fresh water. "You tried to take her home?"

"A dozen times, but she insisted she was fine."

Naomi made a face.

Watts interjected. "He tried to take her to her home. To rest."

I frowned at Watts, confused at why he'd elaborated on something

so obvious. It occurred to me that Naomi didn't know I had sisters and a foster mom who I'd take a bullet for, and she didn't know I'd tried to protect my mother from guys like that for the better part of my childhood.

I turned to Naomi. She seemed to believe Watts, but she didn't deny needing an explanation in the first place. She thought I'd meant I was trying to take Darby to my place when she was sick.

"You think I'd try to take advantage of an ill woman? Wow," I said, scrubbing harder. My forearms were burning, my wrists aching from being on all fours, but I was used to it. I was not, however, used to a woman thinking I was a douchebag.

"For half a second," she said, defensive. She took a swig of her beer.

"Half a second too long for anyone to think I'd do something like that." *For Naomi to think I'm exactly the kind of man I hate.*

"It was the way you worded it," she snapped. "How the hell was I supposed to know?"

"How are we full-blown fightin'? I barely know you."

"I have that effect on people," she grumbled.

I'd missed something. The conversation rolled backward in my mind. That look on her face before ... it wasn't disgust. *Wait a second...*

"Why are you looking at me like that? Quit smiling," she said.

I couldn't. The smile was permanent. "You were *jealous?*"

"Fuck no," she said, scrubbing harder.

"C'mon. For half a second you were jealous," I prodded.

"Like you pointed out just a few seconds ago, I barely know you," she said, out of breath.

"So?"

Her movements slowed, and she sat back on her haunches. "That must've been some date if she felt like puking but refused to go home until she actually did."

I breathed out a laugh, tossing the rag to the floor. "She let Trex take her home. It's safe to say I'm out of the running. But, like I told you, we made these plans before I met you. Trex has been in the

picture while I've been out of it. I liked her, sure, but we're just friends."

Naomi's expression softened, her scrubbing slowed. "Well, then let me apologize for Trex. He's sensitive about her."

"No, he was right. I should've taken her home no matter what she said. I knew she wasn't feeling well."

She soaked a rag in the suds and began to scrub. Her toned arms tensed as she pushed and pulled the wadded fabric against the carpet. "When he realizes what really went down, he'll feel bad. That's not really like him. He thinks she's something special."

"She is."

Naomi looked up, annoyed. "You going to help or not?"

"Oh," I said, getting on my knees and reaching across her to soak my rag. The water was already disgusting again, but I kept going, anyway.

We rinsed the carpet then lay towels over the soaked spot and stepped down. Once we couldn't pick up more moisture, we picked up the soaked wads of fabric and tossed them in an empty laundry basket Jerry had brought over.

"I'll take back the bucket," Watts said, leaving Naomi and me alone.

"So ... are you two going to start fighting over her or...?" Naomi asked. "Because Trex is my best friend, and I'll take his side."

"I'm more of a lover than a fighter," I said, smug. She didn't want me with Darby any more than Trex did.

"I happen to have seen you fight—over a girl—and she happened to be me, so I know that's not true. You at least fight for honor, and that's pretty cool."

I looked down at the ring on her middle finger. "What's that about?" I asked, gesturing to the gold band. The coldness in her eyes returned, and I instantly regretted my question.

She stood, looking down at her wet, filthy knees. "I'd better get washed off. Pretty sure every STD in existence is hiding in that carpet."

"Right behind you." I stood as she walked toward the restrooms.

Watts stood next to me, grabbing me before I took the first step to follow. “I don’t think she’s married.”

“Yeah, doesn’t really make sense for her to wear the ring on the wrong finger to confuse her situation just to beat someone’s ass for flirting.”

“Actually, I could see her doing that.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Do you like her?” Watt’s asked.

“I don’t know yet. Not if she’s married. I thought I liked Darby, though, and look how that turned out.”

Naomi disappear into the Men’s room and Watt’s froze.

“Did she...?” he asked, trailing off.

“She sure as shit did,” I said, chuckling. “The women’s room is around the corner, and Naomi doesn’t seem to care about things like that.”

“Is she a ... a...?” Watt’s said, again unable to finish his sentence.

I laughed out loud, then cleared my throat. “No.”

“I mean ... she fights like a dude.”

“Women can fight, Watts. Haven’t you seen MMA? Amanda Nunez? Cyborg? Holly Holmes? Ronda Rousey?”

“Cyborg? What the hell are you ... no. I mean, I know what MMA is, but I’m not a fan of watching anyone beating the shit out of each other for sport, so no, haven’t heard of ‘em,” Watts said. “You think Naomi’s MMA or a dude?”

I shook my head, leaving Watts standing in a stupor.

chapter nine
a different distraction

Naomi

The cold water rinsed the suds from my hands, and I pulled a paper towel from the dispenser. Zeke did the same, stealing glances. He glanced around with a smirk on his face, getting a towel for himself. “You’re in the men’s restroom. The women’s is around the corner.”

“Yeah, I was in there earlier. Believe me, this is the cleaner of the two. And, I’ve showered, shit, and shaved around many a man. The men’s john in a dive bar is actually pretty nice compared with some of the places I’ve had to squat and piss.”

Zeke chuckled. “Watt’s will be glad to know you have to squat.”

I tilted my head. “Were you about to ask if I have a penis?”

He shook his head emphatically. “No. Nope. I think you threw Watt’s for a loop coming in here, though.”

“If I was transgender, I’d be in the women’s restroom, genius.”

“I just told you it wasn’t me questioning you.”

I rolled my eyes and left him alone to sit at my table. For a reason I couldn’t put my finger on, what Zeke said bothered me. I looked at my arms. They were clearly toned, and yes, a beautiful little egg shape formed when I flexed, and I didn’t have the biggest tits in the room, but I had never been mistaken for a guy before.

Jerry waved me over.

“What?”

“Cheer up. Someone bought you a shot.”

“Who?” I said, looking over my shoulder. Zeke was on his way back

to his friends from the restroom, smiling and nodding once when they inexplicably cheered his arrival.

“They said it was for taking care of Trex.”

“Oh,” I said, hammering it back and setting it on the counter. *They*. Not Zeke. Because his friends thought I was a man. “Tell Trex’s friends I said thanks.”

“What’s wrong?” Jerry asked.

I tried not to peek at my arms before I spoke. “When you first met me ... were you confused about my gender?”

Jerry laughed out loud, his belly bouncing with the roars coming from his mouth. Disgruntled, I glanced over my shoulder to see if Jerry had drawn attention to us. He hadn’t.

“No, Naomi. Who told you that?”

“Zeke.”

“It’s because you can beat ass better than he can, and he needs to feel better about that. Also, you went into the Men’s room without skipping a beat. Their boy brains have to try to put together the puzzle of you, even if it’s stupid. Because, sister... Christ, how can I say this while still respecting my wife?” He looked up, thinking aloud. The answer came to him, and he cleared his throat. “You’re all woman.”

I nodded, his words licking my wounded ego.

The liquid from the shot glass still burned my throat as I walked back to my table. The music was getting louder, more people were filtering in through the door, and some of the hotshots were already on the dance floor with the fairer sex. *You know, the ones who act like girls.*

Zeke came over and sat, leaning his elbows on the wood, seeming content to watch his friends from afar. We didn’t speak, and it was actually sort of nice not feeling like the silence needed to be filled.

“Can I get you another beer?” he asked finally.

“Sure.”

He signaled Jerry, who ran a bottle over.

I thanked them both with a nod and took a swig. The bottle clanked

against the table when I set it down. “Don’t you drink?” I asked.

“Not tonight. I was driving Darby around and ... she seems happy with Trex?”

I shrugged. “How would I know?”

He stared at the door. “She just smiles a lot more when he’s around. I’m happy for her.”

“I bet you are,” I scoffed.

He leaned on the table, annoyed but not angry—yet. Three deep lines formed on his brow, making him a hair more attractive than before. “Are you always this mean? You’ve got at least one friend. Trex rushed over here to save you from Watts. You can’t be this horrible all the time.”

“She needs another shot,” Jerry said, putting one in front of me. “She’s not as uptight when she’s had a couple.”

I tossed it back, feeling my head begin to swim into the shallows of beer and bourbon.

I chuckled, a legitimate laugh, and it surprised me. I chugged the rest of the bitter liquid and stood. “I *am* this terrible—all the time. Thanks for the beer.”

I put a twenty-dollar bill on the table for Jerry and waved goodbye to him, then tossed the bottle in the trash on my way to the door, waved goodbye to him, and pushed the horizontal bar to open the door. I took a deep breath; summer and city filled my lungs, but it couldn’t have been more different from Vegas; thin and crisp, even though it was warm. Asphalt and a hint of food mixed with the indigenous trees one might expect to smell in Colorado.

In Vegas, I worked security for hotels and then the private sector. The thin but constant sheen of sweat on my skin reminded me of my desert home in Arizona and still busy enough to provide me with the distraction I craved, from missing Matt; from memories of my deployments. And the laws were a little more lax there. A scuffle on the Strip wasn’t unheard of.

I exhaled, stopped at the curb, and fished my keys out of my

pocket, balancing an unlit cigarette between my lips. The door closed a second time behind me.

“No Uber tonight?” Zeke asked.

I paused. He was right. I’d drank enough to forget I’d drank too much to drive.

“I can drive you, then I’ll Uber home,” he offered. I glared at him, but he was unfazed. “What? You’ve been alone with me before, and besides, we both know you can kick my ass, probably faster inebriated. I’ll never admit I said that, by the way.”

“Fine,” I said, handing him my keys. “The matte green FJ,” I said, pointing.

Zeke smiled. “Army green. I would have guessed that was yours.”

I frowned. I hadn’t considered it Army green.

We walked together across the street, and he opened my door. I pushed it shut. “Don’t do that.”

“What? Open the door for you?”

“Do I look like I need you to open the door for me?” *Fuck. I’m slurring.*

“Yeah. You kinda do. Quit being a dick.”

I opened the door again and crawled in. Zeke jogged around and opened the driver’s side door, adjusting the mirror and the seat, checking for headlights and the blinkers like he was about to take a test. He reached for me, and I shoved him hard, his back hitting the driver’s side door. The FJ rocking a bit as he stared at me in shock, his hands up.

“The fuck?!” he yelled. “I was getting your seat belt, Naomi, damn!”

I slowly reached for the strap and pulled it across my chest, clicking it into the buckle. “Whoa. Habit. I thought you were coming in to ... should I get an Uber?” I asked.

Zeke leaned his forehead against the steering wheel. “No. I’m fine.” He rolled his head to the side—his temple still resting on the wheel—to meet my gaze, a look of disbelief on his face. “I mean, we’ve been alone together before, and you didn’t feel the need to defend yourself.”

“I know. It was just instinct.”

“Your instinct told you I was a threat?” he asked in disbelief.

I breathed out a laugh but instantly regretted it, straightening my face. “No.” I cleared my throat. “No, it’s just when someone comes at me and I’m not prepared for it ... usually I’m better at deciphering it was a bad call.”

His brows shot up. “You’re not even going to say you’re sorry?”

“I’m...” I sighed. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

Zeke’s jaw ticked under the skin, and then he backed out of the lot, pausing at the street. “Where am I going?” he snapped.

I pointed. Zeke drove forward, then turned left. I gave him directions all the way to my house. It was the only time we spoke. I could tell he was mad, and I felt guilty for such an extreme reaction, but not enough to beg his forgiveness. I coached him for every turn, feeling antsy the closer we came to my house. Finally, Zeke turned down my road, and we crept by the street-parked cars and dark houses. Zeke turned into my drive and parked.

He rubbed his shoulder. “You gonna be okay?” he asked without looking at me.

I glared at the dark windows of my house knowing the moment I walked inside a heavy, awful loneliness would set in.

“No, probably not,” I said, feeling the alcohol cloud my thoughts.

He shot me a curious look. “Don’t make me feel bad for you. Not after you just sucker punched me.”

“I didn’t mean to ... I don’t want you to feel bad for me,” I said, frustrated.

“Well, too late. Are you going to be okay or not?” He was trying to match my tone but failed. Zeke didn’t have a mean bone in his body.

After a few moments, I blurted out what I was thinking. “You wanna come in?”

Zeke’s brows pulled together. “Why? So you can shoot me?” I stared at him for a moment, and then burst out laughing. He chuckled too, but then his smile faded. “You got a husband in there?”

My smile vanished too. “No one’s in there.”

Zeke seemed to sympathize with whatever expression was on my face. “C’mon. I’ll walk you inside.”

He walked around the FJ, but let me open the door, and then he let me lean on him until we reached the porch. I jammed the key in the lock and twisted, then pushed. I tossed the keys to the shallow wooden bowl that sat on the entry table.

Zeke shut the door behind him and put his hand in his pocket. “You need anything else?”

I shook my head and pointed at the refrigerator. “There’s ice packs in the freezer.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said. He reached for his phone. I reached to stop him but pulled my hand back the moment my fingers touched his. “You don’t have to go.”

He shrugged. “I can stay for a while ... if you want.”

“Stay for the night.”

He only thought about my offer for a few seconds before answering. “Okay, but I’m not sleeping with you.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to stifle another laugh, but failed. “Thanks.”

I grabbed him a small ice pack then escorted him down the hall to the master bedroom. Zeke held the ice to his nose for the second time in as many times as I’d met him.

“Nice place,” Zeke said, glancing around the darkness. The bed was highlighted by the light in the hall. “Is this your...?”

“My bedroom.”

“You want me to sleep in here?” He pointed with his free hand.

“Is that a problem?”

“Nope.” Zeke took a few steps inside.

I fell onto my back on the bed, interlaced my hands on my middle, and stared up at the ceiling. Zeke mimicked my exact movements, except once he was on his back, he crossed his arms behind his head.

Once we both stopped bouncing, Zeke sighed. “Of all the beds I

thought I'd end up in tonight, yours did not cross my mind. Not even once."

"You thought you'd end up in Darby's, huh?"

"No," he said with a chuckle.

"Can't blame you there. She's beautiful."

He laughed again. "I said no, Naomi. I was interested, but she's just a good friend."

"Mmmhmmm."

He looked over at me. "Are you jealous?"

"Am *I* jealous?" *Yes. Yes, I am. Fuck.*

He relaxed back, unwilling to call me out. "She is beautiful, and she's sweet too. But she's had it bad for Trex since they met, so I'm clearly not her type. He's got that mysterious, rugged, broody thing going. I have a couple of friends like that, and the girls fall all over them. I'd introduce you if they weren't both already with someone."

"You want to hook me up with your friends? As in plural?"

"No. I don't, actually. But gauging by your reaction in the car earlier, I'm guessing you want nothing to do with me."

"I wouldn't say that," I said, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. I could see Zeke peer over at me from my peripheral. "But I do appreciate you thinking I require two men to keep up with me."

"That's not what I meant. They're twins. I was just saying... Christ, never mind." He sighed.

"Sorry I've been such a hard ass. It's just easier."

"Than what?"

"Than putting up with it, I guess? Being polite? Making sure the feelings and ego of the man hitting on me unsolicited are preserved?"

"I get it. I can't imagine having ti ... breasts. Some guys don't think straight around women. When we're up on the mountain the guys are normal like they are when we're just hanging out in Estes at the dorms. But we go out and they just act ... stupid. And it's not just them. All men. I'm guilty too."

"You're not so bad," I said.

“I was with someone for a long time. I’ve watched my friends acting stupid. Gave me a different perspective, I guess.”

“How lon—never mind.”

“It’s okay,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Since high school until a couple of years ago.”

“High school sweethearts? That’s cute I guess.”

“Nothing special about it. I thought I was going to marry her. She was my first everything, and then I lost her.”

“She ... she died?”

“She stopped loving me.”

“Ouch.”

“She’s married now. A baby on the way.”

“Keep up with her on social media?”

“God, no. I can barely stand to hear about it much less watch it. My little brother goes to school with hers.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re getting pretty good at that,” he said. I could see him look over at me again from the corner of my eye, but I kept my gaze focused on the ceiling. “Watts said you were married.”

“I am.”

“Where is he?”

I sighed. “He died.”

“Oh, damn.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry. And no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to.”

We were quiet for a few minutes. Zeke didn’t seem to mind.

“You can stay. If you want,” I said.

“Do you need me to?” he asked. I looked at him, and he met my gaze.

I hated to ask anything of him after being such a dick, but it was more than me not wanting to be alone. I was genuinely enjoying his company. Zeke had a calming effect, even when he was frustrated with me, and it didn’t hurt that he was unconventionally good-looking. He

was missing the swagger of men who had experienced high school as a typical popular jock getting a blow job from a different cheerleader every weekend. He'd probably glowed-up after graduation and his former co-eds were all kicking themselves when they came across him on social media. Hopefully—especially—the one who'd stopped loving him.

I nodded to answer his question. He had no idea how hot he was, and I liked that.

The corners of his mouth turned up, a hint of a smile on his face. "Then I'll stay."

"Thank you," I said, tapping my fingers against my hand, returning my sights on the ceiling.

Zeke was pure, effortless, and everything else I needed more of in my life.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Wanna hang out again?"

"Sure." I wasn't sure if I was coming across as indifferent as I wanted. I realized too late that Colorado Springs was about four thousand feet higher in elevation than Vegas, and that always slightly messed with my ability to drink.

"Yeah?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah," I said, smiling at him.

"Still not sleeping with you," he said, serious.

I breathed out a laugh, turned my back to him, and fell asleep.

chapter ten

widow

Zeke

Watts was staring a hole through me, waiting for me to answer. We'd been loading carbs since we arrived in the lobby at four a.m., preparing for the hike in since the current crew had reported not being able to get in by helo. *They didn't have our pilot, though.*

We sat at our crumb-covered table, the sweat rings from our waters beginning to resemble Olympic symbols, syrup dribbles dotting any spaces not covered by dirty plates, and powdered sugar dusting the edges. I got up to get a rag, trying to save Darby or anyone else the trouble of cleaning up after us.

"Hey," I said, seeing Reese ambling around near Check-In.

She walked over, her tank top still white, a contrast against her bronze skin. She was usually covered in grease. The sleeves of her olive-green coveralls were tied loosely around her waist. I wasn't sure I'd seen her in any other outfit.

"Hey," she spoke around the wad of gum in her mouth. "You getting ready to roll out?" She waited then prompted me again. "Ground control to Zeke," she said, snapping twice in my face.

"Sorry, it's weird to see you here without your pilot. I don't think I've ever seen one of you without the other unless he's in the air."

She shifted, nervous. "Bobby'll be here by sunrise. I had to pack up and come down here last night. They're moving me here for the duration so the helo can stay closer."

"Where was it?"

“Steamboat Springs,” she said, looking around.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, returning her focus to me. “Still waiting on my tooling to get here. I’m sort of useless without it. The helo is good to go for the day, and he’ll be here by the time you reach fire camp.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Reese walked away, taking a gulp of her energy drink.

“That shit’ll kill ya,” Watts said, his gaze settling on me again.

“So will everything else,” Reese called back.

“Stop looking at me,” I said.

“Then spill it,” Watts said.

Taylor wadded up his napkin and launched it at my face. “Talk, pussy.”

“Do you wanna share about your nights with Falyn?” I asked, sitting.

Taylor crossed his arms, unamused.

“Then shut up,” I said.

“C’mon, man!” Watts begged. “I thought she was married. Didn’t she say she was married? Or did she just say that to let me down easy.”

I leaned forward. “Naomi doesn’t let anyone down easy, and I swear to Christ, Watts, if I ever get to see her again and either of you shit stains bring this up, I’ll kill you in your sleep.”

Taylor breathed out a laugh. I was pretty sure he wasn’t afraid of anything, including death, so my threat didn’t faze him.

“She’s a widow,” I said, sitting back against the chair. I took another bite of a plain pancake—my fifth—no syrup, no butter, no peanut butter or Nutella, just golden fried batter rolled like a taquito.

“Did she kill him? She looks like she could,” Taylor said.

“Not funny,” I said.

“Morning,” Trex said, waving to us as he made his way to the front desk. Darby was there, looking happy and comfortable with Trex leaning a little bit over the desk to greet her.

“Looks like you missed the boat on that one,” Taylor said. “And

now you're chasing a widow?"

I shook my head. "I'm not taking advantage of her grief or anything, damn. I didn't know she was a widow when..." I stopped myself.

"When you fell for her?" Watts asked, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Fuck you," I grumbled.

Taylor nudged Watts, and they both laughed.

Runt sat at our table sipping coffee, his eyes swollen, his brown hair sticking up in every direction.

"Did Mama not kiss you awake?" Watts asked.

Runt responded with a yawn, blinking slowly. The young ones always had a hard time getting up.

"I'll kiss you awake," Watts said.

"Leave him alone," I said with a frown.

Watts pouted his lip, and again, Runt ignored him. He was a pretty good sport, but sometimes Watts didn't know when to quit.

"Runt," Sugar called from two tables over. "Can you bring me a deck of cards and a blanket?"

"Always do," Runt said, patting his pack.

Runt was the smallest of us, and because of weight restrictions, he was always carrying extra shit for Sugar, who was built like a WWF wrestler even at his leanest. We all had to fit on the helo, and if Sugar was over, he didn't go. That meant going without even the basics unless Runt agreed to help him out. But Runt always helped him out.

My cell rang, and I stood, making my way to a quiet corner of the lobby. "Hello?"

"Hey!" Jenn said in her chipper voice. "Today is the day."

"I thought we agreed—"

"I know," she said with a sigh. "But I just can't *not* call my son before he climbs a mountain to fight fires."

I smiled. She would call me her son every time we talked if she could, but she used it sparingly. I still called her Jenn and still considered myself an outsider despite their best efforts, and she knew

it. I wasn't sure why. Some of my other siblings came in after me, and they all seemed to fit in.

"Where'd you go?" Jenn asked.

"Just thinking about the family. I miss you guys."

"You do?"

"I do. Why do you sound surprised?"

She stumbled for a response. "I just don't hear you talk like that very often, I guess. That makes me both happy and sad."

"I don't, do I? I'll do better."

"It's okay, Zeke," she said in her soft mom voice. "I understand. Sometimes it takes years to undo the hurt you've experienced. And ... on that note I, um... I need to tell you something."

"What?" I asked, shifting nervously in my seat. Jenn wouldn't call to give me just any news before I set out on a tour.

"Crystal called for you. She called you here."

"Crystal?" I said, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My emotions violently yanked from pissed to curious to satisfaction to annoyance that the woman who gave birth to me would bother Jenn.

"She wanted your number at the barracks. I made an executive decision not to give it to her, but I wanted to tell you right away so if you decided you wanted to reach out, you could. I ... I have her contact info if you want it."

"How did she find you?" I asked.

"I guess she read a write-up about the Alpines. She asked for you. She sounded ... better. Would you like her number?"

"I'm good," I said without hesitation.

"Is that a no?" she asked.

"Of course it's a no. You know I don't want her in my life. You made the right call."

"Thank baby Jesus," Jenn said, relieved.

"You knew that already because *you're* my mom," I said. "You. You gave me a bed. You cooked for me. You drove me to practice. You

loved me.”

Jenn was quiet except for a tiny squeak.

“You’re crying, aren’t you?” I said, wincing.

“Hello?” Brad said.

“Hey. Sorry. Didn’t mean to make her cry.”

“Happy tears, Zeke. You just make her so happy.”

“Good. It’s good to know I can do that for at least one woman,” I said, grumbling.

“Uh oh,” Brad said. The kids were already yelling in the background. They were starting to get up for school and were likely running around the kitchen. “There’s a girl?”

“There’s a girl?” Jenn said. After a short scuffle, Jenn was back on the phone. “The girl from the bar? That girl?”

“Not yet. Well, kind of. I like her. She feels like...”

“The one?” Jenn said. It was just like her to jump ten extra steps. She was a romantic, just like Brad. Maybe they were rubbing off on me.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I was over at her house, and I definitely felt a ... a familiar connection. She smooths out my edges, but that’s because she’s like sandpaper. She drives me nuts, but I have to be around her. Does that make sense? It’s hard to explain.”

I could hear the smile in the Jenn’s voice when she spoke. “I know exactly what that is.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“My favorite feeling in the world. She feels like family.”

chapter eleven

secrets

Naomi

“**W**hat a day, huh?” Harbinger said, elbowing me. He wasn’t a man of many words, so him trying to defuse the situation wasn’t lost on me.

“You could say that,” I grumbled.

It was barely mid-day, and I was already exhausted. Just over the lunch hour, General Tallis had released me from a six-month probation I didn’t know I was on, and Trex informed me what I sort of, deep down, already knew: Peter had pulled strings to bring me to Colorado Springs and work at the Complex. Now, all eyes were on me, waiting for me to lose my temper a third time.

“Do we need to worry about this guy? Keep an eye on him? Is he stalking you or...?” Sloan asked.

“No,” I said, trying to keep my anger in check. “He’s harmless. He just oversteps on occasion. I’ll take care of it.”

“Do you think that’s why Tallis had you on probation?” Martinez asked.

“Likely,” I said.

“Because you’re a widow, and you joined the same outfit your husband was in when he died,” Harbinger said.

“It is a little weird,” Sloan said with a shrug.

“Lock it up,” Kitsch said before I could respond.

“I can’t believe you knew about this the entire time,” Martinez said.

Trex glared at Martinez, looking guilty and frustrated. He’d already

had to put me in my place after my earlier outburst upon hearing the news. He wasn't in the mood to do it again.

"All right. Break's over, let's get moving," Kitsch said.

Trex stood and patted me on the shoulder. "Want to fuck with the Echo team again?"

I forced a smile. "It's the best part of my day."

We patrolled the corridor until we reached the large glass walls and the equally gigantic door. Unlike other days, no one came over the speaker to demand we step back.

I peered into the large room on the other side. Empty tables and chairs in a commons area, a microwave, a television and a few plants. "Looks like a set on a fifties television show."

"Where do you think they all are?" Trex asked, his eyes taking in every corner of the empty room.

On the back side was the mouth of a hallway, much smaller than the corridor we stood in. There were a few doors on each side, maybe offices or dorm rooms, but it was dark and hard to tell except for another large door at the back lit by a single yellow rotating light on the ceiling.

"Have you seen that before?" I asked, nodding to the light.

Trex shook his head.

The soldier who usually requested our immediate turnabout ran across the back of the hall, slowing down when he saw us. He was in his regular black and gray fatigues, matching the circles under his eyes. He jogged to the speaker and pressed the button, out of breath.

"Trexler, I'm going to ask you once. Turn around. Today is not the day."

Trex lowered his jaw, letting the man on the other side see the concern in his eyes. "Everything okay in there? Do you need help?"

The soldier shook his head slowly, exhausted. "You don't want to be on this side, Trexler. Trust me, just go."

"If you need help, we'll help," I said.

"Get out of here," he said, slamming his palm on a button. The red

light on our side of the door lit up and began to rotate. “Last warning.”

Trex turned around, grabbing me by the sleeve and dragging me with him.

“What the fuck is going on in there?” I asked. “It doesn’t feel right to walk away. He looks sick, Trex.”

“Just walk. He was trying to warn us, Naomi. We’re in over our heads this time.”

I looked at him as he pulled me along, surprised. It wasn’t like Trex to be afraid, but in that moment, for the first time, I saw a glimpse of uncertainty in his eyes.

“You’re scared?” I asked.

He let the words he was about to say simmer in his mouth before he said them. “This stays between us.”

I nodded.

“I have to be more careful, Nomes.”

I shook my head, still confused.

“Darby’s pregnant.”

chapter twelve

dutch boy

Naomi

“**Y**ou’ve been to war. Twice... Officially. You’ve led entire units of militia of veterans from all branches. You’ve taken four bullets. You’ve stood up to your mother-in-law, for Christ’s sake. You can do this,” I said aloud.

I gripped the steering wheel of my FJ, seeing Zeke’s silhouette in the rearview mirror. He was standing in front of the hotel entrance, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Get out of the car, Naomi,” I said to myself. I’d had more courage counting down the seconds before my team charged into an enemy camp in Yemen. “Get out of the fucking car.” I barked the words like I was a new militia recruit then scrambled for the handle, pushing my way out. I smiled when my feet touched the pavement, and Zeke smiled back.

“Did you have problems with the food?” Zeke called, strolling across the lot.

“Oh shit,” I said, reaching for the white plastic sack that had been riding shotgun since I’d left the Chinese place.

I’d felt off ever since Trex and I had walked away from the soldier in Deep Echo, and I couldn’t shake it. Now I was meeting Zeke for the closest thing I’d had to a date since Matt was last home on leave.

I kicked the FJ’s door shut, lost in that thought only to realize when I snapped back to the present that Zeke was standing two feet away, grinning like an idiot.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to get out of the car,” he said.

“Me either.”

He took the sack from my hand and signaled for me to follow him inside. We walked together, but it felt too slow and forced, like he knew I was only pretending Plan B—me dropping the sack and peeling out in the FJ—wasn’t imminent.

Zeke didn’t seem as nervous as I felt. *Why the hell not? And why am I nervous?* Spending time with him wasn’t a *date* date. We were eating takeout in his hotel room and maybe watching some pay-per-view.

Zeke put one hand in the pocket of his gray sweatpants. Between those and his well-worn t-shirt, I felt better about my attire. My hair was pulled up in a messy bun. I might’ve put mascara and lip balm on, I couldn’t remember.

He stopped just before the door sensors tripped, taking the white plastic sack from my hands. “Uh ... Naomi?”

I stopped, swatting away the gnats that had been drawn by the light from inside. “Yeah?”

“Just ignore the guys.”

“What? Did you tell them I already put out?”

“No,” he said, horrified. “No, they just ... love giving me shit. Especially since I took out Darby, and now you’re coming by.”

“I figured that would be normal around here,” I said, looking up at the hotel. I thought about Trex’s news and the timeline. “This is none of my business, but ... did you sleep with her? Darby?”

Zeke made a face. “No. She’s not like that.”

I couldn’t tell the truth, so I just kept my mouth shut. Darby had to have gotten pregnant right after Zeke and right out of the gate with Trex.

He continued. “I haven’t told them you were coming, but they might say something. My roommate is out with his girl, so we’ll at least have some peace and quiet.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll try not to cry.” I took a step toward the

entrance, but his voice stopped me.

“I was thinking more along the lines of you not kicking anyone’s ass. I work with these guys. Some of them are my bosses.”

“Fine,” I said, unimpressed.

“You look great,” he said with a small smile.

I looked down. There was nothing special about my jeans, tank top, and flannel shirt. My boots weren’t even tied. “Uh ... thanks.” I pointed to the sack. “I hope they got your order right.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m like a garbage disposal, I’ll eat almost anything.”

With a tiny lean to the side, Zeke set off the sensors, and the doors swept open.

“You should,” I said, walking alongside him. “You’re one hike away from weighing the same as me.”

He laughed out loud. “Come on, now. I’m lean, but I’m not that lean.” He patted his stomach, sounding like he was beating a tree trunk. “Still got the ol’ six pack.

“Who doesn’t?” I asked.

He turned to me. “Prove it.”

We both pulled up our shirts just enough to display the rippled skin beneath. He wasn’t kidding. He was solid.

“I stand corrected,” he said, staring at my abs in awe.

I put down my shirt, and we made our way through the lobby. Men and women were ambling about with mugs of beer in their hands. They were all talking until those we passed paused to take notice. I could see why Zeke was so uncomfortable. He knew the spotlight would be on us once we were inside. His friends knew we were seeing a lot of each other and were curious.

“Sorry,” he said under his breath.

“I’ve walked through more hostile crowds,” I said, stopping at the elevator bay. Darby had been standing at the bar discussing something with Reese, the female mechanic, and the bartender. She didn’t notice us, even when a fourth of the group stopped talking, including Reese.

Zeke pressed the button, holding on to the takeout sack with both hands. It crunched every time he shifted or moved or breathed, which was a lot. At least he was nervous now too.

The lobby was clean, which surprised me. I figured the hotshots would be staying in a dump to save the government money, but the paint was fresh, the baseboards clean, and there was a hint of carpet freshener in the air. The building was old, but the owner took pride in his business, making me feel better about Trex staying there.

The elevator doors parted, but just before we stepped inside, I saw two men poke their heads around the corner to peek at us.

Zeke saw them then looked at me to see if I did. “Jesus Christ,” he mumbled, embarrassed.

He hurried in, pulled me with him, and pressed the second-floor button once, the button to close the doors several times until they sealed shut.

I chuckled.

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s kind of funny.”

He looked up. “I just don’t want you to break one of their arms and take them out for the season.”

“Oh. That’s what you’re worried about.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “You do have a temper.”

“I mean ... you’re not wrong,” I said, unable to argue. The doors opened, and a tall man bulging with muscles and covered in tattoos stood in front of us, holding a basket of laundry and seeming confused.

“Hey, Zeke,” he said, watching me walk past him.

“Hey, Taylor. I thought you were already at the café?” Zeke said.

He looked at his watch and stepped into the elevator after Zeke stepped out. “Me too. Forgot some shit.”

“This is Naomi,” Zeke said.

“Nice to meet you,” Taylor said with a charming grin as the doors closed.

“He’s bringing laundry to a café?” I asked, following Zeke down the

hallway.

“His girlfriend works there and lives in the apartment above.”

I nodded once, looking around. “Gotcha. I figured I’d see Trex in the lobby.”

“He might be in his room. You wanna stop by and say hi?”

“Nah. I see him Monday through Friday at work.”

Zeke seemed relieved to hear my answer. He slowed down and touched a card to the small black rectangle. Once the lock clicked, he held open the door and gestured for me to go inside. The lights were on, it was clean, and didn’t smell like a locker room.

“You didn’t have to clean just for me.”

“Taylor and I aren’t neat freaks, but we both like to keep shit picked up. That’s why we room together.”

I sat on the bed. “Let’s eat. I’m starved.”

“Oh,” he said, looking down at the sack in his hands like he’d forgotten he was holding it. He set it carefully on the bed, taking care not to tip anything over.

I cleared my Styrofoam container several minutes before Zeke—which he found amusing. He twirled noodles around his fork and put it all in his mouth, savoring each bite. He chewed, took a sip of his water, and then cleared his throat. “You drink, eat, and fight like a dude. What else should I know?”

“Nothing really.”

“You don’t wanna tell me your story?” Zeke asked.

I pointed to the intricate tattoo on his forearm. Tall trees, some with leaves, some without; birds flying overhead, all over black ground that broke up and faded out near his wrist. “Tell me about that.”

“You met Taylor in the hall. His brother is a tattoo artist in Illinois. I went back home with Taylor a few times and knocked out this bad boy. It’s the black.”

“The black.”

“The burned-out area the fire’s already been through. The place we couldn’t save, which—ironically—is the safest place to be.”

I arched an eyebrow. "That's pretty deep, Zeke."

"Shut up," he teased.

"I'm serious. You surprise me."

"Good," he said, trying to suppress a grin. He finished his dinner, packed it up, and threw everything away. He turned on the television but kept it on mute, then sat in the ugly green chair next to the bed. I was thankful for the space. It was always hard to tell what was next when meeting someone new. That was the most stressful part. *Do we talk? Do we flirt? Do we fuck?*

"What were you pissed about yesterday?" Zeke asked. He sat back, crossed his legs on top of an ottoman just as ugly and just as green as his seat, and relaxed, clearly settling in for a while. Hell, I'd rather awkwardly turn down sex than talk about my feelings.

"It had to do with work. My boss is an old friend, and he made some decisions I didn't agree with."

"Such as?" Zeke prompted.

"Let's just get something out of the way. I'm not allowed to talk about my job."

"Okay," he said immediately.

"Okay?" I repeated, defensive. I was so unprepared for such quick acceptance that my response carried an unnecessary acerbic tone. I cleared my throat to start over. "Okay." I said it softer this time, even if it was forced.

"Where are you from?" he asked, unfazed.

"Arizona."

"Oh, yeah? What part? I have cousins in Phoenix."

"Everyone has a cousin in Phoenix."

He smiled. "You know, if you don't want to talk, just say so. I can turn on a movie if you want."

"You invite me over and are okay if we don't talk? Are you always this agreeable?"

He thought about my words then shook his head. "No. Want a beer?"

I nodded.

He stood, walked across the room to the mini fridge, and pulled out two beers, using a bottle opener to pop the tops. He handed one to me and returned to the ugly chair.

“Sasabe,” I said.

“Pardon?”

“I’m from Sasabe, Arizona. My father founded modern militia.”

“Modern Militia?” he asked.

“As opposed to the militias formed during the US Revolution.”

I waited for him to be impressed, to ask more questions, to give me that look of confusion and awe the few who I told inevitably succumbed to, but he simply swigged his beer and nodded.

“That explains a lot,” he said.

The corners of my mouth turned up, and I looked down. “I guess so.”

“I’m from up north.”

“What does that mean? Canada?”

“Kremmling.”

I shrugged.

“Colorado. About an hour and a half south of the Wyoming line.”

“Figures.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“I’ve been around my fair share of Colorado boys. You’re all outdoorsy, flannel-wearing, tree-hugging, sledding, hunting, fishing nature lovers. I’m surprised joining the forestry service in some capacity isn’t a rite of passage for all of you.”

“What did you do? Before whatever you’re doing here?”

“I’m a Marine.”

“Still?”

“Once a Marine always a Marine.”

“Is that how you met Trex?”

Be careful. Darby didn’t know about Trex’s past, and he didn’t want her to.

“Trex was my husband’s best friend.”

Zeke looked down at the band on my middle finger. “How long have you been a widow?”

I pulled at my messy bun, feeling my hands begin to slick with sweat. His question was the very reason I avoided interaction with anyone new. “A while.”

To my surprise, Zeke didn’t seem to mind my answer. He didn’t tense up or sigh. His shoulders were more relaxed than they were when I arrived. He had to have been thinking something, but he had a hell of a poker face.

“He passed away a few years ago,” I clarified.

Zeke’s cheeks filled with air, then he blew out, and his eyebrows shot up. “Damn. That fucking sucks.”

I blew out a laugh, surprised. It did. Matt dying did fucking suck, but no one had ever put it quite so truthfully. “Yeah.”

“Sorry, I’m shit at intense emotional stuff. I can give advice and empower someone all day, but the second they tell me about something sad and personal, it’s like my brain glitches.”

I waved him away. “It’s fine. There’s no protocol for dead husbands. Trust me, I’ve heard it all. I like your response anyway. Better than thoughts and prayers.”

Zeke chuckled. “What the hell does that even mean? They feel sorry for you before sending one up to the Almighty? What good is that going to do? The shit has already hit the fan at that point. If the Lord was going to help, you’d think he woulda done it before you needed those thoughts and prayers.”

I laughed, the light feeling spreading throughout my entire body. It was the first time I’d felt better after telling someone about Matt’s death. Zeke got extra points for not wanting to know the details.

My phone buzzed. I checked it, seeing an unknown number had texted me. I tapped the screen and knew immediately who it was. I rolled my eyes, tapped out a reply, and put down my phone. Zeke started to say something, but it buzzed again.

I silenced it.

“Is that your dad? Are you past curfew?”

“Worse. One of my bosses.”

“Oh, shit. Did you get called in?”

“I don’t get called in. It’s a day job. My boss... It’s complicated. We’re both from Sasabe. We were childhood best friends. We were sort of each other’s first loves. We broke up when he got engaged to the woman he’s married to now. Like I said...”

“Me inviting a girl who can beat my ass to my hotel room is complicated. What you just described is a clusterfuck, Naomi.”

I giggled. “True.” I checked my phone again. “He lied to me, and it would appear that he now knows that I know.”

“Uh oh. What are you going to do?”

“Not respond to his texts. That’s all I can do for now.”

“That’s actually torture. My ex used to do that shit to me right after we broke up, and I hated it. It’s like getting a finger stuck in a bullet wound.”

“Have you been shot before?”

He frowned. “Have you?”

“A few times.”

“Shut up. Are you serious?” When I stared at him blankly, he squirmed in his seat—something I enjoyed immensely. “I haven’t ... been shot. Or shot at.”

“What is that?”

“What?” he asked.

“That look on your face. What does that mean?”

“You want the truth?” he asked, preparing to tell it.

I nodded.

“I’m struggling with how inferior I feel around you, and every time you tell me something about yourself, it makes that feeling worse.”

“Wow. You’ve got stones telling me that.”

He shrugged. “You asked for the truth.”

“And you just give it, huh?”

“Why not?” He watched me, not waiting for my reaction but studying me, trying to figure me out.

“I’ve heard I take some getting used to.” I stood. “You’re sort of the same.”

He smiled at that.

“Another beer?” I asked.

Zeke looked at his bottle, still almost half-full. “I’m good.”

“Mind if I...”

“Go for it,” he said.

I grabbed a second bottle from the mini-fridge and popped the top, sitting back on the bed. I smiled at the bottle. “This is good. I like this.”

“Yeah?” Zeke said, a new light in his eyes.

“Yeah. What are you doing later this week?”

Zeke seemed deflated. “I’m on the mountain tomorrow. We’ll be up there for about ten days then cycle out, take a few days off, then we’re back up.”

“Oh. Well, that’s unfortunate.”

Zeke pressed his lips together, struggling with whatever he was about to say. “Becca and I broke up not long after I took this job. I tried dating a flight attendant hoping she would understand my schedule, but I think us both being so busy made it worse.”

“We’re not dating.”

“I didn’t mean that, I just meant...”

“I know what you meant. And it’s cool.”

“Just text me when you’re back.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know. I mean ... I like that part of you. But it’s just one part of you.” I offered a half smile, and relief softened his features. “I’m going to text you,” he said.

“Good.”

He leaned forward, holding out his bottle. I clinked mine to his, and we drank with a smile.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter thirteen

fire

Zeke

“Wipe that grin off your face, Zeke, it’s creepy,” Tyler said, digging just ahead of me.

The sun was beginning to set. We were hungry and tired, and all we had waiting for us was sleeping bags on the ground and some MREs. Tyler had been sullen all day, but we were twelve hours in, and he was still hacking at the ground like it had insulted his mother.

His girlfriend, Ellie, had been following us around different fires with her camera doing an ongoing story for the local magazine. She was talented and didn’t complain about the hikes, the cold, or the dirt—a nice surprise for a girl whose dad regularly dined with politicians and went to business meetings with people like Elon Musk and Bill Gates. Tyler was still nursing a bruised ego after she unleashed her wrath on him when she was denied access to the mountain.

Ellie wasn’t high maintenance, but she wasn’t used to being told no.

“You still pissed about Ellie?” I asked.

Tyler swung his Pulaski, the sharp end landing just a few inches my from my boot. I jumped, glad to still have ten toes when I hit the ground.

“I was just asking, Maddox, damn!”

“I wasn’t even close, stop crying.”

I shifted. “It’s not right what they did. We all think so. She earned her red card. If she was a dude she’d be up here.”

“She blames me,” he said, his eyes falling to the ground. “I don’t even know what to say to her when we get back. I don’t know how to apologize for something I had no control over.”

“You don’t have to apologize. Just empathize,” I said.

“Ellie on the mountain with her camera ... there’s light in her eyes. She’s different.” He swung the Pulaski at the ground, this time far away from my feet. “Talk about something else, Zeke. What about what’s-her-name?”

I frowned. “It’s Naomi.”

“Yeah, what about her?”

“She’s...” I swung, hitting the ground harder than I needed. “She’s way outta my league, Tyler. She’s a bad ass. Like, a total bad ass. She doesn’t need anyone. But she’s a widow, and she still loves him and—”

“Oh, man. That’s a rocky road, Zeke. You sure?” he asked.

“You didn’t exactly pick a smooth path yourself.”

He smirked. “Accurate. But what fun is that?”

“I guess.”

“Does she know you’re interested? Or is this one of those times you’re hoping your half-ass flirting will send the message?”

“She knows.”

“She doesn’t know,” Watts said, walking up behind me.

“Man, shut up,” I complained.

Watts and Maddox smiled, and Watts planned to shoot off at the mouth again, but Jubal cut him off.

“Is it break time and no one told me?”

“What the hell is so important?” Chief called from down the line. His radio must’ve gone off at the same time because he scrambled to answer it. After just a few seconds, he jogged to meet Jubal.

“A woman was spotted in the fire zone. We’ve been taken off task and ordered northeast in the direction she was seen.”

Runt wrinkled his nose. “A woman’s just walking around out here?”

“She,” Chief began, glancing for the briefest moment at Tyler. “She might be a reporter. They’ve said she had a pack and a camera.

Bobby's spotted her once. Dark-haired adult female is all he reported."

Tyler closed his eyes. "Tell me it's not her."

"I don't know," Chief said. "Either way, we've gotta get to her before the fire does."

"Let's move!" Tyler yelled, setting a quick pace for the rest of the crew.

Our typical single-file line turned into a wide search net. Bobby had seen her from the air hours before but not since, and we had no way of knowing if she'd changed directions.

We cut through brush, sawed through downed trees, Chief's anger pushing us forward, knowing he was rightly furious about wasted time.

"Tyler," I began.

"I know..."

"If it's Ellie..."

"I know, Zeke, shut the fuck up."

Someone down the line yelled, and we paused. After a confirmation, Tyler sprinted toward the center of our net. Scraped, scratched, dirty, and wide-eyed, Ellie was standing in the brush, her shirt torn, her arms bleeding, but her camera firmly in her hands.

"Goddammit!" Tyler screamed, his headlamp shining right into her face. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Ellie winced. Her eyes were bloodshot. She smelled like liquor, something strong. She held up her hand to shield her eyes from the bright beam.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" he yelled again.

Ellie bent over and vomited on his boots.

"Alpines to Base, we've found the journalist. She's pretty banged up and dehydrated. Send a transport, over."

"Base to Alpines, hold for instructions." After several agonizing seconds, the man at the other end of the transmission began to speak again. "Alpines, transport is inbound. Meeting point is the country road over the ridge to your immediate north by northeast. Is she able to travel? Over."

Ellie nodded.

Chief gripped his radio, holding it closer to his mouth. “She is, over.”

“Understood, Alpines. Be advised an officer will be accompanying that transport, over.”

Chief looked at Tyler. His hands were tied. He sighed. “Copy that, Camp. We’ll hike to the rendezvous point and wait for medevac and badges.”

The crew was deflated. Ellie had been traveling with us for several fires, and Tyler was in love with her. When one of us hurt, we all hurt, and Tyler looked like he was about to lose it.

Tyler shook his head. Ellie was oblivious to the shitload of trouble she was about to be in. She could have a dozen charges against her by sunrise. He unscrewed his canteen and held her chin, water dripping from her mouth down his fingers as she drank.

She stood and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, looking sheepish. “Sorry,” she said.

Tyler hugged her, mumbling something into her ear.

I glanced behind us, seeing the fire glow in the distance. “We should get going.”

Tyler lifted Ellie into his arms and carried her up the steep incline of the ridge, reassuring her every fifty yards or so until we reached the road.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said again.

I put my hand on his shoulder, watching Chief speak to the officers in the transport before they headed over to apprehend Ellie. We all moved closer to Tyler—whether it was a conscious decision or not—preparing to stop him if he fought the officers when they cuffed her. Thankfully, they made it easier on everyone, no doubt because of Chief’s meeting with them beforehand.

“Ma’am, I’m Deputy Jansen. I’ll be escorting you out.”

Ellie nodded.

“Turn around for me, please,” the officer said. “Just going to slip

these on nice and easy to keep everyone safe on the ride back.”

One of the medics turned to me, shining a small flashlight in my face. “You look a little pale, sir. You okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, waving the light away. “I’m good.”

Ellie looked at Tyler, and he forced himself to say the words. “Just do what they say, babe.”

“Tyler?” she said.

He leaned forward, and I put my hand on his chest. “She needs you to stay calm, brother.”

The officers took her away, reading her rights as they walked. They took care to not let her hit her head on the way into the back seat then closed the door behind her. After a short conversation, they waved to us and drove away.

Watts folded his fingers on top of his head. “Holy shit.”

“Naomi is good friends with Trex. He was FBI at one point, right? Maybe he can help?” I asked.

Tyler turned to me and nodded, bewildered. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Follow the road out to camp,” Chief ordered. “We’re done for the night.”

“Hey, Zeke?” Tyler said.

“Yeah?”

“If you want Naomi, you should tell her. I know she’s in love with her dead husband, and she’s a hard ass and all that, but damn ... everyone needs to be told once in a while, you know? Sometimes you think they know you care about them, and then you find out too late they don’t.”

My heart bled a little for the shame on his face. “I’ll tell her.”

He nodded. “Good.”

chapter fourteen
cruel and unusual

Naomi

“**W**hat are we doing here again?” Trex asked, peering over my shoulder.

I shrugged him off, looking closer at the monitors. In addition to the cameras all over the Complex, Peter secured funding for drone deployment twenty-four hours a day. They were equipped with night vision, thermal imaging, zoom, and GPS beacons. *Even with all that tech, they can't locate the mother effing Alpines?* I knew Zeke had been on the mountain since around four thirty a.m. because I heard the helo going up just after sunrise.

“We’re looking,” I said.

“For what?”

“Just looking.”

Trex shot me an impatient glare, and I shrugged, walking out. I readjusted my rifle and waited for my partner. Trex didn’t mention it again as we did our rounds, pissed off the Deep Echo boys, then met the team for lunch. I worked out, ignored Peter, then sweat my ass off while I walked the perimeter in the heat of the afternoon. The next day, I did the same, and the next day. I listened to Trex talk about Darby, the tedious details of her pregnancy, and I listened to my boots echo against the metal grid, the water dripping from the pipes... Day in and day out, it was becoming clearer to us all that the execution of a normal life while still holding a gun wasn’t the utopia we’d imagined. My gun was going to rot if I didn’t use it.

“Plans tonight, Nomes?” Trex asked.

“Going to the range,” I said, rubbing my shoulder.

“The range?” Harbinger asked, interested. “The one down the road?”

I nodded.

“Spenser’s coming tonight, isn’t she?” Trex asked.

I smiled, excited. “She texted before we clocked out to say she was two hours out. I figured I’d squeeze the trigger a few times to kill time.”

Trex held up his hand, and I slapped it. “Glad she’s coming.”

Kitsch hummed. “If Karen wouldn’t shit a wildcat, I’d tag along to the range.”

“You should come,” Sloan said. “She wouldn’t mind.”

“Won’t mind,” he corrected.

I paused while my mind scrambled for a satisfactory response. “That’s what he meant.”

Martinez opened his mouth, but Harbinger slapped his chest—hard—and stepped forward. “I’ll go too. Call Karen. Maybe she and Caroline can get the kids together.”

Kitsch thought about it then nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, all right, I’ll ask her.”

“Great. It’s settled then. Martinez?” I asked.

“Hells yeah, I’ll come. I thought it was just me. Patrolling a controlled environment sounded good at first, but I feel like I’m crawling out of my skin here.”

“No,” Harbinger said. “Not just you. When you’re used to chasing, hiding, or running for your life, a day job is a tough transition, even if you’re still holding a gun for a living.” When he realized we were all staring, he shrugged. “I’ve been ... you know... Caroline talked me into seeing a therapist. She’s helping.”

“Good,” Trex said. “That’s awesome, John.”

“Same,” Sloan said, scratching his temple with the barrel of his rifle. “I’m itchy too. I need to blow off some steam and shoot things.”

“Meet you all there?” Kitsch opened his driver’s side door, waiting for an answer.

“Not me,” Trex said.

I rolled my eyes. “She’ll live without you for a few hours.”

“I’m already going to workout. I want to take her to dinner,” he said. “She’s been worried about her guys.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The Alpines—the guys out of Estes Park—are all her friends. They hang out in the lobby all day, and she gets to know them. They’ve been up on the mountain for a few days. She’s just ready for them to get back.”

“Gun range,” I said, even more anxious than I was before.

Martinez, Kitsch, Harbinger, and Sloan were all to my left. We stood in a line, goggles on, in our own stalls, killing our targets so hard we were creating unwanted attention.

“Are you a team or something?” a man asked the second I removed my ear muffs.

“Yep,” I said, setting down my firearm.

“Are those Howard Leight’s?” he asked.

I looked down at my earmuffs. “Yeah?”

“Best of the best. They’re on my list.”

“Oh? Tell me more.” I put on the earmuffs and popped in another clip before turning around to obliterate my target.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Martinez laughing, his cheek still pressed against his rifle.

The sun was touching the summit of the mountain range, so I checked my watch and packed up, whirling my finger around to signal to my guys that I was leaving. They all waved, still focused on their targets.

I carried my shit to the FJ, hearing the chatty dude from the range

stomping on the gravel as he followed me out.

I unlocked the door and opened it, but not before he could call to me. “Hey. I’m sorry. Did I say something to offend you?”

“No, why?”

“You were just so ... abrupt earlier. I thought maybe I’d pissed you off.”

“No.”

He shifted, uncomfortably waiting for me to apologize, or twirl my hair, or maybe giggle. He clearly had no idea how to react to me.

“So.” He breathed out a laugh then shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“Good talk,” I said, getting inside my vehicle.

I rushed home, unable to sit still knowing Spenser would be there any minute. I’d made up the guest room, although I didn’t have to do much. There was already a bed, new bedding, and a dresser.

I pulled into the drive and groaned. Peter was sitting on my porch. I was so preoccupied with Spenser’s arrival, I hadn’t noticed his Maybach parked across the street.

I stepped out, carrying my duffle bag.

“If you wanted to go to the range...” he began.

“I’m good,” I said, passing him to unlock the door.

“Why didn’t you tell me Spenser was coming?”

I turned around. Peter had to step back to avoid getting smacked with my duffle.

“Because it’s none of your business.”

“She’s my friend too.”

“Did she call you? Did she say she was coming?”

He frowned. “You know she wouldn’t. She’s barely spoken to me since—”

“You broke my heart? Because she’s my cousin, Peter. My friend. Not yours. Get outta here before she gets here. I mean it.” I went inside, putting away my guns and returning to the kitchen to unload the dishwasher. Peter stood in the middle of my living room.

“Hurting you is the last thing I’d ever want to do, Naomi. You know I was in a terrible situation.”

“We’ve been over this, Peter.”

“We clearly need to revisit it,” he said, loosening his tie.

I made a show of thinking about it, looking up at the ceiling, then returned to the dishes. “Nah.”

“What was I supposed to do?” he begged. “There was nothing I could do. Could you have told your father no back then?”

“You lied,” I said, slamming a glass down on the counter. “You lied back then just like you’re lying to me now.”

“What are you talking about?” he said, exasperated.

“You brought me here! Not a committee—you! Do you have any idea how humiliating it is for me to try to face my colleagues? As if I don’t have to fight the stigma of sleeping my way to my rank or proving my aim is nicer than my rack every fucking day, Peter! Then you pull this?”

“You deserve to be here! Just like anyone else! Not out there, getting shot at, rolling around in the sand dodging explosives! What difference does it make if I made some calls?”

“The fact that you don’t see it...”

“Your guys needed this. Don’t think I didn’t take shit bringing in a guy who still talks to his dead wife and kids, a man who barely smiles, a field doc who takes nothing seriously. And don’t even get me started on Trex...”

“But *I’m* the one on probation.”

“You’re not just sad or broken. You’re dangerous, Naomi. Because for you ... dying means seeing your husband again.”

I pointed to the wall. “You don’t think it means the same for any one of my team?”

“No! It’s not the same!”

“Dying means leaving behind friends. *His* friends, Peter. Men I’ve sworn to Matt I would protect! And fuck you for saying otherwise!”

“Knock, knock,” Spenser said from the doorway.

My cheeks flushed. “Spence.” After a few seconds of shock, I walked across the living room to hug her. Her long, blonde hair was caught under my grip, but she didn’t seem to mind. I released her, drowning in embarrassment. I gestured behind me. “You remember Peter.”

Peter took a step, but Spenser used her thumb to point behind her. “You’re still a selfish asshole. Get outta here.”

Peter wasn’t offended but annoyed. He knew Spenser didn’t really hate him, but for the moment, she was taking my side ... again.

Peter had once had a crush on Spenser too, before he met me. She was the tall, flaxen-haired beauty of the family. She looked like a ballerina, but was downright frightening in training. She wasn’t just good at hand-to-hand, she was a dangerous sniper. But what made her scary was how cunning she was. She could outsmart any adversary, always one step ahead.

Kansas was the opposite of her older sister. Strawberry blonde and five-feet-one (and a half), she was the loudest of the Marcel granddaughters. We both led units in my father’s militia, and as much as they respected me, they feared Kansas. Our fathers, Spenser, and I were the only ones who dared cross her. She wasn’t only intimidating, she was ruthless.

Peter nodded then slid past Spenser, stopping to greet someone else. I peeked behind her. “Kansas?” My voice went up an octave. I wasn’t expecting Spenser to bring her. We were like a small group of unbeatable Amazons when we were together. Not in height, but absolutely in bad assery. “Oh my hell!” I said, hugging them both. Now it was Kansas’s strawberry-blond hair mashed under my arms.

When I let them go, my cousins stepped inside. I showed them to their room, where they unloaded but didn’t unpack.

“I’ve been in a car with Spence since dawn. I want alcohol and bar food, stat,” Kansas said.

“I have just the place,” I said.

Spenser eyed me.

“You’ll like it,” I assured her.

“You lied,” Kansas said, staring blankly at the exterior of McCormack’s.

“Oh, please. When did you become such a snob?” I asked.

“Since I turned twenty-one and had a choice to go to a shithole or not.”

“This is not a shithole. It’s actually pretty nice inside,” I said, holding open the dark metal door. “And the owner is a friend, so don’t start any shit.”

Spenser and Kansas preceded me, looking around the moment they were inside. Spenser chose a table instead of the bar, and Kansas went straight toward Jerry.

“Be nice,” I warned.

Kansas held up a fist and extended her middle finger.

Spenser let her chin rest on the heel of her hand, her eyes heavy. “She’s put up with me all day. Let her get a drink then she’ll be fine.”

Jerry waved to me, and I waved back, watching him chat with Kansas with a smile on his face. His ability to win her over shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. She returned with a tray with three shots and three beers, standing on her tip toes to place the tray on the high-top table.

“Shots,” Spenser deadpanned.

“Yep,” she said, holding hers up. We did the same. “To family, home, and abroad. To fallen brothers and sisters. To cruel and unusual punishment in the form of hours in the car with Spenser.”

We laughed, shot whatever clear, throat-burning shit Jerry had poured for us, and then chased with several gulps of beer.

Spenser likely had the same look on her face as I did. We could drink our weight in beer, but shots were not our strong point.

“Jesus Christ, Kansas,” Spenser said, holding the back of her hand

to her mouth.

Kansas giggled.

“Was it that bad riding with Spenser?” I asked, stacking the empty shot glasses.

Kansas made a face. “She is a backseat driver while she’s driving, she has terrible taste in music, in addition to road rage and incessant gasping. To say it’s stressful is an understatement.”

“You can handle grenades going off around you but not gasping,” I said, taking a sip.

“It is traumatic,” Spenser admitted with a laugh.

We spent the rest of the night catching up, talking about the militia, our fathers, memories, and Spenser’s ex, Greg. I let my cousins rack up empty beer bottles while I consumed water.

A group of men walked in, but Jerry didn’t seem to know them.

One whistled at us when they walked back, and Kansas’s cheeks flushed.

“We just got here,” she said with a frown. “Now we’re going to have to leave.”

“First, we’ve been here almost three hours. Second, don’t let them ruin your night. Just ignore them,” I said.

Kansas glared at me, pointing out my hypocrisy without saying a word. The male bar patrons in Sasabe knew not to speak to us, catcalling or otherwise. I was the first to throw a punch if I felt disrespected, but then Matt walked into Phil’s bar on a blistering Arizona summer night, asked for a water and ignored me for ten minutes before asking about my holster, then gave me a detailed rec about a better gun, changing the course of my life.

“Agreed. We’ve had a good run here,” Spenser said. “I’m beat anyway. Let’s go home.”

“Are you still sharing a bed, or does Spenser gasp in her sleep?” I asked.

Kansas laughed. “No, I can handle that.”

“Good, because I don’t think I have enough sheets for the sofa,” I

said.

A man in a black flat-brimmed hat and hoodie put his hand on the back of my chair and grinned. “Can we buy you ladies a drink?”

“No,” we said in unison.

“Aw, c’mon,” he said.

I turned to face him. “We have drinks, and we’ll buy our own if we’d like more. No thank you.”

His grin didn’t diminish, but he looked like he was having trouble focusing. I wasn’t sure if he was looking at me or Kansas.

“You are gorgeous,” he said, leaning toward me.

“Walk away,” I said, unmoving.

He reached for my hair, and I grabbed his wrist. Kansas and Spenser stood.

“I just wanted to…” He looked down. Spenser was holding a knife to his groin.

“She said walk away,” Spenser said.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jerry said, half-jogging over with his hands up.

Spenser stealthily put away the knife somewhere behind her as if we’d all dreamed it.

“These ladies were minding their own business,” Jerry said. “They asked you to move on. You should move on.”

“I was just—” the man began.

Jerry lowered his chin, speaking with an expression I hadn’t seen before. “Move on.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, walking quickly to where his friends had congregated.

“Thanks, Jerry,” I said, nodding. He nodded back and returned to the bar.

“Okay, I like him,” Spenser said, watching Jerry resume his duties. The bar wasn’t busy, but Jerry moved like it was.

“Why did it take Jerry telling him for him to get the hint?” Kansas asked, miffed.

“Because they don’t know we could kill them,” I said, glaring at the offending dickhead in the black hoodie.

My phone buzzed, and I checked it.

“Who is *that*?” Spenser asked. “You have a huge grin on your face!”

“Do not,” I said, smoothing my features. “Shut up.”

It was Zeke. They’d just returned.

Doing anything fun tonight? he texted.

At McCormack’s with my cousins.

Is it dead?

Pretty much. Except for the regulars and the idiots who just walked in.

Are they bothering you?

Everyone bothers me.

Have they tried buying you a drink?

Yep.

I’m going to take a shower and wash the fire off me. I’ll be there in twenty.

I put away my phone and crossed my arms on the table, smiling back at my cousins. “Stop it.”

They laughed. “Tell us,” Spenser said.

“His name is Zeke. He’s a wildfire fighter working that canyon blaze just outside of town. Several teams are here, and they cycle out. He’s on R&R for a few days.”

“He just got back? When can we meet him?” Spenser said.

I shrugged. “He’s on his way. Don’t get too excited, he’s just a friend.”

Kansas raised one eyebrow. “Not with that smile on your face he’s not.”

I looked away, trying to keep my expressions under control. “He’s nice.”

“How did you meet?” Kansas asked.

“Here actually,” I said. “He was defending my honor.”

“What?” my cousins said in unison, with similar expressions of disbelief.

“I didn’t ask him to. He just did it. I helped.”

Kansas nodded, satisfied. “He sounds all right.”

I recounted the fight until the doors opened and a dozen hotshots rolled in. They looked exhausted, but with purpose in their eyes. They all located us then the group of guys I’d mentioned. Most split off to the bar, except Zeke, Watts, and a few others.

“Hey,” Zeke said, a tired but warm smile on his face.

“You didn’t have to come,” I said.

He shrugged. “I wanted to.”

After a moment, I remembered my cousins. “These ladies are my cousins, Spenser and Kansas.”

“Ladies,” Kansas said, amused.

Watts’ eyes lit up when he shook Kansas’s hand.

It was Zeke’s turn to introduce his friends. He waited a few more seconds until the rest joined us. “Watts, Fish, Sugar, Jew, Taco, Smitty, Scooter, Sancho, and Pup.”

“I’m Naomi, these are my cousins, Spenser and Kansas.”

“Interesting names,” Watts said.

“You should talk,” Spenser said, her gaze meeting Sugar’s.

“We’re an interesting family,” Kansas said.

“I bet,” Watts said with a grin.

“This is your crew?” I asked Zeke.

“Part of them,” Zeke said.

“*Part* of them?” Kansas said, scanning the crowd while she shook hands.

“We have a crew of nineteen. The others had things to do or wanted to rest. We just got back in.”

Spenser and Kansas finished shaking hands. Spenser got to Sugar last. She smiled, holding onto his hand while she talked. “I guess you brought the mountain back down with you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with a slight Southern drawl. It was dark, but I was pretty sure he was blushing.

Sugar looked like an actor I’d seen in several movies who used to be one of those fancy for-show wrestlers. He was bald and huge but cut like he was training for a bodybuilding competition. His biceps were as big as Spenser’s head, and he was at least a head and a half taller than she was. I could also see a teaser of a massive tattoo on his upper arm that peeked from his short-sleeved shirt.

Spenser’s lashes batted. I’d never seen her cheeks flush, and I couldn’t tell in the dim light, but I was pretty sure she was blushing.

“He looks like—”

“The Rock?” Zeke asked, amused. “I know. We missed an opportunity with the nickname, but he’s the biggest teddy bear. He could easily kill somebody, but he’d probably cry after.”

I breathed out a laugh, interested to see how more conversation with him and Spenser would go. Her last boyfriend, Greg, was the second-best sniper in our unit. He was known as the divider of the men from the boys and sent weaker recruits packing. I wasn’t sure Sugar could handle Spenser.

Jerry came over with a rag and carrying another high-top table. He set it down and began placing chairs. The hotshots went into action to help, moving tables around. The seating arrangement from a small square table and four chairs to enough tables to form a U shape with thirteen chairs. Jerry wiped them off, took orders, then patted my shoulder before returning to the bar.

Kansas eyed me for a moment then returned to being social again, laughing at something Watts had just said.

Zeke stood next to me, smiling at his friends chatting it up with my cousins.

“They remind me of you,” he said.

I smiled, watching Spenser focus her attention on Sugar. “Well,” I said. “That would make sense. We grew up together.”

“Isn’t Jerry worried about you being in here together? If all three

of you get mad, the whole place might blow up.”

“He hasn’t said as much,” I said. I saw Spenser and Kansas giggling. For some reason I didn’t want to do the same with Zeke, so I kept my features smooth, fighting the urge to smile too much or find him too funny.

“Are those the guys who were flirting with you?” Zeke said, nodding to the small group across the dance floor. They were looking over their shoulder at us intermittently, clearly discussing our new band of brothers.

“We handled it.”

“Just asking. Everything all right?”

“Yes, why?” I asked, looking up at him.

“I just...” He lost his train of thought, and I knew why. We were just inches away. I could feel his gentle breath on my face. There was still a hint of the smell of smoke on his clothes, but I liked it; it reminded me a little bit of the oil fields on fire in Iraq.

“You just what?” I asked.

“Looky here!” the man from before said, grabbing Zeke’s shoulder. “I owe you an apology. I sort of hit on your girl earlier. I’m Keith.” He pointed to his group across the bar. “Those are my buddies.”

I had to give Keith credit for approaching such a large group alone, especially when he knew at least one of us had a weapon.

“Yep.” Zeke stared at me, taking a swig.

I’d never liked the idea of belonging to anyone, of being anyone’s *girl*. Matt and I were partners. But I liked that Zeke didn’t deny it.

Spenser and Kansas were subtly keeping an eye on Keith, and Spenser tapped on the table with her index finger, signaling us that possible trouble was heading over in the form of the rest of Keith’s group.

“Come on, let’s order another round,” one of Keith’s friends said, tugging on his hoodie. The rest of their group seemed friendly enough, greeting the hotshots.

Jerry brought another round to our table.

“Naomi,” Watts called, sliding a beer down to me.

“Naomi,” Keith repeated.

“Don’t do it,” I warned.

He looked at Zeke and patted him on the back hard enough to move Zeke forward several inches. “You know her name backward is I MOAN? Tell us, is that true?”

I closed my eyes. “Shit.”

Zeke attacked him, taking him to the ground. The two groups reacted, trying to separate the two.

“Say something else,” Zeke said, fighting off his colleagues to get to Keith.

“I didn’t mean anything by it!” Keith yelled, wiping blood from his nose and lip.

Keith’s friends apologized while they pulled him away, but they didn’t get too far before Keith cried out. I already knew what had happened. They’d made the mistake of bringing him too close to Kansas on their way back to where they were before.

Keith held up his crooked fingers. “Someone grabbed my fucking hand! They’re broken!”

The hotshots and Keith’s friends made noises, all grossed out by the multiple fractures in his ring and pinky fingers.

“Better get him to the ER,” Kansas said. “Before I break the other three.”

“What the fuck? These women are demons! That one put a knife to my dick earlier! You’ve been warned!” Keith yelled while he was escorted out by his friends.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have come back for more, genius!” Watts yelled, then turned to Kansas. “You did that?” he asked her.

“Possibly,” she said.

Watts smiled, in awe. “I think I’m in love.”

“You got a knife?” Sugar asked Spenser.

She shrugged.

The chatter with the hotshots picked up, and I straightened Zeke’s

shirt. “Why do you insist on this nonsense when you know I can take care of myself?”

“I don’t know,” he said, sitting in the chair next to me. “It’s the way I was raised. And I...”

“You what?” I asked when he didn’t finish.

“I like you,” he said.

“I’m married.”

Zeke paused. “Then tell me you just wanna be friends.”

I opened my mouth, but the words didn’t come out. I took a swig of my beer instead, pretending to watch the others laugh and enjoy one another’s company.

chapter fifteen

myths

Naomi

The doors of the Colorado Springs Hotel swept open, and glorious air conditioning blew into my face. A dark-haired college kid stood at the check-in counter. Men and women were still ambling around the lobby, a pint or bottle in their hands. The bartender was in a vest and bowtie, obviously trying to class the place up a bit.

Watts leaned against the counter to order but was interrupted.

“Sorry, last call has come and gone,” the bartender said.

“What? C’mon, Stavros! It’s not even eleven o’clock!” Watts said.

“Does this look like a Hilton to you?” a man said, turning around on his stool. His eyes were blood shot and glossed over.

Zeke touched his shoulder. “Whoa. Tyler. You’re blitzed.”

“Fuck off,” Tyler said, pulling his shoulder away.

Zeke didn’t seem to mind. “Let’s get you up to your room. C’mon. You’re not doing anyone any good down here.”

Tyler stared at him for a minute, looking lost. “They arrested her.”

“I know,” Zeke said.

“I had to put her in a cab and send her back to Estes.”

“I know.”

“She hates me.”

“Tyler. She got drunk and wandered around a restricted area, and they found her almost in the black. She’s lucky she’s still not in jail.”

Tyler looked down. “I can’t help her.”

Zeke forced him to stand. “Not by getting drunk, you’re not.

C'mon."

Zeke walked Tyler to the left and turned around, gesturing that he'd be back.

"What was that about?" Kansas asked.

"That's Tyler Maddox," Watts said. "His girlfriend is a photographer. She wasn't allowed up on the mountain, so she fell off the wagon and decided to go up on her own. It's a bad deal. She's in a lot of trouble."

"Been there," Spenser said.

"You put a knife in all four of his tires and sugar in his gas tank. Not the same as wandering the burning wilderness drunk, Spense," Kansas said.

"So I guess I don't need to ask if you really put a knife to that guy's family jewels at the bar. What do y'all do when you get into it? How are you both still alive?" Sugar asked in his deep voice.

Spenser held up the bottom hem of her shirt, showing her four pack and a two-inch long horizontal scar.

"Appendix?" Sugar asked.

"The bitch stabbed me," Spenser said.

"It was our last fight," Kansas said. "In my defense, she broke my jaw and I had to eat through a straw for months."

"Damn," Sugar said, appalled.

"That's nothing," I said. "Our fathers have shot each other ... on three different occasions."

Watts' eyes widened. "You weren't kidding about your family."

Zeke returned. He wasn't smiling or making light of Tyler's state in anyway, instead choosing to change the subject. "Everybody up for cards?"

Spenser and Kansas smiled when Watts and Sugar both voiced their willingness to join. The rest of the hotshots peaced out.

We took the elevator to the second floor, then paused long enough for Zeke to unlock his door. Zeke's room was clean before, but living with men all my life, the absence of any mess was a little suspicious.

“You cleaned a little before we came up, didn’t you?” I asked.

Zeke looked caught. “I told you I’m cleaner than most of the other guys.”

“It’s true,” Sugar said, pointing at him.

“But, yeah,” Zeke confessed.

Everyone took a seat, Spenser and Kansas at the table, Sugar on one queen bed, Watts on the other. Zeke offered me the desk chair.

“Anyone want a beer?” He bent over while simultaneously opening a cabinet under the television, revealing a mini fridge. He opened it, waiting for someone to speak up, which we all did. One by one, he beered us then sat on the floor next to me.

“So if your dads are brothers, how do y’all look so different?” Watts asked.

Spenser, Kansas, and I glanced at each other.

“You mean why are we so pale and she’s so dark?” Spenser asked. “Our mom is a full-on ginger. Her parents—our grandparents—are both gingers and both fifty percent Scottish. Our dads are third generation Armenian-American.”

They all looked at me.

“Naomi looks like her dad. We look like our mom,” Kansas said with a smile.

“So how are you liking it here?” Watts asked.

“Uh ... it’s good, I guess. I came here for a job,” I said.

“From where?” Sugar asked.

“Vegas.”

Like everyone did when I told them I lived in Vegas, they looked impressed, as if I lived on the strip and enjoyed the clubs every night. I worked night security for some high-profile clients and slept during the day. I kept just busy enough not to think about Matt when I was conscious. It wasn’t really a life at all.

“And where are y’all from?” Sugar asked my cousins.

“Arizona,” Spenser said.

“Desert life. They like it hot,” Watts said.

Kansas laughed. I tried not to roll my eyes.

“What kind of job?” Sugar asked.

“Contract security,” I said.

“She’s a Marine,” Zeke said. “She’s the biggest bad ass of us all.”

“Really?” Sugar asked.

I nodded.

“Explains a lot,” he said.

I smiled. “Why do people keep saying that?”

“Have you heard all the rumors about this town?” Watts asked.

“The fire will be approaching the Cheyenne Mountain Complex if the winds don’t change. I wonder how they’re going to handle it. It’s a top-secret facility. The Air Force has a base there, but NORAD is there too. Tanks and Green Berets ... what the hell are Green Berets doing at an Air Force Station? I heard President Bush went there for 9/11.”

“That’s a myth,” Kansas said.

“Don’t forget about all the science shit going in and out of there,” Zeke said. “A friend of ours who’s from here saw a wreck on NORAD Road involving a government truck. They unloaded a metal coffin with a window on top and some tech and piping connected to it. Put it in a new truck and zipped it away to Cheyenne Mountain.”

“A metal coffin,” I repeated. “He followed it all the way to the mountain?”

“As far as he could,” Sugar said. “If you go too far down the one road, soldiers’ll point rifles at you, and you’ll be escorted straight to prison.”

“What do you think was in it?” Spenser asked.

Watts smiled. “Some people say they’re doing experiments deep in the Complex. Aliens and stuff.”

Spenser and Kansas laughed.

“You can see it from the roof. Wanna go?” Sugar asked.

“To this roof?” Spenser asked, pointing up.

He nodded.

Spenser looked at her sister, and Kansas nodded.

“Naomi?” Kansas asked.

“I’ll pass.”

“I’ve seen it,” Zeke said.

The girls stood, and Watts and Sugar led them to the hall. When the door closed, the energy changed. Zeke and I had been alone before—we’d even shared a bed, but this was different.

“I’m surprised you didn’t take the smoke break,” Zeke said.

“I smoke the cigarettes, they don’t smoke me.”

“Naomi...” He touched my boot.

“Yeah?”

He hesitated. “I was waiting to see if you’d punch me for touching you.”

“How about you just ask?”

“Because just thinking about saying the words makes me feel like a kid.”

I waited, and he rolled his eyes then focused on the floor. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to hold your hand.”

“I’m married.”

He winced then looked up at me, half annoyed, half amused. “Now if you were just gonna shoot me down, why would you have me ask?”

I shrugged. “I wondered if you’d grow a pair and do it.”

“Well, I did. Now what?”

I looked around the room then took a swig of my beer before standing. “Smoke break.”

Zeke reached up, holding my hand, staring at my fingers encompassed in his. “They’re pretty soft for a Marine.”

I looked around, not knowing how to feel. When Peter touched my hand, I damn near had a meltdown. I waited for the pain to seep in, to stain my soul, to be reminded by the anger that Matt would never touch me again.

Seconds passed, but not one moment of rage or agony slithered from the dark corners of my heart to breach the surface.

Zeke’s hand was rough and warm, the acres of land he’d torn up to

separate the living, breathing wilderness from the black death that followed the fires he fought evident in every scar and callous.

An unexpected urgency to feel his scuffed skin tighter commanded me to slide my fingers between his and squeeze. Zeke's brows pulled together as he kept his gaze on our fingers intertwined. "I really like you."

My cousins' voices were just outside the door a second before they burst through, hugging themselves.

"Shit! It gets cold at night here!" Kansas said. She stopped the same time as Spenser, Watts, and Sugar, all of them noticing my hand in Zeke's.

I pulled away. "I was just going out for a smoke. I think it's time to head home anyway."

Kansas looked over her shoulder at Watts, unable to hide her disappointment.

"Sure, yeah," Spenser said.

"Come back anytime, please," Sugar said, smiling at my oldest cousin.

Spenser tucked a few blonde strands behind one ear. "Yeah. I'd like that."

"We cycle in and out from the fire, but we get R&R," Watts said. "Maybe I could get your number and text you?"

Kansas lit up the room with her wide grin. "Yeah. We should do that."

They switched phones, and I could tell Sugar was aching to do the same with Spenser but couldn't quite say it. I thought she would initiate like she had in the past, but she seemed disappointed—or maybe she decided she didn't like Sugar after all.

We said our goodbyes, then Spenser, Kansas, and I loaded up in the FJ and headed home. They wouldn't shut up. It was like middle school all over again. Sugar's muscles, Watts' hair and eyes.

"He's just so...." Kansas said from the back seat.

"Pretty," I said.

“Yes! He is so pretty,” she said, as if it was a good thing.

“What about you?” Spenser asked. “Zeke’s nice.”

“Yes,” I said simply.

“And?” Kansas asked.

“That’s it,” I said. “He’s nice.”

“Naomi,” Spenser said. She made a show of turning in her seat to face me. “It’s okay to be happy.”

“I’m married,” I said.

“You’re a widow,” Kansas said.

I sighed. “I know.”

“Do you think he’d want you to move on? To be happy without him?”

“It doesn’t matter what he wants. He’s not here,” I said.

My cousins were quiet until I pulled into the drive and turned off the engine.

“Just...” Spenser said, grabbing my arm with her firm grip before I could reach for the handle. “Just think about it, okay?”

“I am,” I said. “I will.”

They both smiled, and we made our way inside.

chapter sixteen
someone left to tell

Zeke

With the fire at our backs, we hiked higher up the Cheyenne Mountain. It was rockier, more unstable than our previous location and a bitch to navigate, but if the winds changed that facility would be consumed.

“So it’s like ... top secret? Think if we save it they’ll let us inside to look around?” Runt asked.

“No, genius,” Watts said, hanging on to his Pulaski. “The government won’t give us top security clearance for doing our jobs.”

“Just askin’,” he said with a shrug.

Runt was talented, but in so many ways he was still a kid. He had brown hair and brown eyes like me, but he was whiter than white and had a splash of freckles over his nose. One of his talents was his youth—he was quick and fearless, having no knowledge of his own mortality. I was sad for the impending loss because guys were injured or killed often in our line of work, and the one known element of our days was that we would all at some point suffer loss or be lost.

Chief divided us, hoping to meet in the middle. He warned us the winds could change at any moment. The first was jumping from tree to tree like a monkey running for its life. Reaching and then igniting, the fire sizzled and roared, the tenor and bass creating a song of destruction that was also the first step to rebirth.

“Cat, you’re on lookout,” Jubal pointed to the top of the first ridge.

Cat nodded and climbed the steep incline to where he’d watch our

bags. I made sure Ragnar wasn't thirsty then ripped the cord, letting his metal teeth gnaw through a large tree. It was a shame that I either had to slit its throat or let it burn to a crisp. The forest was just fuel to most wild land firefighters, but I'd been intimately acquainted with life or death decisions, and most times the only alternative to salvation was to end the misery. Thankfully for me, Brad and Jenn were experts at salvation.

We dug and sawed for an hour before Cat signaled the fire had changed direction. He radioed for us to come to him, but by the time we made it, the fire had already cut off the other half of our crew.

"Just go! Go!" Chief yelled over the radio. "Meet at C-three rendezvous point!"

With tools in hand, the Maddox twins, Fish, Runt, Smitty, Watts, Cat and I set out for the predetermined Plan B. It was never a good feeling to get separated from the group, but it happened from time to time.

Tyler Maddox yelled at us to keep up. "Let's go, guys! Double time!"

We picked up the pace, everyone looking over their shoulder and hoping the winds would change again. The hills were rocky, but there was still enough fuel to lead the fire right to us. It was growing and picking up speed. The smoke caught up to us, and I could feel the heat nipping at my back.

"Wait!" Tyler yelled. "Wait." He pulled out his map.

"Whatever you're doing, do it fast," Smitty said, looking over his shoulder.

"If that bitch keeps burning this direction, it will eat that facility whole," Tyler said.

I peered over the tree line, seeing the top of an antenna in the distance. "Let's get to work."

"We stay here and we'll be toast within the hour," Fish said.

I looked around at my brothers. We were all beat up, dirty, and exhausted, and we were discussing whether or not to stretch ourselves to our physical limit. "There are thousands of people in that facility.

This is what we signed up for, isn't it?"

Fish thought about it then nodded. Everyone else readied their tools, and Tyler barked orders.

The sawyer downed trees, the swamper cleared the brush, and the diggers created a three-foot fire line, hoping to God the fire wouldn't jump. We were a crew cut down by half and shorting ourselves time to evacuate.

An hour passed, then another twenty minutes. My arms were shaking, screaming for a break, sweat poured into my eyes, but none of us stopped until Tyler called it.

"All right, we've done what we could. We're out of time, let's go!"

The group moved slower and clumsier.

"We didn't do the math on being too exhausted to evacuate," I said to Tyler. "Rookie mistake that could cost us."

"I'm the one who didn't do the math," he said, guilt and frustration weighing down his face. "But we're not dying today." He put one hand to the side of his mouth so his voice would go further. "Pick it up, guys. Day isn't done!"

Every part of my body screamed to stop, to rest, and every third beat of my heart felt like it was rattling my rib cage. Multi-colored sparkles filled my eyes, and I leaned over to grab my knees.

"Don't stop now, Zeke," Tyler said, pulling me along.

"I'm dizzy as fuck," I said.

Tyler knew we didn't have time for that shit. "You stop, and you won't start again. Keep! Going!"

In the same moment, Fish made a misstep and tumbled over the ridge. Runt fell to his knees and tried to catch him, but Fish's sleeve slipped through his fingers.

Fish fell six feet, then caught himself with the fingertips of one hand on a small rock jutting out, his knees and feet crashing into the side. He looked up; his eyes wide. The small rock wasn't enough to help his fingers offset the weight of his body, and his grasp began to slip away.

Runt took another swing, reaching down and nearly falling over himself before Jubal grabbed his ankle. “Fish!” Runt cried. “Grab my hand!”

Their shaking, dirty fingers were just inches away.

Before any of us could react, Fish slipped away. Rocks and ledges broke his fall for mere seconds at a time, thuds and grunts the only sounds. We watched helplessly as he incurred injury after injury as he fell to the bottom, his helmet hitting a large rock at the bottom with a crack.

“Fish!” Runt yelled, falling to his knees.

Tyler and I stared at each other in horror, and then we descended the side of the mountain to get to our friend.

Fish was still yelling when we reached him, holding his ankle.

“Is it broken?” I asked, taking a look.

“I don’t think so,” he said, breathing through the pain as he stared at his injury. “I tried to get up... I ain’t walking out of here.”

“Make a sled, we’re dragging him out!” Taylor yelled, already pulling a tarp and rope from his pack. “We’ve got no time! Let’s move!”

“I’m going to scout a path out,” Smitty said. He jogged ahead in the narrow base of the ravine, disappearing around a corner.

Watts fashioned a make-shift wrap for Fish’s ankle while the Maddoxes, Cat, Runt and I built a sled to carry Fish out. We tied the last knots, lifted Fish carefully, then picked up the edges of the tarp.

“Just keep going until we see Smitty,” I said.

We had to carry Fish over the rockier areas and dragged him over what we could. We moved even slower than before, and the fire had gained ground behind us.

Smitty appeared, breathing hard, his hands on his hips. He shook his head.

“Dead end. Almost straight up on both sides. We’ll have to fashion some kind of a hoist.”

“Then let’s get started,” Taylor said. We picked up Fish to save time, but when we arrived at the dead end, it was more daunting than

I'd imagined. The climb was at least a hundred yards.

We lay Fish against a tree and took five minutes to discuss a plan.

"We don't have time," Smitty said. "The fire is ten minutes out."

"I'll strap him to my back," Cat said. He was the second biggest only to Sugar, but he was also the most tired. His whole body shook with exhaustion.

Tyler shook his head. "We'd have to hoist you both up, and it's too much weight."

"Me then," Runt said.

Tyler shook his head. "You can't climb that with him on you. You fall and we'll have two injured. Can't risk it."

"Then what are we going to do?" Smitty asked. "We can't just leave him here."

"I can deploy my fire shelter," Fish said. "Come back for me once it blows over."

"No," Smitty said. "Those things give you maybe a 50/50 chance. No fucking way, Fish."

I thought about the tree and how I'd given it an easier death than by fire. Fish wouldn't get that luxury.

Tyler tried to call in that we were trapped, but we were too dug in, and the radio had no signal. "God damn it!" he said, throwing his Pulaski to the ground.

"We're not leaving you behind," I said to Fish. "No one gets left behind."

"You guys aren't dying down here," Fish said, his face pale. "Not for me."

"You're not either," I said. I dropped my pack and took a running start for the cliff wall.

"You can do it, Zeke!" Runt said as I pulled myself up to the next protruding rock.

I anchored a foot on some roots, but ultimately slid down, losing my grip at the halfway point.

"Fuck!" I yelled, punching the wall.

“We’ve got five minutes,” Smitty said, his voice somber. “Maybe we should all deploy our shelters.”

Tyler looked down, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t ... I don’t know. Zeke?”

“We’re out of options,” I said. There wasn’t a worse answer I could give, but we had to make a decision. So many things ran through my head... Brad, Jenn, my siblings, and what would happen if I didn’t make it. I kept coming back to Naomi and how in the fuck she could run into another guy who risked his life every day. I thought about the things we wouldn’t do, the places we wouldn’t walk, and I’d never regretted anything so much in my life.

“Damn,” Taylor said. “Who’s gonna tell my girl?”

“Someone will,” Tyler said, putting his hand on his brother’s shoulder.

Taylor’s lips formed a hard line. “You gotta go, Ty. You gotta climb that cliff and get out of here.”

Tyler shook his head with a small smile. “Not leaving you.”

Taylor’s eyes glossed over. “*Dad*, Tyler. He can’t lose both of us.”

Tyler looked up at the dirt wall, then back at his twin. “There’s only time to boost up one. You go.”

Taylor looked back at the approaching fire then back at his brother. “Not leaving you here.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Tyler said, his temper thin. “But we both can’t stay.” He pointed to the cliff. “You’re the better climber anyway. Go. Explain to Dad. Tell him I’m sorry. Tell him I’m with Mom.”

Runt took off his helmet and raked his fingers through his hair, his eyes wide. “Fuck, we’re going to die.”

The heat grew more intense with every passing second, the smoke filtering down the ravine.

Taylor’s eyes met the gaze of each of his crew. He wiped his eyes, his mouth, then nodded. “Okay ... okay.”

OceanofPDF.com

chapter seventeen

the spitfire

Naomi

We followed Trex to the locker room as a team. I hadn't had time to workout, and that was the only explanation I had for the uneasiness that had come over me in the last half-hour. The guys checked their weapons, scrolled through their phones for a few minutes, then prepared for afternoon orders. We were all restless, walking the corridors day in and day out, and we all struggled with the guilt that we didn't feel the peace we thought we'd find back together again with guns in our hands and off work by dinnertime.

Trex's radio scratched, and Saunders came over the speaker. "Trex, report to the control room with your team immediately."

"Copy that," he said, gesturing for us to roll out.

We made our way to Saunders, our excitement for a possible mission almost palpable.

Saunders was standing in front of the Control Room entrance when we arrived. He escorted us past the computers and ancient equipment with dozens of knobs and buttons to the corner where the exterior monitors were. "The Queen's Canyon fire is within ten miles of the Complex."

"So? The irrigation systems and the Complex Fire Department can handle it. We can bring all personnel and equipment inside," Trex said. He looked at us, taking a step toward the door. "We should get started."

"The winds aren't in our favor, and..." Saunders pointed at a

section a few miles out from the outer fences. “There’s a small group of wildfire fighters who are getting closer to our outer perimeter. They’ve been instructed to save the Complex. But if the winds change, they’re fucked.”

Trex’s expression changed. Two deep lines formed between his brows. “The Alpines are out there today. Did anyone on com happen to say it was them?”

My throat felt tight, and that uneasiness I’d been feeling intensified.

“No, they didn’t,” Saunders said.

No one was moving. “We should get out there,” I said. Keep eyes out, maybe be ready for a quick evac.”

“You’re not trained for that,” Saunders said.

Before I could cut off his balls with my words, Trex did his thing.

“Get the satellite on the area,” he said, pointing at the monitor. “Now.”

Saunders sighed. “Your objective is to make sure the people in this facility and property are safe. That’s your only objective.”

“We’ve all been staying at the same hotel for weeks. They’re all friends, and they’re not only civilians, but civil servants,” Trex said, taking a step toward Saunders. “And they’re protecting this complex. This falls directly under my objective.”

Saunders was trying to hide that was he was intimidated, but the deep bob of his Adam’s Apple when he swallowed gave him away. “With all due respect, Trexler, I disagree.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you agree or not.” He headed for the door. “Let’s go.”

I tried not to grin too much when we followed, glad to see my commanding officer back to his old self. He stopped just outside the metal door of the control room. “Naomi, go upstairs and get us clearance to help.”

“What?” I said, instantly feeling sick. “How?”

Trex frowned. “From Bennett.”

I began to talk, but nothing came for several seconds until I felt my cheeks flush, and that pissed me off enough to speak. “You want me to owe him a favor? Are you fucking serious? There’s gotta be another way.”

Harbinger frowned. He wasn’t happy with the plan either.

“It’s the quickest way,” Trex said.

I looked down Charlie corridor to the stairs that led to Peter’s office. We had no time to waste. Trex was right.

“Damn it,” I hissed under my breath.

I climbed the stairs two at a time, propelling myself forward by pulling on the railing. Two security guards were standing on each side of the door, and I showed them my badge.

“Hold up,” one said. “Is he expecting you?”

I sighed. “Call it in.”

“Is he expecting you?” he repeated, this time firmer.

“No, but he’ll want to see me. I have info he needs to hear.”

“You’re going to have to call Bianca,” the other piped in. “Make an appointment.”

“It’s time sensitive. Call it the fuck in,” I demanded. “Naomi Abrams. Right now!” I barked in my militia unit commander voice.

They both went for their radios, but only one alerted the other side of the wall of my presence. Before he could even explain or say my name, Bianca gave them the green light, and the door clicked.

The soldiers stepped aside, and I tried and failed to keep the petty grin off my face.

Bianca was standing, her blue blazer and matching pencil skirt hugging her thick curves. Peter wasn’t always in town, but when he was, Bianca always looked like a million bucks.

She gestured to the door with her outstretched hand, absolutely annoyed at my unannounced arrival. “He’s just through there, Abrams.”

“Thank you,” I said. I walked through his door, closing it behind me.

Peter was standing at the end of a rectangular mahogany table, pretending to be preoccupied with his bookshelf.

“I need your help,” I said. *No time to waste, right?*

Peter turned, unable to keep the emotion from his face. “Sure, whatever you need.”

His response stunned me for a second, and I stumbled over my request. “There is a group of wildfire fighters trying to keep the canyon fire from reaching the Complex. It’s less than ten miles from here. The Complex Fire Department is on it, and we’re securing equipment and personnel, but...”

“Yes?”

“Trex would like to take our team to evacuate the hotshots if necessary.”

Peter frowned. “Are they in trouble?”

“They could be. Peter, we don’t have time for this. We need a green light. From you.”

Peter thought about it for a few seconds.

“You said whatever I need,” I said. “I need authorization. These guys are my friends. They’re Trex’s friends. We have to make sure they’re not in danger.”

“They’re always in danger, Naomi, they’re firefighters.”

“Peter,” I warned. “I have never asked you for a goddamned thing. Make this happen.”

“Are you giving me orders?” he asked, perturbed.

I grit my teeth. “Fine. I’m calling in a favor.”

“A favor,” he repeated, an edge of curiosity in his voice. “How am I going to justify our security team leaving the facility during an emergency?”

“Trex is locking everything down as we speak. Peter...” I swallowed. “Please.”

“Evac only? No hero shit?”

“Yes.”

“I have your word. Straight there, straight back?”

“Yes, Peter! For fuck’s sake! Make the call!”

He looked down, his eyes darting around the floor, and then his gaze met mine. “Bianca! Trex’s team is clear to leave the perimeter to evacuate civilians. Let everyone know,” he called, still staring at me.

“Thank you,” I said, turning on my heels and rushing out. I was barely at the bottom of the stairs when an alarm sounded. I used my radio as I ran. “Trex! We’ve got clearance for evac only. Best I could do.”

“Copy that,” Trex called back.

I picked up speed. The fire was moving fast, so we had to too. We had less than half an hour to locate the Alpines and get them to safety if they were in trouble, maybe less. My bad feeling only got worse the closer I came to the warehouse.

I turned a corner, sprinted down Delta corridor, and finally reached the warehouse, running all the way to my team only to see the large exterior door closing.

“Are they going to open it again or what?” Martinez asked. His faced darkened as the door pinched off the sunlight.

Trex shook his head. “The general has the Complex on lockdown.”

I looked around for an alternative, then nodded to a smaller door. “We can fit the ATVs through there.”

Trex looked at the guards. “Close it behind us?”

The older one pondered, then nodded.

“Load up!” Trex yelled, jogging to the corner of the warehouse with rows of ATVs.

We each grabbed helmets, chose an ATV, revved the engines and ramped out the smaller door, zooming past the Complex firefighters and the still-open gate they were working out of. We kept our radios on, fanning out at Trex’s command, racing over the rocky terrain of the Cheyenne Mountain toward the area where we last saw the Alpine crew on the screens in the control room.

“Bark if you see anything,” Trex called across the radio.

We drove for ten minutes, then fifteen, our ATVs kicking up dust

rivaling the smoke. The dark cloud settling in the Rocky Mountain National Forest grew thicker the more distance we created between us and the Complex.

The unease from earlier had grown to worry then fear. Trex had called in to Saunders a few times to get eyes on the Alpines, but they hadn't seen them.

"Flames, one o'clock!" Kitsch said.

We drove past drought-parched aspens and blue spruces that stood helpless in the crosshairs of the fire. One whipped me in the face, reaching in for my cheek past my helmet and goggles. Trex signaled for us to slow and then stop just feet from a shallow cliff's edge. He dismounted and looked across. The fire was less than two hundred yards away and barreling toward us, and I could swear I could hear muffled yells in the flames.

"What the hell?" Sloan said. The smoke was clearing before our eyes. The winds had changed.

"Trex!" a barely audible but familiar voice came from below.

I yanked off my helmet and scrambled from my ATV. "Zeke!" I stopped just short of the edge, fell to my knees, looking down. Zeke and a small group of Alpines were standing below, working hard to fashion a hoist for Fish. He was leaning against the twisted trunk of a large aspen, dirty, sweaty, and in pain.

Trex stood behind me. "Everyone all right?" he called down.

Taylor Maddox stood next to his twin brother Tyler and Zeke, looking up at us in confusion.

"What are you doing here?" Zeke asked, his eyes bouncing from me to Trex then the rest of our team.

"Does it matter?" I asked with a wide grin. Even with the fire closing in, I was happy to see him.

Zeke and Taylor glanced back at the approaching flames. "You got a rope?" Taylor asked. "Fish rolled his ankle. We're not going to beat the fire outta here."

"Lucky for you," Trex said as Harbinger let down a rope. "We've got

wheels too. Is this everyone?"

Tyler nodded.

The Alpines sprang into action, tying the rope around Fish's chest. We pulled him up first, then the rest of the Alpines climbed up one at a time. They were exhausted but used the last of their energy to pull themselves up the rope and over the ledge. We yelled encouragement to each one as the fire burned closer. The smoke began to surround us just as the last hotshot, Taylor, had nearly reached the halfway point. The fire crawled across the ground and soon the end of the rope was flickering.

"Let's go!" Tyler barked. If he was afraid, he hid it well. "Double time!"

Taylor put one hand over the other, but the flame was climbing faster than he was.

"He's not going to make it," Zeke said.

My mind spun for something quick and drastic.

"Move your ass, Maddox!" Tyler yelled.

As the fire reached Taylor's feet, his brother smacked Zeke and lurched forward, his top half falling over the edge, his legs following. Zeke dove for Tyler's ankles, grabbing them just in time.

"Got him!" Tyler yelled.

My heart was throwing punches at my rib cage, watching Zeke nearly go over the edge.

The other Alpines joined Zeke and heaved both Maddoxes to the top.

Trex kicked off the rope, letting it fall to the bottom, watching the fire engulf what was left.

The Alpines were covered in soot, their shoulders sagging from exhaustion.

"You okay?" I asked Watts. He nodded. I turned to Zeke, looking him over. "You okay?" I repeated as I ran my hands over his baggy yellow shirt and khaki cargo pants. The fire was burning behind us. I could feel the heat permeate my uniform and light up my face, forming

instant beads of sweat on my forehead that dripped down.

Zeke was already soaked. He removed his helmet just long enough to wipe the dripping sweat from his face. “Yeah,” he smiled, looking down at me. “Thanks for picking me up from work.”

Zeke climbed on the back of my ATV, wrapping his arms tight around my middle, Taylor with Trex, Tyler with Sloan, Fish with Martinez; Runt and Smitty crawled on with Kitsch, Watts and Cat with Harbinger. The smoke was already choking us by the time we pulled away.

Sloan pulled a bit ahead, and I surged forward. The Complex fire crew was gone when we arrived at the fence line, and even through the smoke, I could see that the warehouse doors were closed. The ATVs kicked up dirt when we paused, ash falling around us.

Soaked, bleeding from sharp branches, saturated with mud, soot, ash, grass, gravel and leaves, we slowed to a stop near the entrance of the Complex. The parking lot was just a few hundred yards away. Everyone turned back, watching the fire twist and devour everything in its path.

“Hold up,” Zeke said. “It’s about to turn.”

The trees beyond the fire line that had moments before waved their branches toward us, showing the flames the way to the Complex, were now sacrificing themselves, inviting the fire to devour them whole.

We heaved, trying to catch our breaths through the thick smoke as it seemed to be magically pulled away with the wind. Just like that, the fire moved in a different direction, away from the Complex, away from us.

We sat for a moment, in disbelief that we were no longer being chased. A breeze was the difference between death and destruction.

Sloan removed his helmet. “Holy shit. It’s like that damn thing has a mind of its own.”

“I have to remind myself that it doesn’t,” Zeke said.

I turned to face him, his arms still around my waist. “How did you know? That it was about to turn?”

Zeke winked at me. "It's a secret."

Fish groaned, looking down at his swollen ankle. He was missing a boot, and Smitty's arm was burned.

"Trex to Saunders. Come in, over," he called over the radio, leaning my head toward the mic.

"Saunders," he repeated, his radio clicking off.

"These men need medical attention. Call for a couple of ambulances to meet us at the first security check and make a call to their HQ to report their guys are safe, over."

"Copy that, over," Saunders said, his side going silent again.

"Isn't there a medical facility on site?" Zeke asked.

I kept my voice down. "It's a top-secret, high security military base. No one gets in without prior clearance. No exceptions."

He looked down at my shoulder patch, my badge, then simply nodded.

Trex motioned for us to continue, transporting the dirty, sweaty, exhausted hotshots to the first booth via the ATVs.

I hopped off when Zeke did, hugging him, then evaluating the new cuts on his face.

Zeke winced. "Did you have to drive through every tree branch between the cliff and the Complex?"

"Yes," I said. "Did you notice we were the first ones back?"

One side of his mouth turned up. "You're so damn competitive."

I winked at him. "You have no idea."

The ambulance arrived, loading up the injured first. I couldn't stop checking Zeke for injuries, for some reason unable to wrap my head around the fact that he was safe. Something still didn't feel right.

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," he said again, touching my arm. "A little dizzy still, but I'll be okay."

"You're sure?"

He kissed my forehead. "I'm sure. Everyone is okay."

"I'm not asking about everyone," I said.

He grinned. "I know."

The sun had gone down, and it felt safe in the darkness to let my softer side show.

"Fish?" a woman called, jumping out of the back after the first paramedic.

"Here," Fish called. "Over here, Logan."

She hugged him, tears and dirt smudging her face, her dark hair sticking to her wet cheeks. "You're okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay," Fish said.

Sanchez leaned in to whisper, "Isn't that Bobby's mechanic?"

"Yeah," Jubal said, watching her hug Fish with curiosity.

Another man stepped out of the passenger side seeming relieved. He was tall, a squared jaw, and too clean and pretty to be an on-duty hotshot. He was even prettier than Watts.

"Bobby," Zeke said, shaking his hand. "Bobby's our helo pilot. One of the best," he said to me.

"Nice to meet you," I said, nodding.

"What's Reese doing here? Did you stop breaking your helo?"

"She was worried about Fish. And did you just say I was *one* of the best?" Bobby asked with a smirk.

"You didn't find them, did you?" I said.

"Touché," Bobby conceded after a few seconds of surprise. "Just so you know, I've been looking for them all day."

"I looked for them and got them to safety in a few hours," I said.

Zeke smiled at me. "You done with the pissing match, or can I get this taken care of?"

Bobby was amused. Like most pilots, he wasn't easily rattled. "Is that what she's doing?"

I smiled at Bobby then kissed the corner of Zeke's mouth. "I'll see you later, okay?"

Zeke touched his lips, surprised, then stepped into the back, grinning until the doors shut, and they drove away. I was glad that Trex was in no hurry to return to the Complex, allowing us to stand at

the checkpoint until they were out of sight.

“What the hell was that, Nomes?” Sloan asked.

“None of your damn business,” I said, walking to my ATV.

Harbinger slapped Trex’s back. “Good call, boss. Felt good to save lives again.”

“Oorah,” Trex said, putting on his helmet before mounting up and twirling his finger in the air.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter eighteen

Suds

Naomi

I hugged my cousins goodbye, ignoring the tugging in my chest that warned me what the house would feel like once they drove away. They were always welcome. Almost anyone was welcome, but filling the house with people and laughter made the quiet that much worse when they left.

I hugged my middle, standing on the porch until they were out of sight. I couldn't bring myself to go inside.

As soon as their vehicle disappeared, another pulled into the drive. I smiled, relief washing over me.

"Hey," Zeke said, stepping out of his Dodge Ram. He was in a dark wash pair of jeans and a dark gray concert T-shirt, matching the paint on his truck. His black hat was pulled low on his forehead, his black boots loosened and left untied, but he was clean shaven and smelled fresh out of the shower, so I knew the laces were just an attempt to look like he wasn't trying too hard.

"You look good."

He smiled. "I feel better."

"You were sick?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Had some blood work done when they checked me out after you all bailed us out."

"But you'll be okay?"

"Yeah," he said, dismissing my concern with a quick flick of his hand.

How's Fish and Smitty?" I asked.

Zeke climbed the steps and stood next to me. "They'll live. Fish is out for the season."

"Which ends when?"

"Usually October. Just depends."

"You wanna come in?"

He grinned. "Yeah."

I opened the door, and Zeke followed me to the sofa. I sat back, waiting for him to reveal the purpose in his visit.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his fingers together. "I just uh ... I wanted to thank you. I don't know whose idea it was, but now that I know you're Cheyenne Mountain security, I know it probably took an act of congress—literally—to get authorization to leave the facility to save us when a fire is coming your direction."

"It wasn't just me. We all wanted to, the whole team. And you're partly right. It took exactly one congressman to get authorization. But, Zeke, you guys can't talk about our jobs. You can't ask, and you can't tell Darby. She had a thing about soldiers, and Trex is trying to let her get to know him first before he tells her that part."

He hesitated. "Is Trex cool, though? He really cares about her?"

"He worships her."

An awkward silence settled between us, but I was still beyond glad he was there.

He pushed himself to say what he'd been silently mulling over. "Can I ask if it's—your job I mean—if it's safe? Are you safe?"

"Are you?"

"Obviously not."

"Safe is boring," I said.

Zeke laughed. "Yes. Yes, it is. Try explaining that to my family. What does yours think about it? I guess since you're a Marine this sets their mind at ease a little?"

"My dad would be disappointed in me if I wasn't somewhere saving

the world with my rifle. Militia kids spend a lot of time in drills or mock combat. Being serious and lethal is how we get attention from our parents.”

Zeke seemed surprised and impressed at the same time. “I don’t even own a gun.”

“But you have an axe. And whatever that weird thing was you were carrying.”

“A rhino? Pretty cool that you noticed.”

“I notice everything.”

“I noticed your team. It seems like you’d all known each other for years. I know Trex was your husband’s best friend before, right?”

“After Matt died, I joined up. I worked my ass off and pulled some strings to get into Trex’s special unit. His is one of the best. They’re my brothers. I go where they go.”

“Like black ops type of shit?”

“We went all over the world, and if we were caught or killed, no one would claim us.”

“Whoa.”

“I couldn’t save Matt, so I promised to do everything I could to save his friends. Matt sacrificed himself for them, and so would I.”

“Matt was a Marine?”

I hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Trex is a Marine?”

I sighed. “Yes, but, Zeke, you need to keep that between us.”

His brows pulled in. “Okay. So Matt took a bullet or...”

“He fell on a grenade.”

“Whoa,” he said again.

“This is a lot more than I usually talk about, and probably a more intense conversation than you bargained for.”

“Not really. I want to get to know you better.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, perching my elbow on the top of the sofa cushion and leaning my chin on my fist. “What about you? What’s your story?”

“Uh, my foster mom’s name is Jenn. My foster dad is Brad.”

“Foster?”

“Yeah, I worded that weird, I guess. They’re both my foster parents. They’re married. There’s a bunch of us, it’s nuts.”

I smiled. “Brad. Such a dad name.”

“It is.” He chuckled. “I have eleven brothers and sisters from that home. Kendra and Sam are biologically Brad and Jenn’s, Allison, Kara, Charlize, and Oliver were adopted. The rest were just foster kids like me during the time I lived there.”

“You weren’t adopted?”

“They asked. I said no.”

“Were they cool?” I asked.

“Brad and Jenn? Yeah, they were cool. It was just a lot, you know. She was a teacher, he was a firefighter. They struggled. It wasn’t fair to expect them to adopt every child who came through their door.”

“What about your real parents?”

He shifted. “My mom’s name is Crystal. Never met my dad. She is an addict and did a lot of fucked up shit for drugs. I was just one of a dozen of her kids in the system. Her boyfriends came and went, beat us ... she looked the other way.”

“That sucks,” I said, remembering what he said to me about Matt.

He smiled. “Yeah. It does suck. But Brad and Jenn were awesome, and I spent eighth grade through my senior year there, the longest I’d been anywhere. Jenn is an amazing cook, and they were patient with all of us kids. The house was clean, our clothes were clean, they were clean ... couldn’t really ask for better. Brad’s the reason I decided to become a firefighter and then a hotshot. I always thought he was cool as shit.”

“Do they still call?”

He grinned. “Almost every day.”

“I’m glad they found you. How lucky for them.”

He made a face.

“What?” I asked.

“People usually say they’re glad I found them.”

I shook my head. “No, they’re the lucky ones.”

We stared at each other for a moment, and tension formed in the once empty space between us. I felt at any moment he was going to lean in, but he didn’t.

“Are you close with your family?” he asked.

“I am. My dad is Victor Marcel. He’s sort of a big deal in Arizona. I think he’s just a big deal in general.”

“You said he basically created modern US militia? That’s intense.”

“Then he combined his outfit with the Arizona Recon Border Patrol. It’s quadruple the size of our original unit, and I learned everything I know to protect myself from my father and growing up there. I’ve been in a lot of situations that would make a grown man shit himself, but I’ve never really felt afraid. I don’t think I’m invincible or anything.”

“You’re just confident you can handle it. I see it.”

“Thank you.” I nodded.

“Your mom?”

I laughed. “Christine. She’s more ruthless than my dad. She ran her own unit back in the day. She was a better shot than me until I was nineteen. No one fucks with Christine.”

“I know a woman like that,” he said.

The sun was beginning to set, and a twinge began in my stomach. I stood. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry.”

“I wasn’t looking forward to my cousins leaving. It’s harder than you’d think to cook for one.”

He chuckled. “I’m aware.”

“You cook?” I asked.

“Do I cook...” he said, standing. “May I?” he asked, gesturing to the kitchen.

When I gave him permission, he began looking through my cabinets and fridge, collecting ingredients and within twenty minutes

the house was filled with amazing smells from whatever he had put in the oven.

Zeke just smiled when I asked him what it was, shaking a small skillet with sautéed mushrooms and onions inside. I set the table and paused, trying to rationalize with the quickly approaching feelings of guilt that everything happening was okay. I was okay. Spenser's words replayed in my head. Matt wouldn't want me to be miserable and alone the rest of my life. He'd made his choice wanting anything but that.

"I'll get it," Zeke said, kneeling next to me with a brush and dust pan. He swept up the broken glass from the plate that had fallen from my hand.

"Oh, shit," I said, feeling confused. I hadn't felt the plate fall out of my hands or heard it break. I went to get another plate, thanking Zeke as he dumped the white shards in the trash can.

"You're probably just hungry. It'll be finished in five minutes, I swear," he said.

I carried two beers and two glasses of ice water to the table, sitting as Zeke lowered the glass dish to the trivet in the center. Bubbling cheese surrounded two fat chicken breasts covered in green salsa verde. A second dish was full of Mexican rice.

"I put the mushrooms on the side in case you didn't like them."

"Who doesn't like mushrooms?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Some people are strangely offended by them."

I forked a chicken breast onto the bed of rice I'd already fashioned on my plate, covering it all in sautéed mushrooms and onion. I was salivating, and when I cut the chicken and placed it in my mouth, I moaned. *Yes. Naomi backward.*

"Stuffed baked chicken? Are you serious?"

"It's a basic quick dish, but a good one," he said after he swallowed.

"What's in it?"

"Cheese, more cheese, and a little cream cheese; mozzarella cheese, salsa verde and more cheese."

“Oh my god, I love cheese. Cheese is why I could never go vegan.”

“I can make a vegetarian version of this that is pretty similar.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“My sister Kara is a vegetarian, so I try to come up with a few dishes when we do family things. I’ve thought about it. I just assumed since you had thawed chicken in the fridge, it was a safe bet you weren’t.”

“Guilty,” I said. “That was sweet of you, though. To think of your sister.”

He shrugged. “She started college last year. She hated her roommate. There was a mean best friend and a crazy boyfriend in the mix. I sent her a lot of dishes. I like to eat my feelings, so I guess I assume everyone does.” He chuckled.

“Do we need to take care of the roommate?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said with an appreciative smile and full cheeks. “She moved in with the crazy boyfriend.”

“I’m sure that went well.”

“Kara was happy. She has her own room this year.”

“I can’t stop eating this even though I’m full. Is there heroin in this? I get drug tested, you know.”

“No, just cheese. All you need is cheese.”

“True.” I forked the last bite of chicken and pushed it around my plate, scooping up the remaining sauce, then sat back as I chewed. Zeke and I were sitting the same way, belly out, legs apart.

Being full made us a little delirious, and once we started laughing about nothing in particular, we couldn’t stop. We laughed so much that tears began pouring down both of our faces. We drank our beers and a second, then cleaned up. We stood at the sink together, rinsing dishes and filling the dishwasher. It had been so long since I’d been domestic with another man. Again, the guilt seeped in, and again, I pushed it away.

Zeke squirted me with water. I slapped suds on his face. Once we finished with the dinner dishes, we had to sop up the water mess. But

it was okay. It was better than okay, for the first time in years.

“Do you have a towel?” he asked, looking down at his soaked shirt. I held out my hand. “I’ll just toss it in the dryer.”

He pulled his shirt over his head with one hand, revealing every rise and fall beneath his skin. Fire season had thinned out the entire crew, but Zeke was solid muscle. All six of his abs protruded, and even the beginnings of two more in line with his navel. His pecks moved as he pulled off his shirt, his shoulders and arms flexing, not a stitch of fat on him. Two lines traveling in a V, dipping down past the waistband of his boxer briefs. His hotshot uniform was baggy, and because he’d lost weight, so were a lot of his clothes. I had no idea he looked like that underneath.

I pulled off my shirt on the way to the laundry room. The dryer creaked when I opened the door and rattled when I slammed it shut. The two shirts flopped around the drum, intertwining, climbing up, and then slamming together at the bottom, giving me erotic thoughts that refused to be replaced or pushed away.

“So you wanna watch a ... oh. Sorry.” Zeke paused in the doorway and turned his back to me.

My ass was leaning against the dryer, my arms crossed as I fantasized about two drying shirts like a fucking weirdo.

I looked down at my unimpressive, nude-colored bra. It wasn’t even a push up. “Zeke,” I said. “I work around men all the time. We share a locker room. They’re just boobs.”

Zeke turned his face toward his left shoulder, but he still didn’t peek. “Your co-workers have seen you in a bra?”

“They’ve seen me naked. You know when I get shot, they can’t extract the bullet with my clothes on? Crazy, I know.” I unbuttoned then unzipped my jeans. “Look.”

He turned.

I peeled back one side of the denim, revealing a round scar a few inches interior of my hip bone and as many inches above my pelvic bone. “Trex dug that one out. Just missed my ovary, not that I’m

happy about it.”

Zeke showed me his forearm. “Burning branch fell on me. A big one.”

I turned, showing him my side with a thick horizontal scar. “My first deployment. Haji had a knife. I let him get the jump on me. Stupid.”

“Looks like it went deep.”

I laughed. “Little shit tried to filet me.”

He turned around, struggling to point to a jagged scar in the middle of his back. “Slipped down a ravine during a rainstorm. Whatever created this scar broke my fall. I actually hung there for a while until my skin ripped and...” He hesitated.

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I had an entire train of thought just then. I was going to stop because the details were gory, but I decided you’ve probably seen worse.”

“I have,” I said. I reached out, mindlessly running my finger along the sharp curves and the equidistant dots on each side from the stitches. Zeke tensed, looking back at my hand touching his skin.

“Sorry,” I said, stepping back.

“No ... it’s ... it’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“What about that one?” I asked, pointing to his shoulder.

His cheeks flushed. “My brother shot me with a bb gun when I was fourteen.”

I covered my mouth, trying not to laugh.

“Yeah, yeah...” he said. “Go ahead and laugh.”

“Well, we both have scars from GSWs.”

“Very funny,” he said, poking at me.

I caught his wrist, and he smiled, trying again.

“Don’t,” I playfully warned. I could tell by the look on his face his curiosity was outweighing common sense. “The answer is no. You won’t best me in hand-to-hand,” I said.

“What if I just want to wrestle? If I pin you, does that count as

winning?”

“You won’t pin me,” I said.

Zeke poked at me again then tried to wriggle out of my grasp. He tried to overpower me by using his body to make moves I knew he’d make before he made them.

“Damn it!” he yelled, both hands secured behind his back. “How do you know?”

I laughed. “How did you know the fire would turn? It’s what I do. I live and breathe this shit.”

His smile faded. We were close, my backside against the dryer, our shirts still making a calming, rhythmic sound, the smell of fabric softener in the air.

“Trex didn’t hear me call out. But you did,” Zeke said, his voice soft. “And when you looked over the edge of that cliff, you looked ... you were relieved.”

“I was.”

“Why?”

I looked up at him, his baby blue eyes scanning my face. “Because good men like you die.”

He leaned down, touching his lips to mine. They were soft, the way they moved experienced but foreign. My body immediately begged for him, my skin sighing in relief when his hands touched my bare back. When his warm tongue touched mine, I pushed him away so hard he nearly hit the far wall.

He held up his hands. “Sorry. Damn it, I’m sorry, Naomi. I’d never wanna...”

“I know,” I said, frowning, my gaze fixed on the floor. I turned and opened the dryer, throwing him his shirt and yanking mine over my head, shoving my arms through the sleeves.

“My apologies. Sincerely. I think I misread—”

“You didn’t,” I said, angry. “I like you. I wanted to try, but I...” I shook my head. “I don’t think I can. I see that you’re trying to go slow, and I appreciate that. But ... this is less than a turtle’s pace, and I’m

still struggling.” I sighed, trying to rein in my temper, angry only at myself.

He slipped on his shirt. “I don’t mind waiting, Naomi. I don’t know what gave you the impression I’m in a hurry. I’m not.”

“No, I know. I know that,” I said, crossing my arms. “And I know Matt would want me to be happy. And this,” I said, gesturing to the space between us, “is cool, right? You’re cute, and nice, and a great cook ... and a damn good kisser.”

He smiled. “Right.”

I sighed, frustrated.

He took a small step toward me. “It’s a lot to sort through. I know that. Let’s just ... maybe ... if it’s okay ... sit on the couch and watch something. I came in here in the first place to suggest watching a show on Hulu. Have you seen Dexter? It’s about a serial killer. Right up your alley.”

I ignored his jab, more concerned with trying to make something with Zeke work. I wanted to do normal things with him, like Hulu, and serial killers, and wrestle, and kiss, but I didn’t know how to get there from where I was.

“What’s the frown for?” he asked.

“I don’t have Hulu.”

“Do you have a smart TV?”

“Well, yeah.”

“We can use my account. We’ll cast it to your TV.”

I held up my palm. “Slow down. That’s boyfriend stuff. We’re not there yet.”

He smiled, walking down the hall. “Yet.”

chapter nineteen

trial date

Zeke

My hands burned as I lowered the stack of hot pans into the brown paper sack. “You’re a life saver, Reese. I seriously owe you.”

She held up her palm, and I slapped it with mine. Her cheek was still smeared with grease like every other time I’d seen her. She usually had a wrench or some other tool in her hand. The way she carried herself reminded me a little of Naomi; she was a little bit tomboy but all woman. Her hair was as dark, and she had a great smile, but unlike Naomi, Reese was patient—to a fault—and I’d never seen her lose her temper. She spent her days in the hangar working on Bobby’s helo like it was carrying her most precious possession, because it kind of was.

Unfortunately for Reese, Bobby was already in love with himself.

“Thank you,” I said to her sister, Lindsay. “You don’t know how much I owe you for letting me use your kitchen. This is like ... important. Real important.”

“You mean she’s important?” Reese said, looking a little starry-eyed. She looked at her sister. “Why can’t Bobby act like that when it comes to me?”

“He loves you the way I love my kids’ pediatrician, Lo. You fix his shit, and he loves you for it. Zeke, why can’t you love Reese instead of Naomi?”

“Oh my God, Lindsay! Really?” Reese said, covering her face.

“Uh, I um...” I said, stumbling.

“No worries. You made extra for my family to eat at dinner. You

can use my kitchen anytime,” Lindsay said with a smile.

I waved to them with my elbow, carrying everything out to my truck. I tried not to speed, but Naomi would be at the hotel in forty-five minutes, and I wanted to get the table finished. I glanced at the flower in the seat then turned into the hotel parking lot.

I sprinted through the lobby and skipped the elevator, taking the stairs two at a time.

“Hey,” Taylor said, straightening one of the place settings. I found a vase!”

“Thank Christ,” I said, relieved. “And you too. I owe you, man.”

“Bullshit. It’s what friends do. You’d do it for me.”

“I would.”

“I’d better go,” he said, smacking my ass—hard—before yanking the door and letting it slam behind him.

I dropped the flower in the vase, jogged to the shower, and rushed through my routine. Naomi texted that she was there just as I buttoned the last one on my black shirt. I stared at myself in the mirror, checking my teeth, my nose, and making a mental checklist. Deodorant, bed made, room clean, table set, food ready, cards in the dresser, movie list on the nightstand, beer in the fridge.

I blinked then ran out the door and down the hall, making it downstairs in record time. I stopped at the corner just in time to watch Naomi breeze into the lobby, her hair waving with the suction the doors created.

Stavros was busy tending bar when she walked through the Colorado Springs Hotel lobby, past the hotshots and Darby. The beige walls and patterned carpet faded easily into the background of groups of friends holding beers and chatting about things most people would never experience, and the people faded easily behind the sight of her.

Darby didn’t notice me or Naomi walking across the room; instead, she remained head down, checking a family into the system, pleasant but hurrying to get to the three families behind them.

I took a few steps back, stopping in front of the elevators just as she

rounded the corner, pausing for less than a second, surprised to see me standing there with a grin.

Her jeans hugged her curves, her white V-neck tee was just a tad see-through, her olive-green twill jacket making her look just tough enough to remind me who she was, even with her eyes done and her hair curled and shiny. I wanted to touch it.

“Hey,” I said, pressing the button with my thumb. “I ... you look ... wow.”

A faintly familiar tingle in my stomach rose up to my chest and throat, and I swallowed it before the elevator arrived, and we stepped inside.

Why isn't she reacting? Does she hate me?

“You okay?” I asked.

She blinked, looking down at her clothes. “I hadn't realized this choice would leave you speechless.”

“You look kind of pissed. I'm not great with words. You just look amazing.”

“No, it's nice. I'm not pissed. That's just my face.”

I spit out a laugh, shaking my head seconds before the doors swept open. I held her hand in mine and led her into the hallway like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She let me.

I unlocked the door and held it open, gesturing for her to come in. The table in the corner was pulled out, an extra chair added to the two place settings.

“Real plates?” she said, walking over and touching the white ceramic.

I shrugged. “I borrowed it.” *I'd been at it all day. For you. Because you deserve it.*

“From who?”

“Taylor's girlfriend. She works at the Bucksaw Café. She also let me borrow their kitchen.”

Her eyes scanned the napkins, the silverware, the vase and single

round flower so vivid purple she clearly didn't think was real until she touched its small, soft petals. "What is it?"

"Uh ... well ... I was going to get you a tiger lily. Have you seen Peter Pan?"

"I don't watch a lot of kid movies. I was outside shooting things when I was little."

I laughed and nodded. "That's right. Well, I spent my teenage years hanging out with foster kids. Most of us were raised in front of television if the electricity bill was paid, so Brad and Jenn weaned us all off slowly. But their house was a revolving door, so Sunday nights was family movie night. The little kids usually wanted a cartoon. Peter Pan was a family favorite because Peter and The Lost Boys were kind of like us. Wendy reminded us all of Jenn. Anyway, in Peter Pan, Tiger Lily is a native princess. She's so feisty and fearless. Anyway, when I got to the place, I actually didn't like them. This one is a waterlily dahlia."

Naomi leaned against the chair with her hip, crossing her arms while she stared at me. It was different somehow, but I couldn't read her.

"Stupid?" I asked, rubbing the back of my neck.

"No. I'm currently fighting the urge to undress you."

It took me a second to process her words, then my mouth stretched into a grin. "Why fight it?"

"What are we putting on the plates?" she asked, sitting.

"Huh? Oh!" I lifted a large brown paper sack from behind the chair by its handles.

"Take out?" she asked.

"Nope," I said, setting the sack on the seat of my chair. I pulled out a silver, covered baking dish, then another, and another. I peeled back the lids, steam rolling out and filling the room with so many different, delicious smells.

"My mouth just started watering. I didn't even know I was hungry. What's that?"

“I cooked. No kitchen here, so I had to transport everything. But I timed it right. Everything’s still hot.”

“You made all of this?” she said, eyeing the table.

“I wasn’t sure what you like, so I pulled out all the stops. When I do this at home, my family calls it Around the World.” I loaded up her plate, naming everything as it landed. “Fattoush salad. Cajun broiled shrimp. Asian steak kabobs. Balsamic chicken breasts. Stout-braised short ribs. Mini burritos. Pierogis. Peruvian yellow potatoes, mashed. Brazilian cheese bread. And last but not least—” I jogged over to the small fridge and turned to face her with two cold bottles of imported beer. “Doppelbock. It’s German. I have a tarte tatin waiting in there for a French dessert.” I popped the beers, set them on the table, got rid of the sack and sat down across from her.

Naomi was uniquely beautiful, soft and severe like a tornado slowly rolling over the countryside.

“I ... how am I going to eat all of this?” she asked.

“I made extra. The rest will go to Taylor and his girl.”

She placed the napkin on her lap. “I haven’t tried most of this before.”

“Good,” I said, digging into the salad.

She poked around in the salad then put a nicely portioned bite in her mouth, rolling it around on her tongue. Once she swallowed, her eyes closed. “What is this?”

“Fattoush. It’s a Lebanese bread salad.”

“This is bread?” she asked, pointing at the small squared pieces with her fork.

“It’s pita. Coating it in olive oil helps to keep it from getting soggy. Pretty good, huh?”

“It’s fucking *wow* is what it is,” she said, stabbing another large bite. “How did you learn to cook like this?”

He shrugged. “I’ve always liked to. I fended for myself and younger siblings a lot because my mom would be too high to know what time it was, much less dinnertime. When I got to Brad and Jenn’s and she

noticed I could cook, she bought me a bunch of cookbooks, and we'd watch cooking shows together. She loves that ... to find what a kid is passionate about, and then she goes a little overboard."

She smiled. "I love Jenn."

"Me too."

"Where are your siblings now? Your biological ones?"

I shrugged. "I have older and younger brothers and sisters. I was sort of in the middle. We were taken away a few times before it was permanent. Sometimes they'd take one or two and the rest. We had disconnect. It was just easier on top of everything else."

"Is that why you're so walled off from Brad and Jenn and the rest of the family?"

"Am I?" I asked, considering her question. "I guess I am. They love me. They're kind and care for me—all of them—but, yeah. I guess if I don't care too much it won't hurt as bad if they're taken away."

Naomi took another bite, the wheels in her head obviously spinning while she chewed.

By the time she'd tried everything, she sat back, her hand on her middle. Her chest rose and fell as a burp escaped. She covered her mouth and giggled.

I laughed out loud. "That's a good sign the date is going well."

"It's a trial date."

"Whatever," I said with a grin, confidently meeting her gaze.

She wiped her mouth with the napkin and put it on the plate. "What do I do with this?"

"I'll take care of it later."

"Now what?" She propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin on the heel of her hand. For a moment, she didn't look so tough, so out of my league. "We have a few options. Movie. Cards. A drive. Talking."

"All of the above," she said. Her voice was different. Softer.

"Can I see you again?"

Her mouth slowly stretched into a grin.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty

dirt

Naomi

“McCormack’s tonight?” Martinez asked me as we packed up.

“Can’t, I have plans.”

Sloan crossed his arms. “With who?”

“None of your business,” I said.

“He’d better be a good one,” Kitsch said.

I tried not to smile.

By the looks on their faces it was obvious they had their own theories, but they walked out without antagonizing me.

Harbinger waved and walked out with Kitsch. Trex was still sitting on the center bench, typing out a message to Darby she wouldn’t receive unless he showed it to her. Beads of sweat formed at his hairline; a few at his temple had broken away and fell down his cheek.

“It shouldn’t be this hot underground,” I said.

Trex sat up and sighed. “It shouldn’t be this hot in Colorado.”

“The air in here makes it worse, I think.” The holes in the lockers dug into my back, so I adjusted. “I saw her at the front desk. She was busy.”

“When were you there?” he asked. “And why?”

I shrugged.

“You’re seeing Zeke, aren’t you?”

“We’re friends.”

Trex thought about that for a moment then nodded, grinning. “That’s... I’m really happy for you, Nomes. Zeke is a good guy.”

“We’re not getting married. We’re just friends. You’re getting more action with your pregnant girlfriend than I am.”

Trex laughed. He didn’t shock easily, but I could still surprise him once in a while. “So are you just taking it slow, or is he firmly in the friend zone?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“Talk to me.”

I sighed, propping my foot up on the lockers behind me. “It feels wrong, Trex. I still feel married. I know Matt’s not coming home, but there was a beginning and a middle, but no end.”

“There was an end.”

I looked away. “Not because we didn’t love each other.”

“What happened is more final than a breakup or a divorce. Matt would want you to be happy, Naomi.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that? I know. I know he would. I’m just trying to wrap my head around this.”

“And Zeke is patient?”

“Too patient.”

“Then it’s fine. You’ll get there on your own time.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I still feel the same, and it’s not fair to Zeke.”

“Go talk to him.”

“What?”

“You know where he is. Go talk to him. Tell him about Zeke.”

I thought about that for a while. “Go to Virginia?”

Trex simply nodded. “Take the weekend.”

I looked around while I thought, grabbed my bag, and walked straight to the FJ, texting Zeke before I lit the cigarette in my mouth and hit the road.

I have to cancel tonight.

Was it something I said?

No. All good.

I think this is the first night we haven’t

spent hanging out other than when I'm on the mountain.

I know. It's just for a few days. Something I gotta do.

Is it dangerous?

No.

Okay. Call me when you get back.

Will do.

Is it weird that I miss you already?

I smiled. No. Not weird. I'll call you in a few days.

I didn't pack. I had cash, my credit card, ID, my phone and charger. I bought a ticket on the last Denver flight of the evening while I gassed up, then I headed to the airport, landing in my back row seat with just a few minutes to spare.

I watched the people on the monitor in front of me speak, able to make out what was happening until the flight attendant offered me a set of headphones. I focused on the show, then the flight magazine, and finally the emergency procedure pamphlet—anything to keep my mind off what I was about to do.

The captain came over the speaker to warn us of upcoming turbulence, and I relaxed back, knowing that if it was longer than five minutes, it would lull me to sleep.

My dreams took me back to Africa; green all around me, the air almost too thick to breathe. My clothes stuck to me, damp with sweat, my rifle slippery in my hand, the strap digging into my neck. Screams and gunfire echoed in the distance. My team wasn't with me, and a quick glance around the glade where I stood made me recognize I was alone in the jungle with my rifle. I didn't feel scared, confused, or even tense. Relief washed over me. Not many people understood that it was in the safety of danger that I could hide from my pain.

Maybe Zeke would.

When the wheels touched down, I jerked awake. Babies were

crying, the flight attendant was going over instructions over the speaker, and we filed out of the fuselage like cattle. One Uber ride to the Hyatt hotel, and I was flat on my back, staring up at a ceiling in Arlington, Virginia, hours after I was inside a top-secret and high-security facility in Colorado.

My life is weird.

After the nap on the plane, I ended up staring at the ceiling longer than I'd hoped.

My cell phone chirped. First, it was Trex checking that I'd made it okay, and then Zeke called. I let it ring, let the voicemail pick up, but then he called again.

"Hello?" I answered.

"I went down to the bar."

"McCormack's?"

"Not at first. The guy's talked me into it. You've ruined me."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There was a whole gaggle of women there for some makeup convention or training or something."

"At McCormack's. Were they lost?"

"Fish said one of them was a local and knew Jerry I guess."

"Fish told you that," I said, unconvinced.

"I told you, you've ruined me. A few months ago, I would've been excited about two dozen beautiful women walking in. All I wanted was to see you."

"Not my fault."

"It's completely your fault."

Zeke was talking slow, trying hard not to slur his words.

"You didn't drive home, did you?"

"Nope."

"Good," I said.

"See?" he said, sleepy. "You do care."

"Go to sleep."

"I wish you were here, Naomi. I wish we could... I think about that

night lying next to you in your bed all the time. I know ... I know this is hard for you, but it's worth it to me. I wanna be that for you."

"Be what?"

"Worth it."

I sat up, rubbing the back of my neck. I wasn't drunk like he was and didn't know how to respond. "You're a good guy, Zeke."

He was quiet for a few seconds. "Oh."

"What?"

"In my experience, being told by the woman you're falling for that you're a good guy isn't a good thing."

I smiled. "You're falling for me?"

"Did I say that out loud?"

"I should probably hit the sack," I said. "I have to be somewhere early."

"What is this mystery trip? Work related?"

"No," I said.

"You couldn't tell me anyway, could you? Since you're like CIA or something."

"No, it's... I'm visiting Matt."

"Matt ... your husband Matt?"

"I'm going to Virginia. He's buried at Arlington Cemetery."

"Whoa. Is this something you do a lot?"

"This is the first time since the funeral."

He paused. "Help me out here. I don't know what to say."

"I still love Matt."

Several seconds passed. "I know."

"He's dead, Zeke. He can't hurt me, he can't piss me off, he's practically reached sainthood. No one will ever be able to top that."

"I know that too."

"And you're just okay with forever being second place to a dead guy?"

He sighed. "I don't know what we're doing. I know what I hope we're doing. But, Naomi, being with you never feels like second place."

I closed my eyes. “I know this isn’t fair to spring on you when you’re drunk, but I just needed that all on the table. I need you to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“This will be a little tricky. I’m not itching to get hurt either, you know. We both have old stuff we’ll need to work through. But this is worth it. It’s worth it, I’m sure.”

“You’re sure,” I repeated, unconvinced.

“Like, *sure* sure,” he said, sounding sleepy.

I smiled. “Okay, then. Good night, Zeke.”

“Good night, beautiful.”

For the first time in a long time, I didn’t dream. Matt didn’t come to visit, I wasn’t standing alone in a desert or jungle, on a mission, or conducting a training. I woke up without being covered in sweat, without wet cheeks and red eyes, or sad because I was stateside.

I used the hotel toothbrush and toothpaste kit and grabbed my pack, wanting to be at Arlington cemetery at 0800 because it would take me half an hour to reach Matt’s tombstone.

The Uber driver was kind enough to see where I was going and ignored me instead of asking questions. I slept hard, but not long enough, and my body felt ten years older as I trudged down the path and up the hill, past tens of thousands of white tombstones that looked exactly like my husband’s. Still, I knew where he was.

I sat down my pack and sat next to the place he was buried.

**MATTHEW
NOLAN
ABRAMS
MEDAL OF HONOR
LCPL
USMC
ARIZONA
JUL 19 1989
SEP 21 2014**

His tombstone had no sign to signify religion above his name, one of the few. I touched the letters and numbers, remembering the day of his funeral.

I cleared my throat, feeling it close around the words I wanted to say. "Matt?" was all I could manage.

I lay on the ground and closed my eyes, remembering when I used to lay on his chest and listen to his heartbeat. All I could hear now was the sound of the wind and a few muffled voices in the distance. Matt's remains were down there, just a few feet beneath me, still as the earth between us.

It took me a long time to open my mouth to speak again, but I needed to wait, to feel that he was listening.

"I know you want me to be happy," I said. My left palm lay flat on the soft grass in front of me, the wedding band on my middle finger coming into focus. "I met someone. It's new. I don't know what's going to happen, but ... he's a good man. He doesn't rush me. He knows about you. He's a hotshot from Colorado. You two would've gotten along." My smile turned into frown. "It's weird to say that. That's not what I meant. You wouldn't have gotten along with someone interested in your wife."

The wind made the grass tremble. Growing up in the desert, the lush green blades had always fascinated me. The desert was lifeless, and here I lay, soft green for miles, flowers of every color, and surrounded by death. I wanted to reach down and touch Matt's hand, hear his voice, his heartbeat. Every nerve and muscle had cried for him since the day he left me forever, and being this close to his remains made my insides tense and burn, feeling like I was being pulled forward and crushed at the same time.

I'd carried my pain long enough. Matt wasn't here to share it. It was time to let him go.

"I love you, Matthew. You were and will always be everything I've ever wanted. You're the love of my life. Thank you for loving me." I closed my fist, gripping the grass. It was only my second time at

Arlington, and being there, telling Matt I was moving on felt like a second goodbye.

A droplet hit my nose, and my eyes fluttered opened. The sky had darkened, the clouds rolled in, and a few intermittent drops on my face turned into a steady downpour of chilly rain. I sat up, looked at my watch, and looked back at Matt's tombstone. I held my palm against the letters that spelled his name, his birth, his death, and everything else that was important in his life summed up in a few lines.

"Excuse me," a woman said. "I'm Annie." She was holding an umbrella over her shoulder-length curly brown hair, holding out a small, closed one. "I had an extra."

"Thank you," I said, looking around. The others still visiting the cemetery were ducking and running for cover.

She frowned when I didn't take it. "You'll be soaked inside of five minutes." She took back the umbrella, put it under her arm, then held out her hand again.

"Naomi Abrams." I shook her hand once, then wrapped my hair into a bun, knotting it in place. "I've walked through rain before." I stood, dusted myself off, and smiled. "It feels kind of nice to be in the rain after that."

Annie made a strange face then put down her own umbrella. She looked up with a smile. "You're right." With each drop, her curls were weighed down, but she still smiled. She nodded to Matt's tombstone. "Brother? Husband?"

"Matt is my husband."

Annie nodded. "I'm out visiting mine too."

"How long?" I asked.

"Seven years, three months, six days. No judgement here. I've had my fair share of trying to talk to my guy through the soil. Gives a whole new meaning to dirty talk."

I looked down.

"Sorry. Widow humor. It's gotten me through, but I forget it

doesn't help everyone. I just live down the road now. I quit falling asleep out here years ago, but it's still hard to see the wives, husbands, kids out here with blankets and water bottles, or like you, ill-prepared, unable to leave until closing time sometimes even in the heat ... even in the rain."

I looked at my watch again. "I'm not staying here that long. I have a plane to catch."

"Oh? Where you coming from?"

"Colorado." I shifted my weight. "Annie?"

She lifted her eyebrows.

"It doesn't really get *easier*, does it?"

She sighed then shook her head. "No. You just get stronger. The moments you feel broken get further and further between, but they still come. The worst part is the best part: life goes on."

"What do you mean?"

"I remarried. I met him right over there. His wife Kate is buried four rows over. We're both from Alabama, believe it or not. Gene's a wonderful man with three daughters. Kids I didn't get to have with my Marshall. It's a good life, and yet it was a trade for all of us. Sorting that out in our heads is something we've been able to get through together, but no. It's not easy at all."

I hesitated, but I decided to make my admission, knowing Annie would understand. "I've met someone," I blurted out.

She smiled. "Good. Because the dead don't expect loyalty. They don't care if we live like we died with them. They're gone. And whether we like it or not, a week goes by, then a month, a year ... ten years."

"How do you...?"

"You love them both. Don't compare them, at least not out loud."

"But Matt was the love of my life."

"Of your old life. I'll love Marshall until my last day, but I think everyone here visiting someone can agree that our lives are different now."

I nodded.

“It’s okay to start new. Not that we should forget. Not that it’s a do-over. It’s just a different road than the one we set out on. Now, go warm up before you catch cold.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, wiping the rain from my face.

Annie walked away, holding both umbrellas under one arm. I stared at the ground, watching the rain nudging the blades of grass on its way to the soil.

I kneeled, soaking my knees in the mud, and hugged the etched concrete bearing his name. “Thank you,” I whispered. “Thank you for giving me the time with you that you did.”

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty-one

The New Real

Naomi

I rushed through the Denver airport and sped south, irritated at the butterflies in my stomach that only worsened when I parked the FJ next to Zeke's truck.

Calm down, Naomi, Jesus.

My phone buzzed as soon as I picked it up, but it wasn't Zeke.

"Trex, what's up?"

"You back yet?"

"I'm just parked at the hotel."

"You're here?" he asked. There was something unsettling in his voice.

"Yeah, why?"

"Nomes..." he sighed. "The Alpines were on the mountain."

My chest began to tighten. *Were.*

"Is he alive?" I asked.

"I don't know yet. Zeke's group was separated from the rest. They had to take a detour. No one knows where they are yet."

"Are we going?"

He sighed. "I need to stay here with Darby."

"I'm going."

"I'll call out the guys," he said.

I tossed my phone and stomped on the gas, pushing the FJ as hard as she would go all the way to the first check point. I was still muddy from my day at Arlington, but I had my badge. The night guard wasn't

familiar with me, but he'd already called in on Martinez, Sloan, Kitsch and Harbinger, so they'd told him to expect me.

We wasted no time once I caught up with them in the control room. Without Saunders being there to hold us up, Harbinger gave the order then took the Jeep while we drove ATVs, headlamps on, speeding through the wilderness. After an hour, Harbinger went alone and split the rest of us up by twos. After ninety minutes, we all went on our own to cover more ground. Kitsch called in reports to the mountain and Trex, but when we got reports back that the rescue teams had been pulled for the night, Harbinger radioed for us to meet in the black, and we turned off our engines.

"We're out of our depth," Martinez said, fishing in his pack for water. "We haven't been trained for this. What if the winds change? We have no business being out here blind."

"I mean," Sloan began, "we're trained to survive."

"You're Navy, Martinez. We're Marines. We've been trained for everything," I said.

"Funny," Martinez said, annoyed.

"Okay, okay, we're not getting into a military branch pissing match. Let's focus," Harbinger said.

I continued, "We have headlamps and flashlights. I'm not going in," I said.

"You'll go in if you're ordered to," Kitsch said.

Harbinger sighed. "I've seen that look. I might as well not even try."

One corner of Sloan's mouth turned up. "She ain't leavin'."

"Which means we're not leaving," Sloan said, throwing his pack to the ground.

I handed Martinez my canteen. The sky was changing, still dark, but the horizon was lighter than before. "They're out here. Just like last time, they're probably trying to get one of their injured out. We're fucking Marines; we don't stop when the sun goes down."

Martinez's cheeks flushed. "Think about this, Nomes. You're really willing to get us all killed to fix something you can't fix?"

“What the hell are you talking about?” I seethed.

“Lay off her, Martinez!” Kitsch yelled.

Martinez wasn't afraid to go where others wouldn't. He was a Navy Corpsman, trained in medicine and everything that went with it, including processing death. His medical training hadn't taught him how to understand those of us who couldn't let go, though. His patience had been wearing thin for a while.

“She couldn't save Matt, so she's going to risk her life to save Zeke—and ours in the process. It doesn't make sense to let her make this decision, Harbinger! We're on a mountain, two hours from base. Our radios are patchy. We're simply not trained in fire behavior. It's fucking dangerous. Listen to me, all of you. Naomi's come a long way, but she doesn't have her head on straight about this.”

“So my decisions can't be trusted because I'm a widow. Fuck you, Martinez,” I said.

“Fuck you, Naomi. You joined up to protect us for Matt, and you're going to kill us all to save the new man in your life. The general was right to put you on probation.”

“Lock it up, Martinez!” Kitsch yelled again. “Last warning!”

“Just because we pretend your family's alive doesn't mean we have to let everyone act crazy!” Martinez growled. He immediately regretted it, but Kitsch had already left his ATV. They both fell to the ground, and Kitsch grabbed for his knife.

“Stop!” I yelled, lunging for Kitsch's hand. “Wait, wait, wait! *Wait!*” I screamed.

In the scuffle, between the cursing, there was a voice.

“Wait.” I struggled to keep Kitsch from killing Martinez while also trying to listen more closely.

I heard it again, this time able to hone in that it was coming from an area of residual boulders. We were surround by mountains taller than the one we were on, so it was difficult to discern.

I curved both my hands around their heads and cupped my fingers over their mouths, pulling their necks to almost breaking point. “I said

shut the fuck up!”

In the distance, barely audible, was a chorus of voices.

“It’s them,” I said, breathing hard.

“It’s the wind,” Sloan said.

I shook my head, scrambling to my feet. “It’s Zeke. I know it.”

I mounted my ATV and put on my helmet, the fire burning in a line almost all around us, no more than a few miles away. The engine growled as I pulled back on the throttle, surging forward, and soon the headlamp highlighted two faces, the men jumping up and down and waving their arms.

The ATV slid sideways when I finally squeezed the brake, and as soon as I removed my helmet, Zeke yanked me into his arms. I hugged him back, letting him hold me while the other man, Maddox, poked his head into a crevice in the rocks and called for the others.

Three more climbed out, Jew and two Aussies I hadn’t yet met. They were smiling, seeming unfazed by their impending death.

“We gotta stop running into each other out here.”

I pushed Zeke back, then checked him over, touching his arms, chest, and face. “You okay?”

He smiled. “I’m good.”

I nodded, breathing out a sigh of relief. “Thank Christ. I thought you’d learned your lesson last time.”

“I was out on the fire line. The wind changed. Maddox and the rest of them came to warn me. We got separated from the others.”

“They’ve been out here all night looking for you.”

“You win, I guess,” he said, touching my cheek.

“Wasn’t going to go home without you.”

Zeke’s smile faded, and he leaned in. Just an inch from my lips, he paused at the sound of Maddox’s order.

“We gotta go!” Maddox whirled his hand in the air. It was hard to tell the twin brothers apart anyway, but covered in dirt in the dark, it was impossible.

“I’m with you,” Zeke said, gesturing for me to climb onto the ATV.

Jew and the Aussies loaded up into Harbinger's Jeep, Maddox rode with Martinez, and we kicked up dust as we hauled ass toward the Complex. The fire ripped through everything in its path. Zeke pointed me to a narrow route of escape.

"There!" he yelled. "We can slide right through if we can get there in time."

The Jeep turned to make a straight line to the point Zeke had said to go. The rest of his crew were on the same page. I turned too, and twisted back the throttle, sending the ATV flying over the rocky hills and past the last of the unburned trees for hundreds of acres.

The Jeep slipped through the opening in the fire, but it was clouded with smoke, and I couldn't see what was on the other side.

Zeke patted my thigh. "You've got this!"

I readjusted my feet, ready for the possibility of impact on the other side, and surged forward through the smoke. When the haze cleared, the Jeep was just a few feet in front of me. I tapped on the brake and banked left, then caught up with everyone until we reached the fenced perimeter of the Complex. We followed Harbinger through the check points to the entrance where Interagency trucks were waiting, ready to take the boys home.

Zeke crawled off the back of my ATV, glancing at his crew before returning his attention to me. "Not to complain, but you're going to make us look bad if you keep this up."

I unbuckled my helmet, wiping the smoke from my eyes. "We served as a glorified taxi service this time."

"We'd dug a line and holed up in that crevice waiting for the fire to roll over, but we probably would've suffocated to death. We're lucky you came when you did."

"Not on my watch," I said, hugging him, pressing my cheek against his.

"Told ya," Martinez grumbled.

I raised my middle finger behind Zeke, making sure Martinez got a good look.

Zeke turned to look over his shoulder at his men loading up. “I should go. We have a lot of worried friends back at the hotel. Will you meet me there?”

“Just call me when you’re settled in,” I said, lighting a cigarette.

“Okay. I wanna hear about your trip.”

I breathed out a laugh with the smoke. “You nearly died a horrible death, and you want to know about my day.”

He held my cheeks, grazing his thumb across my lips. “Yes.”

My eyes danced between his as I deliberated, then I leaned up on the balls of my feet, starting my new life by pressing my lips against his. His lips were dry and cracked from his time in the sun and a day without water, but I pulled him closer. The men yelped and catcalled behind us as his hands left my face, and he wrapped his arms tightly around me. He tasted like dirt, smoke, and sweat, and I only wanted more.

He pressed his slick, dirty forehead against mine. “See you soon.”

I nodded, watching him load up in the back of a truck. They all waved to us, keeping eye contact until we couldn’t see them anymore.

I sat on the ATV, exhausted but happy.

“Naomi,” Sloan said. “Tell me I didn’t walk out on a date to save your boyfriend’s ass again.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said, standing.

“You looked pretty cozy to me,” Kitsch said.

“Yet,” I said. “He’s not my boyfriend yet.”

Harbinger and Kitsch chuckled. Martinez and Sloan weren’t amused.

“They wouldn’t have made it out without us,” I said.

“This makes twice,” Martinez said. “Maybe they should find an alternative career if we can do it better than they can.”

I shifted my weight, squaring off with Martinez. “Did you hike miles to that location? Did you dig a fire line all fucking day? Then shut the fuck up.”

“I didn’t realize how soft men made you,” Martinez said.

Kitsch only used Martinez's first name—Othello—when he wanted him to listen the first time. "O, you're going to get your ass kicked," he warned.

I glowered at him. "You've been bitching for weeks that you were bored. We go do something for once, and you're whining and insinuating I made a decision based on emotion?"

"Well, yeah," Martinez said.

Kitsch handed me a cigarette and a lighter. "Take it easy, Nomes," he warned.

I cupped my hand over the end of the cigarette to light it then tossed the lighter back to Kitsch. "Martinez, I don't recall giving you shit when you made us late for a *mission* because you were too busy getting crabs from that prostitute in Sudan. Or that you slowed us down even more because you couldn't walk without scratching? Did I say, 'I didn't realize how often you make stupid decisions with your dick?' No, I didn't."

"That's different," Martinez said.

I narrowed my eyes. "I should have let Kitsch shank you."

"All right. That's enough," Harbinger said. "I'm going back into the Complex to take a shower so my wife doesn't think I went camping. And put out that cigarette, Naomi. We don't need another goddamn fire out here."

I looked down, seeing the ash grow longer, the dry grass beneath coming into view. I spit in my hand and dabbed it out until it was sopping wet before sticking it my pocket. Harbinger was right. Smoking outside and flicking my ashes everywhere was stupid when something like that could be the cause of the fire Zeke was fighting.

"Get some lemon from one of the kitchens. It gets the smoke out," I said to Harbinger.

Sloan smiled. "Tip from your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend," I said, walking to the FJ past a pouting Martinez.

"Sorry," he grumbled.

“Whatever,” I said, slapping his ass—hard—when I went by. He grabbed his backside, trying to hold in a yelp. “I deserved that.”
“Yes, you did.”

The moment I reached my SUV, the sun breached the mountaintops. I yawned, pulling the gearshift into Reverse. Zeke texted me before I reached the exit, so I pulled over to answer.

Just leaving, I typed.

I’m back in the room. I know it’s a lot to ask since you’ve been up all night, but would you mind stopping by?

I’ll be there in fifteen.

I hadn’t planned on going anywhere else, but it was nice that Zeke had asked—to know he wanted to be with me as much as I wanted him. The drive seemed to take longer than usual, even though I pulled into the Colorado Springs Hotel exactly fourteen minutes later.

The lobby was cleared out, a female front desk clerk that wasn’t Darby smiled at me as I passed. Zeke knew I’d take the stairs, waiting for me at the top. He wasted no time pulling me against him, his hair still damp from a shower.

I pushed him back gently. “You’re clean, and I’m filthy. Is Maddox trying to sleep?”

Zeke shook his head. “He went to the Bucksaw Cafe.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, clasping my hands around the back of his neck.

“His girlfriend was here all night and left this morning. She probably thought he was a goner.”

“I should have brought her with me. We could’ve become this little superhero duo who goes around saving our men when they get into trouble.”

Zeke’s eyebrows raised, the lines on his forehead deepening. “Am I? Your man?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Aren’t you?”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, and he nodded. “I am.”

I wiped his hand with my finger and frowned.

“What?” he asked, unsure.

“I got you dirty. Looks like you’re going to need another shower.”

Zeke blew out a breath, looking both eager and nervous. He picked me up, holding me by the hips as I locked my ankles at the small of his back. He lifted his chin, and I grabbed his cheeks, kissing him while he walked us to his room. He fumbled with his key card, but once we were in, he locked the bolt lock and took me straight to the bathroom, lowering me to the floor.

I bent down to unlace my boots, then stood up to pull off my work shirt. I reached down to slowly unbutton and unzip my cargo pants, letting them fall to the ground. I used my toes to pull off my boots, then I kicked them to the side.

Zeke scanned my body, breathing out again. “Is this really happening?”

My sports bra came off then my cotton panties.

“This is really happening,” he said, answering himself.

I grabbed his once-clean T-shirt—now smudged with the grime from my clothes—and pulled it over his head. He looked down at me while I ran my hands over the highs and lows of his smooth torso, then over the bulges of his shoulders, letting my fingertips graze down his back and over his hips, landing on the waistband of his shorts.

I pulled them forward, over his already bulging dick, and they dropped to the floor. He touched his lips to mine gently, reaching behind me to push the curtain to the side and turn the knob.

The showerhead began to spray, and Zeke wrapped his arms around me, holding my bare chest against his. My skin burned, my nerves throwing a fucking party, the apex of my thighs crying out to touch more of him. There was nothing between us, but I only wanted him to hold me tighter.

Zeke checked the water then walked me backward.

“Watch your step,” he said, guiding me over the edge of the tub.

I’d had lovers before Matt, but none after until Zeke. Annie had warned me not to compare, so I didn’t. Zeke touched me with

experience, but it was different, and that was hard to ignore.

He took the soap in his hand, lathering up and running the suds over my skin from face to toes, then he poured shampoo in his hands and massaged it into my hair, pausing for tiny kisses on my cheek, the corner of my mouth, and neck. Something about the water amplified the sensation of his touch, and I felt nearly on the edge each time his lips or hands made contact with mine.

Once the soap was washed away, the murky remnants of the Arlington mud and the fire swirled around the drain and disappeared forever. Zeke used his thumb to gently lift my chin so that my gaze would meet his.

“You okay?” Zeke asked. He looked down at me, water dripping from his hair and nose.

I nodded, wrapping my hands around his neck, then lifting my leg slowly until my knee was hooked at his hip. I brought my leg closer, pulling Zeke closer too. He kissed me while he positioned himself, sliding in with little resistance, slick with how much I wanted him. I leaned my head back, letting the water pelt my face. Zeke was gentle, showing incredible restraint because as deep as his fingers dug into my skin, I knew he was fighting against his own needs to be purposefully tender. His lips left mine, making a line down my neck, and I sighed.

We stayed in the shower until our fingers were pruny, until we’d both climaxed at least twice, and until we were fighting to keep our eyes open. In a queen-sized bed, I was on my stomach in nothing but one of his over-sized navy blue Alpine Hotshots T-shirts, Zeke watching me from just inches away, both our cheeks against our pillows.

His eyes opened and closed slower each time as he struggled to keep eye contact.

“Sleep,” I whispered.

“I’m afraid if I do, I’ll wake up and realize this wasn’t real.”

“It’s real,” I said.

He closed his eyes, took my hand, kissed my knuckles and then

relaxed, his breathing evening out within seconds.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty-two
breaking up the band

Zeke

“Wipe that grin off your face, Zeke, and get to work!” Chief yelled.

I couldn't. I'd been smiling for days, and it wasn't going away anytime soon. We just had one more night on this tour, and I was getting on everyone's nerves. I didn't even care.

“What's up with you?” Jubal asked. He smiled. I smiled. That gave it away. “Zeke, are you in love?”

“He got laid,” Taylor said.

I punched his arm. “I haven't told you shit, Maddox.”

“You don't have to,” Taylor said, chuckling while he worked. “You've got the look.”

“The five-year dry spell is over?” Watts asked.

“It hasn't been five years, shut up.”

“All of you shut up and get to work!” Chief yelled again.

“Glad you found someone,” Jubal said, digging next to me.

“Maybe,” I said. “I'm batting way outta my league. Just hoping she doesn't figure it out for a while.”

“Don't underestimate yourself.”

We finished the fire line then used our drip torches to start controlled fires to burn out the fuel before the fire came that way. By afternoon we were in the black again, planning new attacks.

Bobby dropped sludge a few miles north.

Jubal frowned and pulled out his binocs. “That's where the Geronimos were. They dug in pretty good or they on the move?” he

called to Chief.

Chief pulled the radio from his ear. “They already moved. They said the wind is going to change.”

“It hasn’t, has it?” Jubal asked.

The brass called again, and he got off the radio half-impressed, half-bewildered. “It moved.”

Runt’s excitement for that opportunity made his exhaustion melt away, and his pace picked up as we followed Chief to the next hot spot.

“Does she know everything yet? The foster situation? Your bio mom?” Sugar asked, walking next to me with his Pulaski over his shoulder, his hard hat shielding his eyes from the setting sun.

“Does anyone really know everything? I know next to nothing about her,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

“She knows the best parts. That’s all she needs to know.”

“Enough!” Jubal yelled. “Look!”

We came to the top of a ledge and looked over at the rolling tops, some covered in pines and aspens, about a fourth dead and fallen, waiting to be eaten and spit out by the approaching fire. The sky was filled with a gray haze, the sun shrouded but still managing to cast a light that mirrored the flames below.

“Take it all in, boys,” Jubal said. “Last hike this year.”

The fire was 99% controlled, and the crew was loading up and traveling back to Estes Park. Everyone except me, and Taylor was probably staying behind too. One more hot spot. One more attack. One more night sleeping on the ground with just an emergency blanket to fight the cold. I was one flight away with Bobby to fire camp to her. Naomi was on the other side of tonight. I’d never been so anxious to get off a tour. Whatever it was, I wanted more.

chapter twenty-three

history for sale

Naomi

“**S**he left me,” Peter said. His tie was loose, his first button undone, sweat dripping from his temples. His palm was flat against the doorjamb as he hunched over.

I held my door open but stood stubbornly in his way. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

He crossed his arms over his suit coat, white flakes falling onto his slick, dark hair. “Can I come in?”

“No.”

“No?” he asked, surprised. “Naomi, c’mon. It’s freezing out here.”

“Then get back into your fancy car and leave.”

Peter made a face.

I rolled my eyes and stepped aside. “Fine.”

Peter took off his scarf and coat, and I directed him to hang them in the closet. He looked around and nodded toward the half-empty bottle of beer on the table. “Pre-gaming?”

I shrugged.

“Can I have one?” he asked.

“They’re in the fridge.”

I sat at the dining table, listening to the door open then close, and the beer top pop before Peter sat down, a chair between us.

He set the cap on its top and moved it around in a figure eight with his index finger. “She said it was coming.”

“Where’d she go?” I asked.

“Back to Maryland ... with her mother. Paige knew, Naomi. We knew when we married it wasn’t love. She knew I was in love with you and she was in love with, Malcolm Trebec,” he said, looking disgusted and bewildered at the same time. “My father was a congressman I was being groomed as one too, and her father was neck deep in business and politics.”

“I recall,” I said, unimpressed.

He turned his head to the side. “We’ve been over this.”

I breathed out a laugh. “Do you think I’m still heartbroken over it? You came here.”

He held up his hands, still holding his beer. “I know. I know, I’m sorry.” He sighed. “She didn’t care that I could never get over you. I know she and Malcolm were still sleeping together, even after he married. It was always convenient for me to have a house here.”

“So why did she leave?” I asked.

“I went home. I didn’t call. Malcolm was ... he was in my bed. He left, and that should’ve been the end of it, but I wanted to hurt her. So I told her. I told her it didn’t matter because I’d brought you to Colorado Springs. That I could see you every day like I used to, and that was enough for me. And for Paige, I suppose, that crossed a line. She’s tired of pretending.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I asked.

He took a long swig of his beer then set the bottle down to rub his face with both hands.

“What?” I asked. “Is she pregnant with your kid or something? Or Malcolm’s?”

“God no. She is obsessive about birth control.”

“Then what?”

“It’s an election year, Naomi. This couldn’t come at a worse time.”

My face fell. “Are you serious?”

“What?” he asked. “Can’t we just talk? We used to be best friends, Naomi. We used to talk for hours, and vent about our asshole dads, our overbearing mothers, and the godforsaken fucking desert.”

“You’re right,” I conceded. “We were friends. Best friends. All the firsts! I loved you right up until you came home from a weekend in the Hamptons and broke up with me because you were engaged to Paige.”

I pointed at him, beer in hand. “Don’t look at me like that, Peter. I’m not still butthurt about it. I just think you’re an asshole for breaking my heart to make your father happy.”

“I know. And I promised you that would never happen. But if you’re not still angry, then why can’t you forgive me?”

“Forgiveness is overrated,” I said, taking a sip to hide my frustration.

“Let us forgive each other, only then will we live in peace,” Peter quoted.

“Tolstoy is full of shit!” I slammed my beer on the table. “I haven’t forgiven you for years, and I feel just fine about it! Nothing changes when you forgive someone. You don’t feel better. It doesn’t erase what they did, and that fake high road is someone else’s standards, not mine. I don’t forgive you, I don’t forgive the bastard haji who threw the grenade that killed my husband, and I don’t forgive whoever created Pumpkin Spice Lattes. You can all go fuck yourselves.”

“Naomi,” Peter scolded.

“Explain to me how forgiving someone benefits the forgiver.”

“You feel better,” Peter said, stumbling over his words.

“Wrong.”

“You find a sense of freedom.”

“Wrong.”

“You can let go of your anger and hurt.”

“Wrong. See, I felt hurt for about a year after your engagement, then I got over it. I didn’t need to forgive you to do it; I just forgot you. Forgetting you is where the real peace comes. Most people don’t deserve forgiveness.”

“Do you forgive Matt for falling on that grenade?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ll throat punch you if you say his name again.”

“Pretty sure that threat is an instant felony.” He waited. “Do you?”
I spoke through my teeth. “No.”

“Maybe that’s why you haven’t moved on.”

“Fine,” I said. I held up my hands and looked to the ceiling. “I forgive you, Matt! I forgive you for saving your friends and leaving me. For choosing your friends over ever seeing me again, for leaving me alone in a big, heaping, PTSD clusterfuck!” I looked back at Peter and shrugged. “Still pissed.”

He sighed.

Someone knocked, and we both turned our heads to see Zeke standing in the threshold, a six pack of beer in one loose fist, his other still touching the open front door. “Is this a bad time?”

My mouth fell open, and my gaze danced from Zeke to Peter and back again. I stood. “No. Nope, not a bad time.”

Peter frowned, confused.

“We still on for movie night?” Zeke asked.

I pulled him in by the hand and closed the door behind him. “Zeke, this is Peter. We grew up together. Peter, this is Zeke. He’s a hotshot out of Estes Park.”

“Isn’t fire season over?” Peter asked, looking Zeke over like he was a mineral-rich country he wanted to pick a fight with to gain control.

“I’m still staying at the hotel here in town,” Zeke explained.

“Why?” Peter asked with the most condescending tone he could manage.

Zeke gestured to me with a sweet smile.

Peter didn’t try to hide his jealousy. He glared at me. “Hotshot, huh? Since when? Is this why you begged for clearance? Are you fucking kidding me?”

I didn’t answer, but I could see Zeke’s surprised expression from my peripheral.

“Peter is also my boss,” I explained, refusing to look away from Peter’s scowl.

“Weird,” Zeke said. He set the six pack on the side table by the

couch and crossed his arms. “So you gonna stay for the movie or...?” Zeke asked Peter.

Peter waited for my answer.

I sighed. “Why don’t you come over for Thanksgiving? Zeke and I are cooking, and the guys are coming over.”

One corner of Peter’s mouth shook when it attempted to curl up. “It would be rather awkward to visit my parents without Paige.”

I opened the door with a smile. “Great! See you tomorrow.”

Peter walked out, pausing to glance at Zeke before leaving.

I closed the door, resting my forehead against the wood.

“What was that about?” Zeke asked. He patted the couch beside him. “C’mere.”

I trudged over to him, borderline pouting, then fell next to Zeke. He curved his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer, kissing my temple. “I’m so glad tonight is the night you chose to stay for the first time. Even if it is because you’re helping with the food while I’m at work and not because Peter pisses me off.”

“I’m just glad you finally asked.” When I didn’t respond, he continued. “Peter’s your oldest friend and boss?”

“Peter was my childhood sweetheart. We broke up when he got engaged to someone else, and a few years later, I married Matt. After the funeral, I joined the Marines. Peter through a fit. When I was deployed, Peter begged me to let him find a way to bring me home, but I wanted to be out there with my team. He finally figured out how to do it.”

“How?”

“Peter is the head bitch in charge of funding for the mountain. Trex was offered this job, chose his own team, and after we got here, we realized Peter pulled a lot of strings and cashed in all his favors. He knew Trex would bring me here.”

Zeke looked around as if my house was bugged and leaned in to whisper. “Who is he? Like CIA or something?”

I laughed out loud. “No, he’s a junior senator. His dad is Speaker of

the House.”

“Whoa,” Zeke said.

“He’s harmless,” I said.

“Yeah, if you’re on his good side. I have a government job, you know.”

I made a face. “Are you afraid of Peter?”

“Nope. I’ve got you to keep him in line. Looks like you can handle him pretty well.”

“I can.”

“He looked like hell.”

“His wife left him.”

“Damn,” Zeke said, lost in thought for a moment. “My worst nightmare.”

“That’s sort of weird since you’re not married.”

“Not yet. I’ve been left. It sucks. I feel for the guy.”

“Well that can happen if you’re pursuing an old girlfriend while married.”

He pointed at me. “You? He’s pursuing you?” My non-answer told him what he needed to know, and his cheeks flushed. “This changes things.”

“Again, he’s harmless.”

A deep line formed between Zeke’s brows. “He’s about to be single, and it looks like being married was just a speed bump for him when it came to you. So are there still feelings?”

I stifled a laugh. Jealous Zeke was adorable. “I have absolutely zero interest.”

“You just evaded.”

I shifted, uncomfortable. I’d forgotten about this part, being accountable to someone else. “Peter was my first everything.”

“So you loved him.”

“Past tense. My feelings for him are strictly platonic, and most of the time he pisses me off, so...”

“Guys like that don’t care,” Zeke said, unhappy.

“Are you projecting your previous experience? Because I’m not her.”

Zeke turned to look at me, his mouth open. “That’s not what I was saying. If that’s really how it sounded, I deeply apologize.”

I hugged him to me then pecked his lips. “I promise, Peter is not a problem.”

Zeke padded around in his bare feet, wearing my robe as he brought me a cup of coffee in bed. Music was playing in the kitchen, something old but catchy. Perfect morning music that mirrored Zeke’s mood.

I sat up, taking the steaming mug from him. “Wow. Thank you,” I said, taking a careful sip. Zeke climbed onto his side of the bed and sat legs crossed, drinking from the only other mug I had. He looked content, his eyes still heavy from staying up late fucking my brains out, then waking up just a few hours later to take a quick shower.

“Your robe is very fetching,” I said in a horrible British accent.

He looked down. “It’s cold this morning. I work with what I have.”

I thought about that then sat up higher, shrugging. “What if... I mean, if you want ... what if you kept a drawer here? And maybe a hanger or two.”

He smiled. “What does that mean?”

“You know ... toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, shaving cream, a robe —personal items you need that I don’t have here. I’m assuming it’s not the last time you’ll stay. I mean, if you don’t mind having two of that stuff.”

His smile widened. “Not at all.”

I nodded once. “Good. The middle drawer on the left in the bathroom is open.”

“Yeah?” he said, unable to tone down his excited expression.

“Yeah.” My heart was pounding, but I kept my face smooth. Each time we took things to a new level, after the initial panic was over, I’d

never once regretted it. I wanted to be with Zeke, even if I had to fight my demons daily, sometimes to emotional and mental exhaustion. I'd never backed down from a fight, and this time I'd win something I'd lost a long time ago: me.

He leaned over, planting a quick kiss on my lips. "I'd better get dressed. I need to start dinner, and you have to get around for work."

"Right behind you," I said. The robe fell to the floor, and Zeke pulled on his navy-blue boxer briefs, a pair of gray sweats, and a plain white T-shirt. I willed myself to feel relaxed at the domesticity of it all.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty-four
mine

Naomi

“Turn around, sir,” the man on the other side of the blast doors of Deep Echo said through the speaker. The Deep Echo security team stopped getting annoyed a couple of months before and just accepted that Trex and I were going to visit them every day. The warning was just procedure. No guns, no posturing.

“Do you ever leave?” I asked the man on the com. “Do you even know it’s Thanksgiving?”

“Turn around and walk, lady,” the soldier said.

I took a step closer. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“Dean, ma’am. This is your last warning.”

I lifted my fist and gave them the finger. “Happy holidays, assholes.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Happy holidays to you too, Naomi.”

Trex and I traded looks then headed back down Echo corridor to Delta. The Complex was quiet, only a skeleton crew working the control room and security, and a couple dozen essential personnel. Our steps were louder than usual against the metal grid that led to Delta, the water dripping from the ceiling louder, the whispers louder.

“Think they’ll ever let us back there?” I asked.

“I’m more concerned at this point that those guys will never get out,” Trex said. “No amount of money would make that contract worth it.”

“Maybe they know too much, like that lab rat was saying.”

“Then I need to mind my fucking business. Tonight’s our first night in the new house.”

Martinez and Sloan met us back at headquarters a few minutes before lunch, and Harbinger came in right after us, but it seemed extra quiet.

Trex stared at the door for a full minute then turned his head toward the com clipped to his lapel. “Trex actual to Kitsch, check in.”

The rest of the team waited, frozen in place. Kitsch didn’t do well during the holidays. They were the few times during the year he couldn’t pretend. We were all on edge, dreading hearing the worst.

“Trex actual to Kitsch,” Trex repeated. “Do you copy?”

“It’s Thanksgiving,” Sloan said.

“I know,” Trex said, staring at the door and waiting for a response on the radio.

“This time of year is rough on him,” Sloan said.

“I know,” Trex snapped. “Trex to Kitsch. Do you copy?”

The radio crackled. “Lima Charlie, out,” Kitsch responded, signaling he’d heard Trex loud and clear.

We all sighed and relaxed.

“We’re headed to chow, and it’s comfort-food day. Get your ass in here,” Trex said.

“On my way, over,” he said. The radio crackled again.

Martinez leaned back, letting his head hit his locker. None of us dared say it aloud, but holidays had us all on edge.

“I invited him over tonight,” I said. “I’m cooking if you guys want to stop over,” I said to Martinez and Sloan.

“Can I bring a date?” Martinez asked.

“Sure. Just make sure Kitsch comes.”

Martinez nodded once. “Will do.”

Lunch was a slice of roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, cranberry salad, and apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. We had all sat down by the time Kitsch made it to the table, not mentioning that his face was red and blotchy, his eyes swollen and

bloodshot. The knuckles on his right hand were skinned and bloody, his napkin soaked with crimson.

“You’re not going to flake out on me, are you, Kitsch?” I asked.

“Huh?” he said, snapping out of the hell he was in. “No. I’ll be there.”

“Good. I’m picking you up. You’re my date,” Martinez said.

I eyed Martinez, seeing the moment he’d decided not to bring anyone else so he could keep Kitsch company.

Kitsch nodded.

“Everyone be sure to bring liquor. We’re going out after, and the bar marks up the alcohol on holidays,” I said.

Kitsch frowned.

I pointed at him. “You’re the only one who can two-step.” I pointed at his bloody hand. “You’re cleaning that shit up, then you’re taking me out, fucker.”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

“I’ll be DD,” Trex said.

I grinned. “You’re coming?”

“Someone has to drive you drunken losers around. I don’t want to have to bail you out of jail so you’re at work on time. I don’t like leaving Darby at home alone on Thanksgiving...”

“Bring her,” Sloan said.

I frowned. “I’m not bringing my very pregnant girlfriend to a bar. Besides, she has to be at work by eleven.”

“You guys should come by,” I said.

“She’s been cooking all day.”

“So go after,” Harbinger said. “We’re stopping by after dinner.”

Trex nodded. “Okay. I’ll ask Darby. I’m sure she’ll be fine with it. We’ll stay until she has to go to work.”

Kitsch picked at his lunch, moving it around on his plate but never taking a bite.

“Attention!” Saunders called from the doorway.

We turned to see the general walk in. A few airmen at the other end

of the cafeteria stood and saluted. We stopped eating and faced him, waiting to see what all the fuss was about. He walked over to our table. “Trexler, congratulations, your team has the rest of the day off to spend with your families, per Senator Bennett.”

“What?” I said. Peter knew I loathed special treatment.

“Calm down, Abrams,” the general said. “The early release is for all civilian contractors.”

“Enjoy your Thanksgiving meal and then collect your things for the weekend.”

“The *weekend*?” Trex asked. We didn’t work a full eight on Saturdays and Sundays, but we were on call 24/7. “What will you do for Complex security?”

“Deep Echo will take care of it. You go home, they breathe fresh air, it’s a win-win. Happy holidays.” The general turned on his heels without another word, followed by his entourage.

I stood with my tray. “I’d better get home and finish dinner.”

“You need help?” Martinez asked.

“I’ve got it,” I said, rushing out.

Zeke was in the kitchen when I opened the door. He was still in his sweatpants and T-shirt, not a speck of food on him. His smile was bright. He rubbed the back of his neck, almost blushing. “I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to my girl coming home every day looking like she saved the world.”

I smiled, letting my duffle fall to the floor. “Who says I don’t?”

Zeke playfully took wide strides to get to me, then wrapped me in his arms, welcoming me home with a kiss. “I missed you.”

“Same,” I said, looking up at him. “I’m going to get dressed then help you. My whole team is coming over, plus Watts and one wife, their two kids, and a pregnant girlfriend.”

“Darby?”

“Yeah?”

“Cool.”

I joined Zeke in the kitchen. He’d already prepped and basted,

stirred and boiled, baked and refrigerated. I hadn't cooked for so many since my days at home in Sasabe, but Zeke was in his element.

Zeke popped a sliced strawberry in my mouth then kissed me. "This is already my best Thanksgiving ever. I'm a lucky, lucky man."

"You're a rock star in bed and in the kitchen. I'm feeling pretty lucky myself."

He grinned while he searched for a place to put his mixture into the already full fridge. "And that's not all I'm good at."

"Oh yeah? What else?"

He wrapped me in his arms, pressing his lips against mine. His lips parted, his tongue tasting the inside of my mouth, making my insides tingle from hairline to toes. He pulled away.

I inhaled, feeling a little dizzy. "That too."

"For the rest, you'll just have to be surprised."

I slid my fingers under his T-shirt, letting my fingers graze his back. "I'm good at things too."

"I know you are."

I kneeled in front of him, pulling his waistbands with me as I went. I took his already-hard shaft in one hand, cupped his ass in the other, and slowly pulled him into my mouth until I could feel the tip of his dick at the back of my throat. I pulled back with the tiniest bit of suction then went in again, even slower, keeping my mouth tight around him. His right hand grabbed the countertop, the left gripped the handle of the fridge.

"Oh my *fuck*," he breathed out, the last word lingering in his mouth. Ten minutes later he finished, then he was lingering in mine.

I stood, but Zeke didn't move, his eyes still closed, his brow still furrowed. "That thing you did ... with your..."

"Yeah?"

"Holy hell."

I laughed, kissed his cheek, then left him standing in the kitchen alone, his pants still around his ankles. "I'm taking a shower. Can you check the oven?"

“Uh-huh,” he called.

I came out in tight jeans and an ivory Henley with the top two out of four wooden buttons open, setting off my olive skin. My hair was down and curled for the occasion. It was simple, but Zeke was just as obsessed as he was when I didn't have clothes on.

“Wow,” he said. “You're going to keep having to remind me that we're together, because you're way outta my league.”

“Quit it,” I said, reaching over to peck him on the lips.

Zeke helped me clean up the kitchen for the second time in an hour before our friends arrived so we could start the potatoes, gravy, vegetables and finish the rest of what Zeke had started that morning.

As I set the table, someone knocked lightly on the door. I glanced at my watch, noting whoever it was, was half an hour early. If I had to guess, I'd say it was Harbinger.

I was wrong. On the porch stood Peter, holding a bottle of wine. He looked at me then down at the dark glass in his hand. “It's a red. Paige did all the cooking, so I apologize for coming mostly empty-handed.”

“We have plenty of food. Come in.”

Peter stepped in and stood around for a few minutes, trying not to watch Zeke and I work together in the kitchen. He seemed to get sadder as each minute passed.

“Peter? The corkscrew is in the drawer to the right of the sink,” I said.

“Oh. Right,” he said, happy to be of use. He worked on the bottle for a few seconds then took two glasses already on the table and filled them. “Zeke? Would you like a glass?”

Zeke held up a bottle of beer. “I'm good, thanks.”

I could hear the strain in Zeke's voice. His demeanor had changed the moment Peter walked in. I rubbed his back, trying to show my appreciation for his effort.

“Are Spenser and Kansas coming?” Peter asked from the table.

“They went to their parents,” I said.

He nodded then took another gulp of wine.

Soon, Harbinger arrived with his wife, Caroline, and their young sons, Henry and Miles. Martinez and Sloan showed up, then Kitsch, then Watts. Three facets of my life collided. It wasn't awkward—except maybe for Peter—and Zeke and Watts got along great with my team and Harbinger's family. Zeke had met them in passing before, but this was the first time he was able to speak to them, and thank them all, for longer than a few minutes and not while running for our lives.

I was glad that he kept his gratitude vague for Harbinger's sake. Caroline knew what Zeke did, but she didn't know exactly what her husband did or how the two were related, and that had to be very confusing. Caroline simply smiled and attended to the boys. If she wanted to know or was at all curious, she didn't show it.

We ate and drank then ate some more. Everyone brought beer or wine, and by the time Trex and Darby had arrived, we were miserably full and more than tipsy.

Trex and Darby pulled into the drive, and everyone cheered. As they stepped out, Darby was already dressed for work, her baby bump obvious, even though she'd worn a loose top. Trex hooked his arm in hers while they walked. Darby carried a pie across the yard, not nearly as concerned about the short walk in the dark as Trex seemed to be.

"Thank you," I said, taking the pie.

"Trexler," Zeke said, reaching for his hand. "Congrats on the new house. That's awesome."

"Thanks," Trex said, his hand on Darby's belly. I imagined the strange, conflicting emotions Trex would have. Of all the people I could choose to move on with, it had to be Zeke, someone who was once interested in Darby.

"Trex?" Darby said. "I need to sit."

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, just need to rest, I think," she said, rubbing her stomach.

Trex led her by the hand to the table, pulling out a chair.

"T-Rex! You've turned into a regular gentleman!" Martinez said, slapping his back.

Caroline went to the kitchen then brought Darby an ice water.

“Thank you,” Darby said.

“She doesn’t look very far along,” Caroline whispered.

“Barely half way,” I said. “She’s been under a lot of stress. She works full-time, nights, and she doesn’t have family here.”

“She has us,” Caroline said.

I nodded once. “Yes, she does.”

Not that I can help with a baby. I can take out the trash. Mow the lawn. The dishes and shit like that. Cuddles? Diapers? Negative. I didn’t have siblings. The women in my family practiced holding guns, not babies. I’d never had a desire for children and, approaching my thirties, that biological urge others talked about just wasn’t there.

Zeke paused next to Darby and leaned down to whisper in her ear. She smiled.

Now I was red-faced. I hadn’t had as much to drink as everyone else, but the two I’d had and my temper made me wanted me to fight them both. Zeke was headed to the restroom but stopped next to me. “You okay?”

“Yep.”

He smiled, but the confusion on his face was evident. He walked down the hall and closed the bathroom door behind him. I rationalized the anger, and it slowly melted away before Zeke returned to nuzzle my neck.

He pulled back. “You’re not okay.”

“Fine,” I lied. Just him asking pissed me off. I was such a girl.

He pulled my hand as he walked down the hall, closing the door behind us. He’d had far more to drink than me, his body relaxed.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, let’s go back out before people realize something’s wrong.”

“Wait. Are we fighting?”

“You whisper shit into a girl’s ear—a girl you dated—yeah, something might be wrong with that.”

“It’s not what you think. I told her she looked beautiful,” he admitted.

Bile rose in my throat. “That’s so kind of you,” I said, my anger boiling just below the surface. “Definitely worse than what I was thinking.”

He held up his hands. “That’s not how I meant it. I was just trying to be nice because she looked embarrassed that she felt sick. I texted her when I found out the news, and I told her about you.”

“You’ve been texting her? Since when?”

“Pretty much since she got her phone. We’re just friends, Naomi.”

I sighed. “Fair enough.”

“But while I was washing my hands in the bathroom, I realized it might not have looked the best. Please don’t be mad. Today’s been amazing, and the last thing I’d wanna to do is fuck it up.”

“I’m not mad.”

“You’re a little mad.”

“I’m jealous, not mad.”

He grinned.

“It’s not funny,” I said, starting to walk past him.

He grabbed my arm and shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a little cute.”

I looked down at his hand on my arm. “Would my knee in your ball sack be cute?”

He shrugged again. “No, but it’s the price I pay to date a woman like you.”

“Like me?”

“Who can kick my ass.”

I pressed my lips together, trying not to smile, but it vanished with my next words. I pulled away from him. “I’m not the jealous type. But you’re texting a girl you’re attracted to and didn’t tell me.”

“Was attracted to. I don’t think about her like that anymore.”

“Because she’s pregnant.”

“Because she’s not you.”

I sighed. “Whispering in Darby’s ear that she’s beautiful?”

“You’re absolutely right. It was stupid. I was thinking about her feelings and not yours, which is the opposite of what I’d want to do.” He looked around. “Now that I think about it, that’s just idiotic. Why would I do that? I’m in love with you, not her.”

“*What?*”

Zeke frowned then cleared his throat. “Let’s back up.”

“Okay...?”

He held out his hands, palms out. “Only because that’s not something I want to say to you when I’m drunk. Or...” he began, seeing the horror on my face, “to scare you off. *Fuck.*” He rubbed his face with both hands. “Turns out, I’m making all kinds of stupid mistakes tonight.”

“Let’s just table this, go back to our guests, and we can come back to it later.”

Zeke nodded slowly. “You’re not going to dump me later, right?”

I frowned at the thought. “No!” I blurted out.

He hugged me tight. “I’m sorry, baby. I wanted today to be perfect.”

“Okay. Okay, let’s just get back out there. I don’t want a bunch of questions.”

He nodded then led me out by the hand. Only Peter seemed to notice we’d been gone. Watts was talking to Darby, and everyone listened intently to their conversation. There was something about her that mesmerized people. She was stunningly beautiful, but there was something more. Maybe it was her Southern charm, or something she exuded that made everyone around her want to be in her light.

You okay? Peter mouthed.

I nodded, irritated he’d noticed.

“You still working nights, Darby?” Watts asked.

“Yep,” she said. “What have you been up to?”

“Traveling, mostly. One of the guys has a house in Mexico on the beach. I’ve been spending a lot of time down there. Is that Laney girl still working afternoons?”

Darby’s smile was strained when she looked at Trex when she

answered. "Lane? Yep."

I poured Trex an ice water and handed it to him. He was standing across the room, watching everyone be as ridiculously obsessed with Darby as he was. Even Henry and Miles had stopped playing long enough to watch her every move.

"Uh-oh," I said, the ice clinking against the glass when I handed it to him. "What's that about?"

"Thanks," he said, taking a sip. "I went there tonight after we were released to get Darby's boxes," he whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Crazy bitch tried to fuck me in Darby's old room."

"*What?*" I said, trying to keep my voice down. "Does Darby know?"

"Yeah, I told her when I got back. She's pissed, but not at me."

"Makes for an awkward shift transition. Glad you told her. Way to avoid a stupid misunderstanding."

"I almost didn't. I was scared shitless it was going to ruin our first night at the house."

"Well, looky there. You have a reasonable girlfriend. Congratulations." I swiped my beer bottle from the countertop, clinked it to his glass, and we both drank.

"Told you she was worth waiting for," Trex said.

"You still believe that shit? You think she's the one, huh?"

Darby laughed and chatted with Caroline and the team.

"Without a single doubt," Trex said, taking another drink. His phone pinged, and he checked it.

"Fuck," he said, putting his phone away.

"What?" I asked. I assumed he was going to tell us we'd all been called in. I was hoping that was what he'd say. I didn't want to have the inevitable awkward conversation with Zeke later.

"He's been spotted in town."

"Who?" I asked.

"Her ex. I had some of my old friends at the Bureau keep an eye on him. They'd lost track of him the last two days. Looks like he's found

her.”

“Shit,” I said. “Are you going to tell her?”

Kitsch came inside from the porch. “Nomes. You got a flashlight?”

“Just in every room of the house.”

“I need the closest one.”

He looked concerned, and I put down my beer. “In the kitchen. Drawer to the left of the dishwasher.”

Kitsch went to the kitchen, rummaged around for a second, and returned, rushing past. “It’s to the right of the dishwasher,” he said.

“Everything all right?” Trex asked.

Kitsch pushed through the screen door, pointing his flashlight at the ground.

“What is he doing?” I asked, stepping forward.

“Boss,” Kitsch called from outside.

Trex and I traded glances, then we followed Kitsch to the front porch. He stood at the top of the stairs, nodding to the yard. The flashlight highlighted a mound of dead rabbits.

“What the hell?” I said, grabbing the flashlight from Kitsch. I followed the carcasses with the light. I handed the flashlight to Trex then rushed inside.

Martinez passed me, going outside too.

“What’s going on?” Zeke asked, watching me furiously gather flashlights.

“I don’t know. Something bad.”

Sloan and Harbinger followed me out, and I gave flashlights to everyone on the team. We each turned on a flashlight and pointed it in the same direction.

“What the actual fuck is going on?” Harbinger asked.

Zeke and Watts came out, talking and laughing, but stopped the second they saw the mutilated bodies in the spotlight.

“That wasn’t there ten minutes ago when we came outside for Watts to smoke,” Zeke said. “Is someone...is someone playing a sick joke?”

“It’s more than one person,” I said. “One guy couldn’t do all of that in the amount of time he had.”

“Agreed,” Harbinger said.

The screen door opened one more time, and Trex turned. Peter was holding a beer now that the wine was gone, recoiling at the mess in the yard. “Is that...?”

“Yes,” Trex said, glowering.

We peered out over the rabbit carcasses lying in the dead grass, lit up with six heavy-duty flashlights, forming just one word: MINE.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty-five
sticks and stories

Zeke

The large black trash bag Naomi held rattled each time the guys pitched in a new double-handful of dead rabbits.

“Get a move on, guys. Darby will be out in a few minutes, and Trex wants this gone,” she said. *Damn, it turns me on when she orders grown men around.*

I approached her with my own handful. “This is a shit ton of animals.”

“Yep,” she said.

I didn’t like it when she acted like I was just one of the guys, and it was impossible not to show my disappointment, which she loved. At least she loved something about me. I was batting way out of my league, and we both knew it, but dead animals were a whole new level of romantic gestures—if anyone could even call it that. *No, definitely not.* Naomi could handle herself, but she was being harassed. I wondered how long it had been going on and why she hadn’t told me.

Martinez dumped in some more limp carcasses, then Harbinger, then Sloan, then Peter.

“What do you think they meant?” I asked.

Naomi frowned. “They?”

“The people who did this. *Mine* must mean something. Who would do this to you?”

She let go of one side of the bag, using her wrist to brush a thick strand of sweaty hair from her face. “It wasn’t for me.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Naomi...” I began. The fact that she hadn’t told me and was now keeping it from me didn’t help one fucking bit.

“Remember when I said there were things I couldn’t tell you? This is one of them. You don’t have to worry about me anyway. You know that.”

Harbinger and Kitsch traded looks.

I glanced inside the trash bag. “Whoever did this is sick. It happened in your front yard. I’d still be worried if you had superhuman strength and could fly.”

“You assume I don’t have superpowers? That hurts.” She jutted out her lip.

Martinez chuckled.

“You’re not taking this seriously,” I said, frustrated. “That just makes me worry more.”

Naomi opened the bag wider for Peter and Watts to dump the last of the carcasses in. She looked at the other two trash bags then the one I held, acting like the conversation we had was over.

“Doesn’t feel right to just dump them in and throw them away. Poor things.”

“Naomi!” I yelled.

“I heard you!” she shouted back.

“Don’t yell at her,” Peter said. “She’s been taking care of herself far longer than you’ve been around.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “How about you worry about your girl, and I’ll worry about mine?”

I could see Naomi was unhappy from my peripheral, but Peter was a spoiled rich kid, and I had no patience for putrid, tie-wearing fuckwads like him.

Peter’s jaw tightened. “Naomi doesn’t belong to you.”

I took a step forward. “She sure as shit doesn’t belong to you. You can’t even keep your own wife.”

The skin around Peter's eyes tightened. I could tell no one had ever spoken to him like that.

Naomi stepped in. "Oh my Christ, you two. Shut up. Guys, take these to the bins on the other side of the garage."

When Kitsch, Harbinger, Sloan and Martinez disappeared, Trex and Darby came outside.

The team came around the house as Trex walked Darby to the truck. Concealing their bloodied hands and keeping them away from her clothes. Darby didn't seem to notice, and thankfully it was dark.

"Thanks for doing this. I loved meeting everyone," Darby said in her sweet Southern drawl.

"Come back anytime. It will be nice to see Trex more often."

Trex hugged Naomi. "Thanks, Nomes."

"Of course."

When Darby turned, we traded glances. She had no idea what we'd just done. Trex waved to Naomi, to the rest of us, then backed out of the drive. He had to be out of his mind with worry.

I turned on my heels and headed in, trying to get settled on the couch before Peter came back in.

Naomi passed through the living room to the kitchen sink. She held her hands under the water for a while, probably relieving the ache in her hands from the cold temperature outside.

"So," Martinez said, "we still on for McCormack's?"

"I'm not really feeling it tonight," I said.

"No?" Watts said. "You were all for it an hour ago."

"That was an hour ago," I said, taking a sip of water.

"I might catch up with you later."

Martinez looked disappointed, but he nodded, heading out with the rest.

She sat next to me, in full view of Peter, and the satisfaction I felt was almost too much to hide.

"Thank you for dinner, Naomi," Peter said. "See you next week."

She nodded. "See you. Happy Thanksgiving."

Peter left, and I glared at the door even when it closed behind him.

“Still mad?” Naomi asked.

“I don’t like that prick.”

“You’re not supposed to. He’s a politician.” Naomi smiled, but I didn’t think anything about Peter was funny. She touched my hand. “Why don’t we go out? Have a good time and blow off some steam?”

I stood, my head immediately spinning, my heart banging against my chest. “Blow off steam? Dead rabbits in your yard spelling that shit isn’t steam, Naomi. Something is very wrong.”

“I promise, it’s fine.”

I sighed. “I should probably head home.”

“Zeke, it’s Thanksgiving.”

“I know. It’s just ... awkward.”

“I thought you were going to teach me how to two-step?”

One corner of my mouth turned up, but it quickly faded. “I dunno, Naomi. I’m not feeling the best, and I’m trying to process.”

“Process what?” When I didn’t answer, she prompted again. “If you want to be with me or not?”

I couldn’t say anything. All I could hear was the thump of my heart and the ringing in my ears.

“Wow. Okay then. You’re right, this is awkward as fuck.”

“Naomi,” I said, reaching out for her and pulling her to stand. “You know my story. Even with Brad and Jenn treating me like their son, there was something missing. I spoke with them yesterday, and Jenn said I was different. I *feel* different. It’s more than just being with you. I feel like I’m finally part of a family. Our family. You and me.” The look on her face warned me away. “I get it. We’re in this weird place where we’re together, but there’s an invisible line you don’t want to cross. That’s what I’m processing. I just needed you to know that.”

“That it’s not you holding us up?”

I shrugged one shoulder.

She looked down. “Wow.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m such a dick. Stay. Please?”

I had to get to bed and sleep whatever it was off. I had too much work coming up to get sick. I kissed her forehead, letting my lips linger on her skin. “Can I call you tomorrow?” I said softly.

Naomi nodded.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter twenty-six

next level

Zeke

It nearly killed me, but I walked away from her. I let the engine of my truck run for a minute or so then backed out, my foot planting the gas pedal to the floorboard. The tires squealed so the whole world would know my frustration. It might've been a stupid kid thing to do, but it felt good in the moment.

I stared at my phone more than the road, wishing she'd call, text, beg me to come back. She didn't, but of course not. I knew better.

Just as the lock clicked as I pushed through the door, my phone buzzed, and it flipped in my hands a few times before I caught it and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey," Jenn said in full mom-voice mode. Her tone was soft; just the one word dripped with love and patience.

"How'd you know I needed to hear your voice?" I said, sitting on the bed just as the door slammed shut.

"I didn't. Just wanted to hear yours. What's up?"

"The girl. Naomi."

"Oh?"

I fell onto the bed, flat on my back, staring up at the ceiling. The room had become a prison, Naomi's house my escape. It was more than just weird that I'd retreated here. "It's hard to explain, and her job is sort of secret, so there's not a lot I can explain."

"That's ... odd. What does she do?"

I chuckled. "I don't know."

“You don’t know, or won’t say?”

“Yes.”

Jenn laughed out loud, but quieted down quickly. “Zeke. You like this girl?”

I sighed, picking at my jeans. “Yeah.”

“Tell me.”

“I can’t, Jenn. It’s ... complicated.”

She took a breath, preparing to mother me. “You know, when you and Becca split up, I worried about you. You were lost. She was a sort of lifeline for you, but I couldn’t figure out to what. You have a big family who loves you. You have a safe place to land, a job you love, and a crew of brothers who love you back. All of my children come to me searching for something, but you’re the only one I couldn’t help figure it out.” She paused. “What do you think it is?”

I thought a minute, remembering loving and then missing Becca, and now the way I felt about Naomi. “This is different.”

“How?”

“Becca ... she was what I wanted. Naomi ... she’s what I need.”

“How so?”

“She doesn’t put up with my shit, but she’s tough. She’s not going to run.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Everyone runs.”

“Not everyone,” Jenn reminded me without hesitation. “But you’ve always been a runner.”

I rubbed my face with my hand. “You’re right. I left her alone tonight, on Thanksgiving. Who does that?”

“Someone trying to see how far he can push until she leaves you too? And maybe even so you could say you knew she would all along.”

“No.” I sighed. “Yes.”

Jenn had a way of pulling the truth out of me that was buried so deep inside that I didn’t know it was even there until she dangled it in plain sight. “Are you serious about her, son?”

“Yes,” I said immediately. “This job, though ... it’s going to be a challenge not knowing if she’s safe or not. Where she is. Who she’s with. She can take care of herself and has been long before I came along. I don’t know. Maybe it’s a guy thing.”

“Or a Zeke thing,” Jenn said. “You didn’t choose your career because you enjoy sitting on the sidelines.”

“I’ve told her that.”

“You can make it work if you really want it.”

“I do.”

“Then sleep on it. Get some rest, call her, and tell her what’s going on in that head of yours before you lose her.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Love you,” she said, hanging up.

I undressed down to my boxers, then reached over to switch off the lamp, pulling the covers over me. My head was still pounding, and my chest felt tight. Jenn’s voice had relaxed me a little, but I knew until I smoothed things over with Naomi nothing would feel right.

chapter twenty-seven

sunrise

Naomi

Trex and I talked until sunrise. The rabbit carcasses were an intimidation tactic by Darby's abusive ex, and he'd been working overtime to make sure she was safe without her stressing over the knowledge.

"I still think you should tell her," I said. "These things always come out."

"I know. I should. She's so far along," he said, worry in his voice. "I'll tell her after she delivers."

"She won't think that's good enough, Trex. I promise."

"But she'll understand."

"Will she?"

"Yes." He sat in silence for a long time after that, and then we began reminiscing about things that always helped distract us: our old deployments, Kitsch and his mental health, old times... We moved on to the shit coffee we were drinking and whatever else helped keep us awake while we watched over Darby.

I glanced up to Zeke's window. The lights were out. He was probably sleeping, having no clue I was just below wishing I was up there with him.

"Okay. I'm out."

Trex and I touched our coffee cups together.

"Thanks, Nomes."

"Yep."

I started up the FJ, letting it warm up for less than a minute before pulling out of the parking lot.

Just as I drove into the street, my phone rang.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Is that you pulling out of the parking lot?” Zeke asked, his voice raspy.

“Uh, no?” I lied.

“It’s not your green FJ turning onto the road right this minute?”

“Nope.”

“Come back,” he begged.

“Nope,” I repeated.

“Fine, then I’m coming over.”

“You sound exhausted.”

“I can’t sleep. I need to see you.”

A lump formed in my throat. “Okay, fine. Come over,” I said, hanging up.

I raced home, making sure to beat Zeke there in plenty of time to park, wash my face and change into pajamas. He didn’t even knock when he came in, walking through my front door as a silent symbol of what he wanted, giving me hope.

The bolt lock clicked, and he padded down the hall to my bedroom, hovering in the doorway, backlit by the hall light.

“Are you awake?” he whispered.

I pushed myself up on my elbows. Zeke was wearing a wrinkled T-shirt and his favorite gray pants, his hands in the cotton pockets.

“No.”

“You weren’t at the hotel for me?”

“No.”

He thought about that. “You can’t tell me, can you?”

I shook my head.

He nodded. “Can I come to bed?”

“Yes.”

I turned onto my side, keeping my back to him as he crawled in bed

next to me, wrapping his arms around my middle and pulling me against him. He buried his face in my hair, and I held his arms against my middle.

Zeke's skin felt clammy.

"Are you feeling any better?" I asked.

"Not really. Didn't get much sleep."

"Think it's a virus?"

"I don't know," he said, dismissive.

"Just ... hang in there with me, okay?" I asked. "Don't give up yet."

"This is hard for me. I am desperate for this to work, but I also don't think I can survive another broken heart."

"I don't want to break anything."

"How do Harbinger and his wife do it? She's just okay not knowing?"

"She understands that it's better not to know."

"I will never understand that. I know you can take care of yourself. I know I shouldn't worry. But knowing weird shit is going down and I'm not allowed to know what it is..."

"You don't need to protect me, so you don't need to prepare, Zeke. If you can accept that, I think we'll be okay."

"I save people and things for a living. How am I supposed to change my mindset for the woman I love?"

I turned to face him. "You love me?"

He touched my cheek. "So much it scares the shit outta me."

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips against his. When we finally pulled away, he watched me, his eyes blinking slowly until he couldn't open them again. He fell into a deep sleep within minutes, and soon after, I was somewhere in oblivion with him.

chapter twenty-eight

fade

Naomi

Much to Peter's dissatisfaction, I skipped the workouts at the Complex to join Zeke later. We'd gotten memberships at the same gym where Trex had gotten his, and it was an added bonus to see him outside of work.

Now that fire season was over and he wasn't hiking up mountains with little sustenance for days, Zeke had begun to bulk up, and he seemed to feel better in his own skin, despite still feeling dizzy and nauseous at times. But even when I tried to scale back, Zeke tore himself up every workout, filling out and cutting down in record time.

I watched him eat multiple times a day—mostly protein—while he chatted happily about his family back home or places he wanted to walk hand in hand with me. So many plans, it was hard to keep up, but it didn't matter. Zeke was all about the future, and I loved that he effortlessly included me in it all.

"Babe?" I said, hopping down mid-chin lift to check on Zeke.

He was bent over next to the gym trash can, holding up his finger when I got to close.

"Lunch isn't setting well with me."

"I don't think any meal has set well with you for a week."

He grabbed his knees, he's breathing becoming labored.

"Why do you go at it so damn hard? Listen to your body," I said.

"That would set a precedence. Then I'd have to start listening to Jenn, and you, and my sisters..."

I smiled, crossing my arms. "Very funny. It's been a month. Time to make an appointment."

"I ate two steaks and six eggs on ab day, honey, I think I deserve this." He stood, his lips the same color as his face.

"You're pale," I said, frowning. "Sit."

"Babe..."

"Sit," I demanded, pointing at the floor. I crossed my legs under me, watching him. He seemed dazed as he rubbed his shoulder. "You're overdoing it." Before he could argue, I continued, "Why?"

"Ask any of my guys. It's just what I do in off-season."

I stared at him for a while, trying to decide if he was leaving anything out. "You workout until you puke?"

"No, that's new," he said with a smile.

"You're not funny."

"I'm a little funny," he said, the color coming back to his face. He bent over and kissed my forehead. "Let's eat. I'm starving. Then we've got some Christmas shopping to do. You're going to finally understand exactly how big my family is very soon."

I arched an eyebrow, watching him walk a few steps, and then he turned when he realized I wasn't following.

He lifted his arms. "C'mon, babe. I'm fine, and I'm not going without you."

"Make an appointment."

He shrugged. "Fine," he said, nonchalantly scooping me into his arms.

I kicked, not trying hard at all to free myself.

He pulled me toward him, waiting patiently for me to stop flailing, and then he kissed me. "You 'bout done?" he asked.

I kissed him again then shook my head.

"Food. Christmas presents. Bed. In that order," he said, nuzzling my neck as he carried me to his truck.

I watched him eat his first dinner of the night at a local diner, knowing he'd eat a full meal before bed too. Then, I held onto his arm

while he pushed a basket through a department store and carefully chose gifts for Jenn, Brad, and each one of his siblings. I bought something small and easily shippable for my parents, Spenser, and Kansas, and then a little something for Trex, Sloan, Martinez, Kitsch and Harbinger. By the time we finished, though, I was also pushing a basket.

“This is the easy part,” Zeke said, sliding each gift across the scanner. “What sucks is wrapping them.”

“We still have like ten days before Christmas. I can wrap them,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t mind.”

“You don’t hate wrapping presents?”

I shook my head.

“What are you doing next Thursday? Because my schedule is wide open that day to marry you.”

I threw a box with one of the dozens of toys he’d bought at him. “If that’s all it takes, I shouldn’t try so hard.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not a *try hard*. Not even close.”

I lifted one shoulder, trying to feign embarrassment when I was really bursting with pride. In truth, we were effortless. Once we got the few kinks ironed out, it just seemed right.

“That’s the last of it,” he said, placing a sack on top of the rest already in the basket.

He paid, and we pushed the carts to the parking lot, racing, of course.

“You sure you want to wrap all these?” he asked, stuffing them in the back seat of his truck.

“You sure you want to marry me on Thursday?” I teased.

“In a heartbeat,” he said without hesitation, white puffs coming from his mouth in rhythm with his labored breath.

“Quit it, you’re making me blush.”

His nose was beginning to get red from the cold, a contrast from his white teeth when he smiled. “You’d make it my best Christmas ever. I was a foster kid, you know. Do it for charity.”

I rolled my eyes. “You get no sympathy from me. You ended up with the best parents ever.”

He slipped into the driver’s seat next to me, our doors slamming at the same time. He started the engine, then held my hand between his, kissing it before rubbing my fingers between his to keep them warm.

“You’ll hear zero complaints from me about where I ended up. I go to sleep next to you every night and wake up next to you every morning. There is nothing better than that.”

My cheek was warm against Zeke’s chest when I woke. The presents were wrapped and shipped, the rest under the tree for Zeke and me. The snow tapped against the window, and the heater kicked on. The Christmas lights blinked all the way into the hall, on for a second, off for two, then on for two, off one.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” I whispered, gently squeezing his middle.

For a few minutes, everything was quiet. For a moment in time, I was in bed on Christmas morning with a man who loved me, it was snowing, and the hallway darkened and then lit up again from the blinking lights on the fir tree in the living room.

And then his phone rang.

Zeke didn’t move.

“Babe,” I said softly. “Your mom is calling you.”

Zeke stayed still. I nudged him. He still didn’t move.

“Zeke?” I said, trying not to panic as I shook him, then slapped him. Nothing.

He was pale, but warm. I lowered my ear to his nose. He was breathing. I held my fingers against his neck. His pulse was weak.

“Fuck! Zeke, wake up!” I grabbed my phone, dialing 9-1-1. The rest was a blur. She asked me questions, I answered, and then after what seemed like an eternity, we were in an ambulance, racing toward the hospital.

I walked with him into the ER, the walls, doors, and desks decorated in red and green. It only made me feel worse that we should be sitting next to the tree trading gifts instead of in the hospital. The paramedics wheeled Zeke straight back. No one asked me who I was or told me I couldn't stay with him, so I followed them into an empty room.

Two nurses immediately went into action.

"I'm Steph," a nurse with Christmas print scrubs said, removing her stethoscope from around her neck. She took his vitals while another nurse, her name badge reading *Candy*, started an IV. They worked quickly, calling Zeke's name every few minutes, trying to calmly coax him awake.

Once Steph was finished with Zeke's stats, she placed small round adhesive patches to his chest, then buttoned wires to him.

"Leads on," Steph said.

"What's your relationship to the patient?" Candy asked.

"Girlfriend," I said, staring at Zeke. Every minute that he didn't open his eyes just worried me more.

"Is Zeke on any prescription or non-prescription drugs? Was he drinking heavily last night? Any history of drug or alcohol abuse?" Steph asked.

I shook my head no.

Another nurse walked in, this one was short and squat. "Merry Christmas," she said. "I'm Susan. What do we have here?"

"Girlfriend found him unresponsive half an hour ago. She says no history of drug abuse," Steph said quickly, still working.

"I didn't find him like this," I said. "We were still in bed. I tried to wake him. He wouldn't wake up," I said.

"Has he been ill? Complained of chest pains?" Susan asked.

"No ... uh ... oh, actually yes. He's told me a few times the past few months he didn't feel well, but nothing serious. He said he got blood work a while ago."

"Did he make you aware of his results?" Candy asked.

“No,” I said.

The nurses traded glances.

“Do you know which doctor he saw?” Susan asked.

“I don’t,” I said, suddenly feeling completely inadequate for someone so close to him.

“It’s okay, we can figure it out,” Susan said. “We’re going to do another full panel anyway. Is there a next of kin we can call?”

“Um ... his uh ... his mother called him this morning. That’s why I tried to wake him. She’ll be the last incoming call on his cell.”

“Her name?”

“Um...” I thought for a moment, feeling next to tears. “Her name is ... her name is Jenn.”

“Lund?”

“I don’t think so. She was his foster mom.”

The nurse eyed me. “We’ll need that number off of his phone, and we’ll need you to step out.”

“I said be careful!” Trex yelled from the hall.

I pushed out the exam room door to see Trex following a gurney into the room next door.

“Trex?” I said, stopping when I saw his little sister Hailey crying and bleeding from her head, soaking parts of her long, beautiful blonde hair. “What happened?”

“Car accident. What are you doing here?” he asked, red faced. “You’re supposed to be at the hotel.”

I pointed to the wall. “Zeke is next door.”

“Zeke? Is he okay?”

I shook my head, feeling tears burn my eyes. “I don’t know. He wouldn’t wake up this morning.”

Trex looked behind me then hugged me. “I’ll get one of the guys to get Darby.”

“No, I’ll go,” I said, grateful for something to do. “Give me your keys. I rode here in the ambulance.”

“Nomes...”

“I can’t do anything for him right now anyway. They’re running tests.”

“You sure?”

I nodded, looking at Hailey. “They kicked me out because I’m just the girlfriend who is embarrassingly ignorant of his personal details. I’ll go now to get Darby. Keep an eye on Zeke for me.”

Trex nodded, and I left Trex and Hailey for Zeke’s room. Candy stopped me. “I’m sorry, ma’am. You’ll have to go to the waiting area.”

“I have to go pick up a friend. Let me tell him.”

Candy stepped aside, watching me closely as I leaned in as close as I could. In the ten minutes since we’d arrived, his blood had been drawn, he was hooked up to IV tubes, oxygen, and he looked completely vulnerable.

“Zeke? Can you hear me? I have to go get Darby,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry to have to leave you here alone. I’ll be right back. Hang in there, okay? You promised you would.”

“He’s stable,” Steph said. “Leave your number. If he wakes up while you’re gone, we’ll let him know you’ll be right back. If he gives us permission, we can call you.”

I scribbled the digits on a piece of paper lying on the counter then ran out. Concentrating on driving was difficult, and by the time I reached the hotel, I’d been so lost in thought I was surprised I’d made it unscathed.

Darby was already gone when I arrived. Another girl had already taken over and said Darby had taken a cab home. I raced to Trex’s house, but she wasn’t there either.

I went back to the hospital, dreading telling Trex that Darby wasn’t home, but hoping to see Zeke with his eyes open. A woman at the front desk with fluffy blonde hair and square glasses attempted to stop me, but just as I tried to explain to her who I was, the nurse came out.

“Naomi?” Steph called.

I turned. “Yes?”

No one had contacted me, so I tried not to get my hopes up, and I

also tried not to panic at the solemn expression on Steph's face. "He's awake. He's been asking for you."

Once she opened the doors, I rushed in ahead of her, smiling when I saw the relief on Zeke's face.

"Whoa, what happened?" he asked. "They said I wouldn't wake up?"

"You scared the hell out of me," I said, taking his hand in both of mine, careful not to disturb the tubing.

"I imagine it did. I'm so sorry," he said, his voice scratchy.

I frowned with my eyebrows and smiled with my mouth. "Don't apologize, dummy. We just need to figure out what's going on."

He grinned. "Merry Christmas." He looked at Steph. "I signed that paper, so can you tell her what you told me?"

"As soon as Dr. Steers returns—" Susan began.

"Hello," the doctor said with a stiff smile. His round glasses sat high on his nose, and he looked over his tablet. He then gave me a once over. "This is..."

"Naomi, my girlfriend," Zeke said.

"Ah! Nice to meet you, Naomi. Due to some arrhythmic behavior from his heart, I ordered an ECG. We're still waiting on the results, but I suspect hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, more commonly referred to as HCM. Has anyone mentioned enlargement of the heart, inherited cardiac muscle disorder disease, or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy to you, Mr. Lund?"

Zeke stared at him, confused. "Uh ... no?"

Dr. Steers continued, unfazed "Do you have any family history of premature sudden death?"

"I don't know," Zeke said. "I grew up in foster homes."

"You're scaring the shit out of me," I said, frowning.

The doctor tapped something out on his tablet, ignoring my comment. "I ask because it's usually caught during puberty."

"What is?" I asked, frustrated.

He looked up from his notes. "HCM. It's a condition associated

with the abnormal thickening of a portion or the entire heart muscle. I want to do a few more tests.” He looked at me. “Meaning Zeke will be here a bit longer. We’ll also need to do a few more tests in an outpatient setting as well. He had an impressive episode while you were gone, and we did have to conduct a procedure to return his heart to normal sinus rhythm.”

“What procedure?” I asked.

“They shocked the shit out of me,” Zeke said, adjusting in his bed. “Twice.”

“*What?*” I said, the image leaving me shaken.

“It hurt like a bitch,” Zeke said.

“I should’ve been there, Zeke,” I choked out. “I should’ve been there with you.”

“To watch that? No.” He shook his head. “Nobody needs to see that. Especially not...” he trailed off, glancing at me to see if I’d noticed.

“Especially not me? The widow? Stop acting like I can’t handle this.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I...” He sighed.

“So now what?” I asked.

“Some people who have HCM have no signs or symptoms, with no affect to their lives. Others have severe symptoms and complications. You may have shortness of breath, serious arrhythmias or an inability to exercise. It’s rare, but some with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy can have sudden cardiac arrest during very vigorous physical activity.”

“How did I...” Zeke trailed off for a moment then snapped back. “How did this happen? Did I eat a bad shrimp or is it from the smoke or...?”

Dr. Steers patted Zeke gently on the shoulder. “Your blood pressure and thyroid are normal, and you’re not diabetic, so it’s likely inherited.”

“Well that’s just fucking great,” he said, relaxing back. “The only thing my parents gave me was heart disease.”

“So he’ll be okay?” I asked.

“The disease is still in early stages. There is quite a lot we can do for complication prevention and treatment.”

“I’m a wildfire fighter out of Estes Park,” Zeke said.

Dr. Steers offered an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. I can’t recommend you continue in that line of work. Even competitive sports put you at high risk for cardiac arrest.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Zeke said.

“Low intensity sports should be fine as long as you listen to your body,” the doctor said, tapping out more notes.

Dr. Steers smiled and gestured goodbye, moving on to the next patient.

I squeezed Zeke’s hand, and he stared at his knees, processing what the doctor had said.

Trex poked his head in then came inside the room.

“Hey, man,” Zeke said, surprised.

Trex pointed toward his sister’s room. “My sister was in an accident.” He looked at me. “She’s banged up but will be fine.” He looked around, expectant. “Do you have Darby?”

I shook my head and looked at Zeke, nervous to explain.

“Why would you have Darby? What’s going on?” Zeke asked.

I said, hesitant to give him more bad news. “I spoke to Trex earlier, and hasn’t heard from her. She didn’t come home.”

“What?” Zeke asked, trying to sit up. “That’s not like her. She’s getting close to her due date, Naomi. We’ve got to find her.”

“I know. I’ll get an update from Trex and figure it out.” I kissed his cheek. “Rest. I’ll take care of it, I promise.”

Zeke nodded, and I stood, ushering Trex outside into the hall.

“Is Zeke going to be okay?” Trex asked.

I looked toward the door. “I think so. I…” my brows pulled together. “I want to help you, but I need to stay here.”

Trex nodded, but I could tell the reassurance in his voice was forced. “You should stay.”

I returned to Zeke. He was holding his hand out to me, and I took it. He was still disoriented, but he was awake and talking, answering questions—all good signs. But he was still pale and weak.

“Silver lining,” he said, “We’ll have a good story to tell about our first Christmas together.”

I breathed out a laugh. “True.” My smile crumbled.

“What? Is it Darby?”

“Trex has the rest of the team. They’ll be fine. I’m staying.”

“What are you not telling me?”

I cringed.

“Naomi...” he insisted.

“It appears her ex is in town.”

“He was here?” His eyebrows shot up. “Darby, she’s scared of him. He’s bad news.”

“Yeah.”

“Go,” he said without hesitation.

“I can’t leave you. I won’t.”

He waved me away, dismissive. “I can get Watts to babysit me. They need you.”

I shook my head.

“Naomi, if something happened and you weren’t there to stop it, you’d never forgive yourself.”

“And if you get sick while I’m gone?”

“I won’t. But Watts can do exactly what you could if you were here. No one can do what you do out there. They need you.”

I shook my head.

“Naomi,” he said, squeezing my hand. “Please.”

“You’re sure?” I asked again, my heart tugging in both directions.

He frowned. “Go find her, Naomi, then come back to me.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll go. I’m calling Watts first.”

“Yes, boss.” He nodded then relaxed against the bed.

I dialed Watts' number and made sure he could come to the hospital. When he assured me he was on his way, I finally felt at ease. Zeke rested with his hand in mine as Steph kept a close eye on his heartbeat. I leaned over, listening to each one thump in my ear, memorizing the sound, the rhythm, his breath, his smell.

I kissed Zeke's cheek just before he fell asleep again, just seconds before a confused nurse told Steph the other patient was waiting for me in the hall.

I gathered my things and stood next to Trex, holding Hailey's other hand. "Hey, kiddo." I looked at Trex. "I'm in."

He sighed and Hailey smiled, the splash of faint freckles over her nose moving infinitesimally.

"How've you been?" she asked.

"Better than you," I teased.

I helped Trex walk her to his truck.

"The rest of the team will meet us there," Trex said as he helped Hailey into the seat.

"I'll text Kitsch to see if he can stop by my place and bring me some gear, just in case," I said. I didn't want to go on a manhunt in my pajamas. "I was in a hurry, so I didn't lock up. Not on purpose, but I guess everything happens for a reason."

"I hate it when you—"

"Say that," I finished for him. "I know."

I sat in the back and waited for him to jog around and settle into his seat before speaking again. "Do you have a plan?"

"Sort of," he said.

chapter twenty-nine

going home

Naomi

Trex died.
Twice.

“It’s okay,” Darby said from her hospital bed when her newborn stretched in my arms.

“I don’t really know how to do this.” Maddie was warm and had the softest skin I’d ever felt, but holding her made my arms feel awkward and stiff.

Darby didn’t seem nervous about me cradling her baby at all. “You’re doing great.”

Shawn had taken Darby all the way to Texas before we’d caught up with them, but neither he nor his two thug friends were a match for Trex and his team, even after Shawn impaled Trex with a hunting knife. The stress had thrown Darby into labor, and we barely got her or Trex to the hospital in time, but there Darby was, cooing to her newborn in my arms, and Trex was due out of surgery at any moment.

“Hi, Maddie,” I said. They’d named her Madison, after Matt, and I couldn’t be more proud.

“She is a pretty little thing,” Kitsch said.

“She’s beautiful,” I said, smiling down at my husband’s namesake. I froze while she reached and found my finger, her tiny fingers and even tinier fingernails encompassed my pinky.

“She likes you,” Martinez said.

The air was sucked out of the room once the surgeon stepped in.

“He’s in recovery and doing well,” Dr. Stevens said. “Once we got him stable, he hung in there like a champ.”

Darby covered her face with both hands, her body shaking as she cried. Kitsch stood next to her and pulled her gently to his side.

“He’ll be okay?” Darby asked, wiping her cheeks.

Dr. Stevens nodded. “He’ll need to take it easy for a while. The knife did some damage, but he’ll live.”

“When can we see him?” she asked.

“In an hour or so when he’s moved to a room from recovery. He’s in and out of consciousness now.”

I handed the baby to Darby. “He’s probably confused. Occupational hazard.”

“Yes, someone should be with him,” she said. She looked at Dr. Stevens. “Thank you.”

Dr. Stevens frowned, scanning the room. Martinez was covered in blood, Kitsch in dirt, and Trex had come in with stab wounds. We’d had a rough night, driving all the way to Texas to take Darby back from her ex. We’d found her just in time for her not to have her baby in the back seat of his car.

“The police are outside,” the doctor said. “They’ll be wanting to speak to all of you. Not sure what happened out there, but I’m glad you’re all okay.”

“We’ve been through worse,” I said.

I traveled up one floor with Steph. She showed me the way to recovery, side stepping as she spoke to me. “Normally, we would have flown Trex out, but Dr. Stevens moved back here from Boston to care for his mother. You picked the best hospital.”

“Good to know,” I said as she pushed back a curtain.

Trex looked like Zeke the last time I saw him, hooked to oxygen, heart monitors, and IV tubing.

“Hey,” I said, holding his hand.

He was still groggy, but he smiled.

“Do you know what’s going on?”

“Where’s Darby?” he asked.

“She has her own room in the maternity ward. She and Maddie are doing great. Maddie is beautiful.”

He tried to sit up, but I stopped him. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. You can’t go anywhere yet. Darby will bring Maddie up to you once the anesthesia moves out of your system and you’re coherent.”

He set back, blinking and looking around, trying to wake up. “Have you spoken to Zeke?”

“Yeah. Watts took him home. I’m going back to take care of him once you’re out of recovery. He’s pretty bummed.”

“That you’re going to take care of him? I doubt that,” he said, sounding a little drunk.

My body decided to let exhaustion take over. “He got a bad diagnosis. It’s his heart.”

“What? How is that possible? He’s younger than me.”

“Hereditary.”

“Damn,” Trex said, grabbing my shoulder. “He’s going to be all right, though, right?”

“The doctor won’t release him to go back to work, and it’s doubtful any doctor will. Too much stress on his heart.”

Trex frowned. “Go. Don’t wait for me.”

“Okay,” I said, touching his cheek. “Thanks for waking up, mister.”

“Yep,” he said, groaning when he tried to adjust.

“Need something for the pain?” I asked. “I can get a nurse.”

He shook his head. “I’m going to hold Maddie the second they wheel me out of here. I need to be alert.”

I kissed his cheek. “See you soon. I’ve got a flight to catch.”

In the cab, on the way to the Dallas airport, I texted Zeke that I’d be home in a few hours. I’d be landing in Denver and connecting to Colorado Springs, then I could go straight home. Watts had taken Zeke to my house, and he was waiting for me there.

He typed, Ready to see you.

T-minus five hours. How are you feeling? I tapped out.

This is the 20th time you've asked me.
So tell me, and I'll stop asking.

Still trying to wrap my head around it all.
Still tired. Still pissed. We need to talk about a
few things. Trying not to stress about it.

About what?

It took him a full minute to respond, and then the three dots
appeared, alerting me that he was finally typing.

About you being with a dude with a bad ticker.
Shut up. Don't stress. I'll be home soon.

Soon felt like an eternity. The cab smelled like old Thai food and
armpits. The plane was delayed just long enough that I might have
missed my connecting flight, but I ignored my exhaustion and ran to
the gate, making it just in time. The plane took longer to taxi to the
runway than the flight itself, and when I walked out of baggage claim,
Watts was waiting for me with a smile and snow in his hair.

"You're really going above and beyond in the friend department," I
said.

Watts walked next to me to his truck. "Zeke isn't my friend. He's
my brother. Besides, I'm going for points here. I'm hoping you'll talk
Kansas into coming back. It would be weird if I went to her."

I shrugged. "She's called me a couple of times. She hasn't asked
about you."

He frowned. "Really?"

I smiled. "No."

He playfully shoved me, and I tripped him, laughing when he
ended up slipping on the snowy sidewalk a few times to regain his
balance.

"Brutal," he said, finally righting himself. "Have you thought about
working for the forestry department? We've got a few badass chicks on
the ground crew. They're just waiting for a spot to open."

"Do I get to hold a gun?"

He made a face. "A gun? To fight fires?"

“Then no.”

He chuckled. “You probably make more than Zeke and I put together anyway.”

“I do,” I said, throwing my duffle into the back seat before climbing into the passenger seat.

I fought the urge to ask Watts to drive faster, and to jump from my seat when he parked in the drive. Zeke was lying in my bed, ice water and a dirty bowl and spoon on the nightstand next to him.

“Thank God,” he said, letting his head fall back.

“You look bored,” I said, leaning down to peck his lips.

“So bored.” He pulled me down again, planting another kiss, this time opening his mouth and grabbing each side of my face.

“All right. I’ve got some shit to do. Call me if you need me,” Watts said from the doorway.

I reached up, waving goodbye with Zeke’s mouth still on mine.

When Zeke finally relaxed back, I had to remind myself he was unconscious the morning before.

“Merry Christmas,” he said.

“Day late.”

“No, today is our Christmas.” His smile faded. “But first, we should talk.”

I tilted my head and glared at him, annoyed. “Zeke...”

“No, just let me say it. When I first met you, it was obvious to everyone you needed someone who could keep up. I thought I could—just barely—but things are different now.”

“Quit it,” I said.

“Naomi...”

“Shut up, Zeke. Just shut up. We’re not doing this. You’re not weak. You don’t have a bad heart. It’s controllable, treatable. You’re not even on medication, are you?”

“Not yet. It seems like it’s going to be a lot of wait and see. What if I... I don’t want to make you go through that twice.”

“So you’re going to leave me before you leave me? That makes

sense.”

He breathed out a laugh and looked down. “It does sound stupid when you put it that way. I just... I love you. It’s real. I know because I want you to be happy with or without me.”

“I’d rather be happy with you, if it’s all the same to you,” I said.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I said, picking up the dirty bowl and spoon. “Need anything from the kitchen?”

He shook his head.

“What did the doc say?”

“No drinking. Low stress. My career is over.”

I looked down. “I’m sorry Zeke. I don’t know what to say. It has to be devastating.”

“Yeah,” he said, using his index finger and thumb to wipe his eyes.

“We’ll figure it out,” I said. “Together.”

The corners of his mouth turned up. “It’s what’s keeping me going right now.”

I made a face. “Then why did you offer a sympathy-kick-to-the-curb?” I shook my head and rolled my eyes. “Boys are dumb.”

I put his bowl in the sink and washed it, feeling tears sting my eyes. Truthfully, the thought of going through loss again scared the shit out of me. The sight of Zeke wiping his eyes broke my heart. The nauseous-slash-butterflies feeling was familiar, even if I hadn’t felt it in years. My fingers gripped the edge of the sink, and I breathed out a faltering breath.

“Naomi,” Zeke said from the dining room.

I wiped my eyes with my wrist, rinsed the bowl and spoon, and set them out to dry. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“You feeling sorry for me is exactly what I didn’t want.”

“I don’t,” I said, shaking my head. “I just...” I turned to him, meeting his gaze. “I held Darby’s baby girl today.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Yeah? Is she pretty?”

I nodded. “Beautiful. They named her Maddie, after Matt. I realized

while I was holding her... I mean, I always knew, but... I don't want children, Zeke. I don't mind kids, but I don't want to be anyone's mother. Is that okay?"

"Yeah?" he said, confused. "Since this is hereditary, I don't think kids are a good idea anyway."

I rolled my eyes and looked at him. "You didn't even think about it. You could adopt."

"I just want you."

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure because I..." I trailed off, afraid. Finally, I decided to just blurt it out.

"I love you," I said.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, clearly wondering if he'd heard me right. "You...?"

"I'm worried about you, I empathize with you, but if I feel sorry for you at all it's because you're in love with me. I needed you to know my feelings on children before I said it."

"You love me," he repeated, still unsure.

I nodded. "When you didn't wake up, I wished I'd told you sooner. I don't want another second to go by without you knowing. I don't know if I'm good for you, but I'll keep trying until I am."

His bottom lip quivered, and he opened his arms wide, wrapping them around me, and holding me as tight as he could, his cheek against my hair. "Babe," he said, his voice breaking. "For real?"

I gripped his shirt with my fists, closing my eyes. "Long haul. Real as it gets."

He touched each side of my face, looking down at me, his eyes dancing from one of my irises to the other. "Best Christmas ever."

He pecked my lips then hugged me again, this time swaying from side to side. We danced in the kitchen alone, the Christmas lights on the tree blinking; the sun had escaped behind the mountaintops half an hour before. He kept his arm around me while we walked to the corner of the living room, sitting next to the only two presents under the tree. Both were wrapped horribly, Zeke's with newspaper and mine

with uneven wrapping paper, the white underside showing.

We opened our presents—both under fifty dollars as agreed upon. Zeke got me a diffuser with some essential oils, and I got him a new pair of sports glasses.

“These are more than fifty bucks,” he said.

I shrugged. “I threw in next year’s present early.”

He shook his head and put them on. “How do I look?”

“Tired, let’s get you in bed.”

Zeke had been asleep for forty-five minutes. His breath was deep and rhythmic, his hand relaxed against my thigh, the mattress warm beneath him and radiating to my side. I was reading a novel about angels and demons in Rhode Island when someone landed three soft knocks on my front door.

After the last twenty-four hours and no heads-up, I crept to the hall closet, retrieved Vicky, and pointed her at the ground with one hand, using the other to push aside the front window’s curtain so I could peek at the front porch.

I sighed, rolled my eyes, clicked Vicky’s safety then opened the door, hissing at Peter.

“What the hell are you doing here? It’s almost midnight!” I whispered.

“Can I come in?” Peter asked.

“No, you can’t come in. Zeke is asleep.”

He frowned. “Is he living here now?”

“I’m taking care of him. He was in the ER on Christmas Day and half the night, not that it’s any of your business.”

Peter blinked. “Oh. Is he ... is he okay?”

“He’s better.”

“Naomi, we need to talk.”

“Another time,” I said, beginning to close the door, but Peter grabbed my arm.

I looked down and then met his nervous gaze. “I’m holding Vicky in my other hand behind the door.”

“Besides it being illegal to threaten me, does it escape you that I’m your boss?”

I pulled my arm from his grasp. “Well, in that case, this is sexual harassment instead of just annoying.”

“Naomi,” he said, passed frustrated. “Paige is going to file for a divorce. It will be a scandal. I might not be re-elected. Don’t you see? We’re finally free. It’s time to get rid of the glorified ditch-digger.”

“Do you want me to punch you? Did you come here hoping for a broken nose because violence is in your very near future,” I said.

Peter smiled. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“Are you afraid of me?” Zeke said, opening the door wider. “Peter. You keep hanging around here like you’re wanted. You’re like an STD with none of the fun.”

“This is between Naomi and me,” Peter said.

“Zeke,” I said, turning toward him, placing my free hand on his middle. “What are you doing? I can handle Peter. You should be in bed.”

Zeke took a step forward. Peter a step back.

“Oh, I’m gonna handle Peter,” Zeke said.

Peter stepped off the porch backward, holding up his hands, palm out. “I don’t want you to end up incarcerated tonight, Zeke, especially if you’re not feeling well.”

“How can you feel like a man constantly hiding behind your position? I don’t even use my heart condition to be a coward.”

“It’s just a fact. I’m trying to protect you,” Peter said.

“Get off her lawn.” Zeke pointed. “Get in your pussy car and go back to whatever sink you formed under, scumfuck.”

Peter glanced at me.

“Don’t look at her, you piece of shit, look at me,” Zeke said. “You made your choice years ago. So fuck right off, Senator. No matter how many divorces you get, or how many times you piss off your daddy, I’m still better for her than you.”

“Peter, just go,” I said, nudging Zeke back.

Peter complied, pissed off but at least cooperative.

Zeke let me guide him inside, waited for me to lock the door, turn out the lights, and then walk him to bed.

He lay down on his back with a sigh.

I sighed. “I understand, okay? I get why you’re angry, but I had it handled. You can’t be doing that shit anymore.”

“He won’t be knocking on your door at midnight to reunite again, so I won’t have to.”

“Zeke, Peter is ... persistent. He’s always been part of my life in some way or another. He brought me here. Now that he thinks he’s free or whatever, he’ll have tunnel vision for a while. That’s just who he is, but he’ll get over it. And, even if he doesn’t, I don’t love him anymore. It’s just dumb to stress over Peter Bennett of all people, so please don’t.”

“Knocking his teeth out is worth a trip to the ER—and jail.”

“Stop. I want you to take a deep breath. Do it, Zeke. Take a deep breath and blow it out. In through your nose...”

“Are we meditating?”

“Shut up and do what I say.”

He took in a breath, and as he followed my lead, his body relaxed. I snuggled up next to him, hoping he would wake up with a new perspective. Stressing over Peter was pointless. Regardless, Peter and I were long overdue for a conversation, and I lay awake, hoping it wouldn’t mean my entire team would be out of a job.

chapter thirty

white glove

Zeke

In my dream the night before, I saw the Devil. At least, I thought it was him. He was standing in the doorway, breathing deep, his dark red chest heaving, the breath coming from his pig-like nostrils visible as if it was cold. But it wasn't. The room was a sauna. Fire was all around me, sweat poured from my skin, dripped from my nose, my hair soaked. When I woke, I was still wet with perspiration, but Naomi was holding me anyway, telling me it was going to be okay before I even told her what had happened.

Now, sitting in Dr. Levine's office, I was cold. The white walls, his white lab coat was draining me somehow. Needle pricks, stress tests, X-Rays, telemetry wires stuck to me every few days; I was tired. Knowing I was sick made me feel sick. I remembered feeling dizzy on a twenty-mile hike and ignored it. Now that I knew my heart was fucked up, that dizziness was somehow amplified. I felt like I was dying.

"It's his medication," Naomi said. "He's gone from none to eight."

"It could take a bit to get it right, but he'll feel much better, I assure you," Dr. Levine said, writing something down.

"He's not better, he's worse," Naomi said, leaning forward.

Dr. Levine nodded, writing more.

Naomi slapped his desk.

He looked up, pushing up his designer glasses.

"You're not listening to him," Naomi said, glaring at the doctor. "I realize you're a god, a cardiologist who lives in a fancy house with an

ex-cheerleader wife and model babies, but your meds aren't improving your patient's quality of life. Do your fucking job. Earn your lifestyle."

Dr. Levine laced his fingers together, resting his hands on his desk. "This is an emotional time for everyone. I understand you've been caring for Zeke."

"And doing a damn fine job," I said, smiling at her.

She squeezed my hand.

"You look tired. Are you sleeping?" Dr. Levine asked.

"Don't patronize me," Naomi warned.

"Babe," I said, squeezing her hand again. "It's a good question. Are you sleeping?"

She turned to me, the dark circles under her eyes more noticeable since the doctor had mentioned it. She was exhausted.

"No, I'm fine."

"Naomi..."

"Zeke, I used to sleep with one eye open in the African jungle. I can get up with you a few times a night."

"A few times a *night*? Why? I'm not waking up that much."

She shifted in her seat. "You are. You might not remember, you're pretty out of it. I think your meds are giving you vivid nightmares. Maybe night terrors."

The doctor shook his head. "That isn't a side effect of—"

"That you know of," she interrupted.

"The meds don't—"

"That you know of," she insisted.

Dr. Levine gave up on Naomi and looked at me. "Mr. Lund, for our appointments to be most productive, I feel next time you should come at a time where you and I can really get together on your health. Together. Without distraction."

"I'm an advocate, not a distraction. That you don't see the difference—"

"Dr. Levine? Naomi is my girlfriend, she's been my caregiver, and she clearly cares about me. I know you won't disrespect her again."

The doctor sat back, resigned.

I stood, and Naomi rose with me. I led her out of the doctor's office by the hand. She was quiet for the first time in an hour as she drove me home, deep in thought. I turned on my phone, and it began to ding with text notifications from my large family like it had been daily since I broke the news about my condition.

I answered in chronological order, from who texted me first to the last, but before I could get to the last five or so, Jenn called.

I answered, immediately putting her on speaker phone.

"Hello, my son," she said, her voice warm and comforting. "What did the doc say?"

"Not much. Just getting the kinks worked out of the medications."

"Still having bad dreams?"

"Every night. And apparently, they're worse than Naomi's been letting on."

"Oh?"

"She's exhausted, Jenn."

"Stop," Naomi whispered, lacing her fingers through mine.

"Well, maybe I could come help? Let her get some rest?"

"I'm fine," Naomi said. "How are you, Jenn?"

"Worried about my boy. Is he okay?"

"He's getting there," Naomi said, raising the back of my hand to her lips.

"Glad he has you," Jenn said. "Zeke, call me later. I mean it."

"I will," I said. "Love you."

"Love you too. So much."

We hung up, and I sighed, covering my face with my hand.

"What's up?" Naomi asked.

"She doesn't mean to, but she makes me feel like I'm dying."

"That has to be frustrating. Try to remember that she's just worried and processing in her own way. She wants to be supportive."

I nodded, itching my nose with my free hand. I stared out the window, feeling my eyes burn.

“Talk,” Naomi said.

“It just sucks,” I said, my voice breaking. “My mom is worried sick, my family is scared, and it’s my fault. Well, not my fault, you know what I mean. And my girlfriend is a fucking superhero, and I’m weak.” I cleared my throat. “Do you know what it’s like not to deserve someone?”

“Yep,” she said, taking her eyes off the road for half a second to look at me.

“Who? Me? You think you don’t deserve me?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Talk,” I said.

It took her a while to speak. She held her knee against the bottom of the steering wheel to use the back of her hand to wipe an escaped tear from her cheek instead of letting go of my hand.

I frowned. “Babe,” I said. “What is it?”

Death had already taken away someone she’d loved. Now she was dating some shmuck with a heart condition. She was exhausted and worried while I felt sorry for myself, and that was on me. I suddenly felt ten times worse.

My heart beat loudly in my ears, drowning out the road noise while I waited to hear what her tears meant.

“It’s just ... you’re so good. You’re so good Zeke. You don’t deserve this. I wish I was a better person. I’m trying.”

I turned in my seat to face her. “You’re perfect. You’re better than perfect, Naomi. How can you think you’re not enough?”

“How can you think you’re not? It breaks my heart that you feel like that.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing I could say would make it better. If I explained that I barely deserved her before, that now I was so much less than she deserved, it would hurt her. She would never agree, but she didn’t have to. I knew the truth.

“You’re more than enough, Naomi. I’m just holding on until you’re gone. And I guess you’re holding on ‘til I’m gone too. And that’s shit.

You deserve better.”

She frowned. She was annoyed now. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that to me again. Do I look like a pussy to you? Do I look like I would cut and run at the first sign of difficulty? That’s insulting.”

“I’m sorry. I just meant that ... no. I know you’re not. I know you wouldn’t. But I also don’t want you to stay just because you’re stubborn.”

“I stay because I love you. I wasn’t kidding when I said it. I’m in this with you.”

“No man left behind?”

Her cheeks glowed red. “You’re not a fellow Marine—you’re my boyfriend. It’s not duty. It’s not even loyalty; it’s just love.” She breathed out, as if the truth took more energy than she had.

I looked down, shame taking another swallow, sucking me into the hole I was already trapped in. I was punishing her for my insecurities, and that made me worse than a sick man in love with a woman like Naomi. That just made me pathetic. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to lighten the mood.” *Liar.*

She pulled into her drive.

“Maybe you should just take me back to the hotel so you can get some rest,” I said.

“No. No, I’m taking care of you tonight. We’re going to take a bath and lay in bed naked, and I’m going to remind you that being sick doesn’t make you less of a man.”

I leaned toward her, my elbow on the console. Not even shame could deter me from that plan. “You’re perfect, you know that, right?”

“Yes, I do. I also know you’re perfect for me. Stop making me work for it, okay?”

I breathed out a laugh to mask the lump in my throat. *I’m going to lose her. She’ll either leave me, or I’ll push her away because I can’t let it go that I don’t feel like I measure up.* I wasn’t sure how to fix it other than pretending I deserved her. I could tell the occasional white lie, but living one took more energy than I had. “Deal.”

OceanofPDF.com

chapter thirty-one

the elephant

Naomi

Zeke and I sat at a table near the dance floor at McCormack's. The day lights had been dimmed, the regulars already drunk and heading home. We were celebrating Watts buying his first house, even if it was in the armpit of Colorado Springs.

Zeke seemed bored, watching Jerry trying to shoo people holding drinks in their hand off the new dance floor. He sipped his water, his chin in his hand. Watts was at the bar, drinking a beer before he came back to sit with us.

"Hey," I said, nudging Zeke's arm. "What's up?"

"I'm a pretty good dancer. Did I ever tell you that?"

"A few times."

"I never got to swing you around out there. I thought I had plenty of time."

"I'm terrible, but if you want to dance, just ask."

He shook his head. "Better not."

"Oh, c'mon. We'll take it easy. Won't do anything that gets you too out of breath ... until we get home."

He finally smiled. The first weeks after his diagnosis, Zeke stayed positive about it all, but as time went by and more test results came back, he became sullen and depressed. Fire season was approaching, and he was waiting on word if they would allow him back regardless of Dr. Levine's refusal to release him and my pleading for him not to appeal to the higher ups.

He laced his fingers between mine. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

“So,” Watts said, putting his cell phone on the table. “Kansas might come visit.”

“Oh yeah? You finally talked her into it?” I asked.

“She wants to see my place before fire season starts.” He glanced at Zeke for a reaction. “Sorry.”

Zeke shook his head. “Don’t be. Chief will get me back in.”

Watts shook his head. I already knew what he was going to say, and I wasn’t going to stop him. It was a relief for someone else to offer tough love for a change.

“Zeke, it’s not going to happen, brother. I’m sorry, but the appeal is just a formality for them. They can’t put you out there. If something happens and we’re miles away from any hospital…”

“Bobby can fly me out. He can set down pretty much anywhere, in any conditions.”

“You want him to stop dropping loads to keep the guys safe to Mediflight you out?”

“The Mediflight guys can take over when he comes back to reload the slurry.”

Watts shook his head. “Listen to yourself, man. They’re not going to put us at a disadvantage just to hire you. You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“Fuck you,” Zeke said.

“Hey.” I nudged him.

He looked away, angry.

We ended the celebration early, walking out to Zeke’s truck. I purposefully walked through a cloud of smoke moving slowly toward the bar’s entrance, breathing in deeply. *I miss smoking. So much.*

“I’m proud of you for quitting,” Zeke said.

I shrugged. “I needed to anyway.”

He unlocked the doors, and we both climbed up into our seats. I pulled the seatbelt across my chest and it clicked, the only sound in the

car.

Zeke sat behind the wheel, staring at the center of it, lost in thought.

“I know,” I said, rubbing his thigh.

“You don’t know. If you wanted back into the Marines, they’d take you tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to go back,” I said, realizing it as I said the words. I used to miss it every day. I used to need it as a distraction. After meeting Zeke, life was good again. Now, my days were filled with trying to get us back there. “I did my time. It was time for something new.”

“I wasn’t ready.”

My brows pulled in as I watched him process his anger, grief, and disappointment all in the same few minutes.

“I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “You’ve gotta quit saying that.”

“I don’t know what else to say. What should I say?” I asked.

He leaned forward, pressed the button to start the truck, then backed out of the parking space. I kept my hand on his thigh, but he drove home in silence with both hands on the wheel.

At home, Zeke showered without me, and I waited for him to come to bed, using my tablet to devour medical journals and peer-reviewed research; anything on the Internet that discussed Zeke’s condition.

He came out in a thin yellow towel wrapped around his waist. “I know you’re trying,” he said. “I know it’s the only thing you can do, but you shouldn’t have to. I want normal back. I know you want it back too.”

“I want you. That’s it. As-is.”

He grinned. “Limited warranty?”

I pulled back the cover and sheets. “Come to bed.”

He dropped the towel and crawled in next to me, wrapping his arms around my thighs and hugging me to him as he rested his head in my lap. “I’m sorry I’m not handling this well.”

“How are you supposed to handle it? Are there rules I don’t know about?”

He squeezed me tighter. “I just don’t want to hurt you, Naomi.”

“Then don’t,” I said, putting away the tablet. I ran my fingers through his wet hair, watching him relax.

I’d seen the behavior before with wounded soldiers. Adjustment sucked ass. Transition wasn’t easy. But if I could just get Zeke to hang in there with me, we could make it through together. He was going through the stages of grief, but his frustrations grew with each passing day—sometimes with each passing hour.

The next morning, Zeke set out to meet his foster mom in Denver. Jenn planned a long layover before her connecting flight to see one of Zeke’s pregnant sisters. They planned to discuss his health, so I opted to stay behind. I’d meet her another time—a better time.

I went for a run, mowed the lawn, cleaned the house then took a shower before settling on the couch to do more research. It was a typical Saturday, except I knew when Zeke returned, he’d likely be upset and cranky.

I wasn’t wrong.

At four o’clock, he slammed the door, and I looked up at him with a frown.

“Really?” I asked.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to close it that hard.”

“How’s your mom?”

“Fine. Chatty. Overly curious. She says the Mayo Clinic has an entire department devoted to HCM.”

“Hmmm,” I chirped.

“I know, I know, you’ve told me a dozen times.”

“If you’ll listen to your mom, whatever. Can we apply now?”

He frowned, going into the kitchen. “I’ll think about it.” He opened the cabinet, then the freezer, then the sink faucet turned on. Zeke walked out with two cups of ice water in his hand, giving one to me.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip. “What’s to think about? It’s

cutting edge treatment.”

“I’m telling you the same thing I told Jenn: I don’t want treatment—I want a cure.”

I sighed. “I know. It’s so frustrating, but they’re not there yet.”

“I’ll go when they are,” he said, standing and disappearing into the bedroom.

I sighed, watching him go, then sipped my water again. I wanted a cigarette. The house was wiped top to bottom, the carpets cleaned. I didn’t want any residue left since Zeke was staying with me most of the time. I’d quit cold turkey and had to weather Zeke’s mood swings as well as my own emotions about his illness; my entire body screamed for one.

I grabbed a pen and chewed on it, staring at the bedroom door. I stood and walked to the bedroom. He was just putting on a pair of sweatpants.

“Hey,” I said. “Can we talk?”

He sighed. “If it’s about my heart, then no.” I made a face. He did, too. “I’m tired of talking about it, Naomi. I just want things to go back to normal.”

“We can get close if you get the treatment you need.”

He sat on the bed and leaned back, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Babe. Seriously.”

“Just tell me why. Why are you so against it?”

“I just don’t want to.”

I tilted my head, feeling like his mother instead of his girlfriend. “That’s a shit answer. We’re not talking about you taking me to a chick flick, Zeke. This is your life. I want you to stick around for a long time.”

He hooked his arm over his eyes, seeming embarrassed to say his next words. “What if you don’t stick around?”

“What?” I asked, my voice higher and louder than I’d meant for it to be.

He cleared his throat. “Sometimes people leave. Sometimes they don’t wait.”

“You won’t get treatment because you think I’ll pack up before you get home?”

“It happens.”

I sighed and sat next to him, touching his knee. He’d been abandoned so many times before, I couldn’t blame him for worrying. “I’m not your mom. I’m not Becca. I swear to God, Zeke. I’ll wait for you.”

He moved his arm and locked his gaze on mine. “I’m not chancing it. Not with you.”

My hands tightened into fist. I wanted a cigarette, and I wanted to punch something. “Okay. I’ll be back, but I have to get some air,” I said, standing and turning on my heels.

Zeke sat up. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” I said, gathering my things. “McCormack’s? Maybe for a drive?”

“Don’t go,” he said, his voice small.

I pointed all four fingers at him. “You’re literally throwing a tantrum in my bed. I know everything feels like it’s crumbling around you, but you’re not even trying! Are you just going to sit around here and die?”

His face turned severe. “I’ve lost everything! My career, my future, my family, my health!”

“You have me! You still have your family; what are you talking about?”

“My brothers! My crew! You want me to smile and pretend everything’s fine so it doesn’t make you feel bad?”

“Fuck. You.”

“Just leave then,” he said, laying back against his mound of pillows. My mouth fell open. “This is *my* house! *You* leave!”

“Maybe I will!” he said, sitting up again, his feet touching the floor. He grabbed his knees and leaned forward, obviously dizzy.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, rushing over and kneeling in front of him. I touched his neck, searching for a pulse. His heart was working

hard, but nothing crazy.

“I’m fine,” he said, trying to push my hand away.

I grabbed his wrist. “Let me help you, damn it. Let me love you! What is wrong with you?” I said, standing. “Why are you taking this out on me?”

“I don’t know!” he yelled, breathing hard. His voice softened, his wild eyes, returning to the Zeke I knew. “I don’t know.” He grabbed me and pulled me against his chest, holding me tight. “Fuck, I’m sorry.” He covered his face. “I’m so sorry. I just... I don’t know how to fix this.”

“We don’t,” I said, my cheek against his chest. “It’s not going away, Zeke. We work with it. We handle it. We don’t fight each other.”

He let me go and nodded, his head hanging in shame. “I don’t think I’d win anyway.”

I smiled and play-punched his shoulder. “That’s right, so quit pissing me off.”

His expression turned sad. “I love you. I love you so fucking much, and I see what’s happening, and I hate it. But I’m so fucking angry, Naomi. I don’t want this for either of us.”

I stretched up, pressing my lips against his. “The important things between us are still the same. I know it’s not enough, but we can work with that. We can build a life with that, even if it’ll be different than what you thought.”

“Than what you thought.”

I touched my forehead to his. “Please? Please try.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll do better.”

“So you’ll let me make an appointment?”

He thought about it. “Not yet. I need more time.”

“Zeke.”

“I know. Time is one thing we don’t have.”

I cupped his cheeks. “Please? *Please*.”

“Because I’ll die? Because you don’t need another funeral?”

I closed my eyes and sat back on my haunches, rubbing my face in

frustration. “Can we live in the present, please?”

“You first.”

I looked up at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He winced. “Fuck. Fuck, Naomi. I hate who I am right now.”

I pressed him back gently onto his back and tugged the hem of his shirt upward, but he stopped me.

“I just tried to kick you out of your own house.”

I reached up to run my hands over his skin, and he sighed. “This is when we’re us. This is when nothing else matters. So get naked with me.”

He stared at the ceiling. “It’s a distraction.”

“A good one.”

He looked down at me, smiling. “And when I’m not strong enough for that anymore?”

I kissed his stomach, lifting the waistline of his sweatpants and licking beneath. His head fell back, and he sighed, already relaxing. “Let’s focus on what’s happening right this second,” I said.

I tugged, and his pants slipped over his bare skin, making a light noise when they fell to the floor. I took him fully inside my mouth, and he groaned, resting his palm on the back of my head.

Zeke whispered my name; he was with me in that moment, thinking only of how I was making him feel. It was just us again without the hundreds of negative emotions that bombarded us daily.

“Oh my God, you feel good,” he said, his fingers tangling in my hair.

chapter thirty-two

hollow

Naomi

I think I'm close.

I'll just send you my location, I typed out with a sigh. In Trex's defense, I was on a mountain in the middle of nowhere, lying on the hood of my FJ, staring up at the billions of stars above me.

Two headlights formed in the distance at the same time Trex's truck engine ripped through the otherwise quiet night. He honked once, the sound carrying and bouncing off the mountains that surrounded me.

His boots crunched in the gravel, and he stood next to me.

I didn't look at him, instead focusing on the sky above.

"Is he still being a dick?" Trex asked.

"He's not a dick. He's going through a lot."

"Did you fight or something?"

"No, I just let him vent and keep my mouth shut. I don't want to upset him. He's had two episodes this month already, and we're five days into May. They're not going to let him in."

"They as in the Alpines?"

"Correct."

"Damn," Trex said, leaning against the hood.

"Try telling a guy who chose a job for the adrenaline that he can't do that job anymore, or anything that might excite or upset him."

"And you're keeping your mouth shut when he takes it out on you? Nomes, if I could think of a true hell for you, this would be it."

“It’s not,” I said.

“Feeling sorry for him and loving him aren’t the same thing.”

“That’s not what this is.”

“You don’t think he can see it? I can only speak for myself, but if I was in the same predicament, the last pair of eyes I would want to see pity in would be Darby’s. He’s probably hoping you of all people won’t treat him differently, and you losing Matt adds a whole new level of clusterfuck.”

I sat up, bending one knee to rest my elbow on. “You’re right. I’ve been so worried I’ve been babying him. It just pisses him off more.”

“So when you’re ready, go home and hash all of this out. If he’s being a dick, tell him. Yell at him. Make it feel like an equal. Dating you would not be easy.”

“Thanks,” I said, glaring at him. My features softened. “How’s the baby? Did you get the loan?”

Trex smiled. “Maddie is growing. Rolling over. You should try it someday.”

“Rolling over?” I teased.

He ignored me. “I thought there was nothing better than being with Darby. Nope, parenting with her, being Maddie’s father. It’s everything, man. It’s everything. And we got the loan. Everything has been smooth so far.”

“How is Stavros taking it?”

“He’s relieved. He’ll still manage the hotel and bartend. He said Darby being his boss won’t be much different from before. But she’s going to pull that place out of the grave. She has all these great ideas. She’s amazing.”

“Wow. You guys will own a fucking hotel. That’s nuts.”

He grinned. “Yeah. So... I saw you in the weight room this afternoon talking to Bennett. It looked tense.”

“We’ve been fighting a lot.”

“About?”

“He’s getting a divorce. He’s still in love with me ... or, what he

thinks is love which is really him not being able to let go or be alone. He's unhappy about my relationship with Zeke. He was pissed off that I didn't tell him when Spenser and Kansas visited the past two times. Zeke thinks he has something to do with the Forestry Department's decision. It's just"—I sighed, feeling tired just explaining it—"it's a mess, Trex."

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"What?"

"You have no kids. Zeke has to find another job anyway. Get away from Bennett. He can't control everything."

"You won't have a job if I leave."

Trex thought about that. "You think so?"

"I know so."

"We don't trade one for another, Naomi. If you're unhappy here, go. We'll figure it out. I have the hotel and my family. Sloan, Kitsch, and Martinez can go wherever. Harbinger might have a tougher time since his kids haven't even been here a full year, but..."

"The guys will have to go back into contract work, Trex. I'm not doing it."

"Then you have to set boundaries. I'll talk to him."

"No, you won't."

He sighed. "Then what can we do?"

"He wants to come over tonight. Zeke and Watts are going to do boy things. I'll set some ground rules, but it's going to limit us at work. We might all get fired anyway."

"Then we all get paid by his daddy to keep quiet when you file a sexual harassment lawsuit, and we follow that up with unjustified termination. It's a fair trade."

I nodded, jumping down off the FJ. Trex hugged me quickly, then I followed his truck down the mountain into town. The street lights twinkled like the stars, and the different responses Peter might have to what I had to say played over in my mind. It would be a fine line, telling him we were over and still making sure he walked away a

friend. Peter loved me. I just hoped it was the kind of love that made him think twice before doing something to hurt me and my team.

When I pulled into the drive, Zeke's truck was absent, replaced by Peter's car. He was waiting on the porch in a white button-down and navy-blue slacks, missing his usual tie and suit jacket. Even his top button was undone.

"You look ... casual," I said.

"It's been a rough week and have another one coming up."

"Work or divorce?"

"Both." He stood, following me inside. "Where's Zeke?" he asked, looking around. "Doesn't he live here now?"

"Pretty much. I'd offer you a drink, but I don't keep any here anymore. Water?"

Peter made a face. "Why not?"

I shifted my weight. "Zeke has a heart condition. Alcohol makes it worse."

"What kind of heart condition? Is it serious?"

I glared at him. "He's not going to die, if that's what you're asking. Even though he might feel like it since the Forestry Department didn't approve his contract this year. Peter..."

"What?"

"You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

Peter frowned. "I didn't know about the heart condition."

"Did you pull him?"

"I have zero authority there, Naomi, please."

"You have favors."

He grinned. "Which I used to get you this job. I only have one favor out at the moment."

I crossed my arms. "I remember."

He walked into the kitchen. "Sounds like you've been waiting hand and foot on someone else. How about you let me do it for you for once?" He poured two glasses of ice water and handed me one.

We sat on the couch, sipping our water in silence for a few minutes

while I gathered my thoughts.

“I was hoping we could talk about things between us,” Peter said.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“It’s no secret that I’m in love with you. I’m willing to wait while this thing with Zeke plays out. I have a divorce and work pressures. The Deep Echo team switches out next week. It’s always a tough transition.”

“This thing with Zeke isn’t going to play out, Peter. At least not the way you’re hoping. I love you, but it’s different than what it was. I care about you. I want you to be happy. But I’m happy with Zeke. We love each other. It’s the real deal.”

“C’mon, Naomi. Matt was the real deal. I was the real deal. This guy, he’s an invalid.”

Before I could stop myself, my fist connected with Peter’s jaw.

He bent over, holding his face. He stomped his foot a couple of times then sat up. “What the *fuck*, Naomi?” he yelled.

I kept my face smooth. “That’s for a lot of things.”

His jaw moved from side to side while he held it in his fingers. “I shouldn’t be adoring the fact that I know you pulled that punch. What is wrong with me?”

I frowned. “Peter, I don’t want to hurt you, but my love for you will never be anything more than loving you as an old friend.”

He pressed his lips together to suppress a smile. “You never get over your first love.”

“We were kids. I’ve learned love is very different than that.”

“Is it? Love is love, Naomi.”

“You’re not listening to me. Whatever you think we had is over. It was over when I fell in love with Matt. It’s not coming back because you’re getting a divorce, because you might lose your seat, or because we work together. It’s over.”

Peter paled. “You can’t know that.”

“I know it.”

He stood, shaking his head. Splotches of red were forming on his

face where I'd hit him. "Remember our first kiss?" he asked.

My face screwed into disgust. "Yes. You slobbered all over me."

"That kiss was your idea. I was terrified."

"I would be too, if I kissed like that."

"Do you remember what you said to me?"

I thought about it then narrowed my eyes at him.

He continued, quoting my fourteen-year-old self, "*How will we know anything until you kiss me?*"

"I'm not kissing you, Peter."

"Then how will you know? You said it yourself..."

"I know, Peter, because I'm an adult. And I don't need to talk you into kissing me."

He sighed and rubbed his temples. "Fine. Fine, I'm calling in my favor."

"*What,*" I seethed.

"I'm calling in my favor. You kiss me, and if you don't feel anything, I'll let it go."

I could feel my nostrils flaring. My blood boiling. My face on fire. "You unbelievable bastard."

He held up his hands then let them fall to his side. "We do what we must." His expression softened, and he took a step toward me. "Can I kiss you?"

A truck engine pulled into the drive and shut off.

"Zeke's home."

"So?" Peter said.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

He shrugged. "At least you're not sneaking around."

"I'm going to tell him why."

He shrugged again.

I shook my head as Zeke came in the front door with Watts. I could smell the whiskey on him.

Watts held up his hands. "I tried to stop him, Naomi. I swear to God."

“Are you insane?” I yelled. My words came out harsher than I’d meant.

Zeke frowned. “The doc said occasionally.”

“It smells like you drank for the entire year. What are you doing, Zeke?”

“Celebrating,” he slurred.

I looked at Watts, who didn’t answer. “Celebrating what?”

Zeke gestured to Peter. “Why, you hanging out with your ex while I’m gone, of course.”

Watts made a face. “You didn’t know that until we got here. Shut up.”

“I knew something was up,” Zeke said, kicking the door shut.

“Hey!” I yelled.

Zeke pointed at Peter. “This is not fucking cool, Naomi, and you know it!”

I took a deep breath. “Okay, calm down. There is a very good explanation. I told him he’s just a friend, that everything we had is over. He doesn’t believe me. I owe him a favor, and he’s calling it in.”

“And what’s that?” Zeke asked.

“Naomi,” Peter prodded.

I glared at Peter. “How does this solve anything? He’ll kick your ass. You’ll call the police. The press will catch wind of everything, and everything you’ve been hiding will unravel. Nothing changes. *No one* wins,” I said.

“Then explain to Zeke how favors work for people like us.”

I breathed out through my nose, looking away. “This is so stupid.”

“What’s going on?” Watts asked.

I pointed to the door. “Take Zeke outside.”

Zeke’s brows pulled together. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I pointed again. “Take him outside, goddamn it!”

Watts reached for Zeke, but Zeke shoved him back. “Don’t fucking touch me. I’m staying. What’s the favor, Naomi?”

I stared at him. “It won’t mean anything to me.”

“What’s the favor?” he asked again.

I looked away. “Please go outside,” I begged. I looked at him, and he shook his head.

“Tell me,” he insisted.

I glared at Peter. “Then you’ll leave us alone? Forever.”

Peter shrugged. “I don’t think I’ll have to.”

“Yes or no,” I demanded.

“Yes,” Peter said quickly.

“What’s the favor?” Zeke screamed.

I grabbed Peter’s shirt and pulled him toward me. He opened his mouth, kissing me deeply. I let him hold me tight, cradle my face, telling me about the years he’d loved me and how he always would in that single kiss. The room was quiet, and I kept my eyes closed. I didn’t want to see Zeke’s face. Finally, Peter released me. “Now you can tell me you feel nothing.”

I looked up at him, tears in my eyes. “I. Feel. Nothing,” I said through my teeth.

Peter’s smile vanished. He stepped back, wounded, then turned and walked out with his head down.

I stared at the door, then finally got the courage to peek at Zeke’s expression.

He tapped Watts’ shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Wait...” I said, pulling on him. I pointed at the door. “I did what I had to do. He called in a favor.”

Zeke swallowed.

“Maybe you should both sleep and revisit this in the morning?” Watts suggested.

“C’mon,” I said, pulling him toward the bedroom.

He stopped. “I’ll sleep it off at the hotel. I should go before I say something I’ll regret.”

“Say it,” I begged. “Say what you want, just stay.”

He wiped his nose with his knuckle and sniffed. “Yeah, not going to happen.”

“You saw it! You know why! After I told him it was never going to happen, he asked me to kiss him so we’d know, like when we were kids. I told him no. He called in his favor. I have to walk a fine line with him, Zeke. Peter brought us here to keep me close. My friends’ jobs are on the line. Harbinger’s boys have been in school less than a year. Kitsch is just getting settled in. Martinez and Sloan are both seeing someone.” I pointed at Watts. “Randon is in love with my cousin. How many new relationships do you know that last through fire season?”

Watts frowned. “Kansas won’t visit?”

“You think *I’m* scary? You don’t want her in Colorado. When she finds out about all of this, if she gets within fifty miles of Peter she’ll come after him. Probably maim him for life and leave no evidence. She gives zero fucks when it comes to her family.”

“Then turn Peter in,” Zeke said.

“You have no clue how this works. It’s politics. He holds all the cards. He brought us here and just like that”—I snapped—“he can send us packing. This is the first job where we could feel like we’re not living a lie, that our families could live with too. There is nothing else Harbinger can do like this where he can go home to his family every night. We aren’t built for anything else. If I have to play the game with Peter, that’s a price I’ll have to pay.”

“What else are you willing to do?” Zeke snarled.

“Hey,” Watts said, pulling him back.

“What, did I cross a line? I come home to see my girlfriend kissing her ex, and I’m the bad guy?”

I shook my head. “You’ve been pushing me away for months. This is convenient for you.”

“Yes, my plan came together perfectly! I’m a goddamn genius! I was hoping exactly this would happen, to be unemployed shortly after learning that I can’t keep up with my own girlfriend, then to see the woman I love getting tongue choked by a world-class cockmuppet.”

Cockmuppet? Watts mouthed.

“The best part,” Zeke yelled, holding up one finger, “is that I can’t do anything about it, because I can’t even drink a beer without wondering if my heart is going to puss out on me!” he said, screaming the last words. Veins bulged from his neck, and he stumbled back, then leaned over, grabbing his knees.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, kneeling in front of him.

He met my gaze, breathing hard. “What was the favor?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, a tear escaping down my cheek. “When we came to get you guys the day that Fish was hurt. Peter let us go out to get you as a favor to me. That’s not the kind of favor you don’t pay back, Zeke. And he’s not the guy to betray. He feels like I held up my end of the bargain. It’s over.”

Zeke stood. “You’re right about that.”

“Zeke,” I said, brushing away a tear that had toppled over my lashes.

“I was already losing you,” Zeke said. “It’s time to call it.”

I shook my head. “Zeke, you’re drunk. Go back to the hotel. Come home in the morning, and we can talk.”

“This isn’t my home. It’s yours.” He looked around the room. “The home that Peter built,” he spat.

“We should go,” Watts said.

“You’ll keep an eye on him?”

Watts nodded. “He’s going to hate himself in the morning,” he whispered. “Don’t be too hard on him.”

“Just take care of him,” I said, watching Watts help Zeke out the door.

chapter thirty-three

lost

Naomi

While Zeke's voicemail greeting played, I decided if I would leave a third message. His voice was deep but light-hearted like the man I knew, the one who loved me back.

I closed my eyes tight. "Zeke, it's me. I don't know if you're avoiding me because you're pissed off or ashamed, but either way, can we just talk about it? Even if you want to tell me to fuck off. Just ... don't let me sit here wondering. It's fucking torture. Please...? Bye."

I hung up, feeling the same cement in my chest I felt the previous two times I'd called, and the last four times I'd sent him a text.

My house was clean, the yard was immaculate with not a single leaf, stick, or weed. I had grocery shopped, fixed a loose baseboard in the hall, and called home to my parents, Spenser, and Kansas. I sat on the couch alone, resting my head on one knee. There was nothing else to do, and it was only three o'clock.

I stood, swiped the keys from the bowl that sat on the entry table, and slammed the door behind me, pissed and terrified that I had to go to him. Both Peter and Matt had pursued me relentlessly. When we fought, Peter refused to let me walk away mad. Matt crawled back asking for forgiveness, usually with a new knife or sights or something else I couldn't say no to. I was not used to being the one trying to hold things together.

I parked two spots over from Zeke's truck and stomped inside, pretending not to be raging while passing the front desk clerk, waving

to the dark-haired kid behind the computer. Taking two stairs at a time, I jogged down the hall to Zeke's room, banging on the door with the side of my fist, then waited.

Ten seconds passed.

Thirty.

One minute.

I banged again. "I'm not leaving. Open the fucking door," I said, trying to keep my voice low.

I banged again, interrupted by Zeke yanking the door open.

"What?" he hissed.

His tone surprised me. I thought he'd feel calmer once the alcohol left his system.

"I..."

Zeke leaned back a bit, crossed his arms, and waited.

"Can I come in?" I asked.

He thought about it for a moment then stepped aside.

I passed him, noticing how messy the room was. That was uncharacteristic for Zeke. He was typically tidy. I began picking up the dirty clothes on the floor.

"Don't do that," he said with a sigh.

"What is this?" I said, flinging around the wrinkled T-shirts in my hand. "What is going on with you? This isn't you."

"It's the new me," he said, sitting in the chair.

I sat on the bed across from him, glaring at him for a moment before blurting out my question. "Does the new you love me?"

He frowned. "Naomi..."

"Do you love me?" I asked again, emphasizing each word.

"No."

The word stung worse than any bullet that had passed through my flesh, but I refused to give up.

"You don't love me," I repeated, unconvinced.

His jaw ticked under his skin. "This isn't going to work, Naomi."

"Why not?"

He looked away.

“You owe me an answer,” I said.

“I barely deserved you before,” he grumbled.

“Bullshit,” I said, feeling tears sting my eyes. “Why don’t you tell the truth?”

“What truth?”

“That you love me, but you’re scared. You’re running away from me before I can walk away from you.”

“You shouldn’t have to take care of me the rest of your life,” he said, sounding broken.

“Nope. No, I don’t. But that’s what you do when you love each other. You take care of each other, Zeke. I don’t... I don’t even know why I’m here if you don’t want me.” I wiped my wet nose. “But what we’re going through—what you’re going through—is a lot, and we make the worst decisions when we’re afraid. So I’m choosing to believe you’re just saying all of this because you’re hurting. I’m choosing to fight for us. If you don’t love me, that’s one thing. But I don’t believe that. Not for a second.”

His eyes glossed over, and he bowed his head, propping his elbows on his knees and his head with his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. He looked up. “I’m sorry for everything I said last night. I know Peter is a class-A prick. I know he’s been chasing you since you were kids. I know you didn’t ask for any of this, but I ain’t got a fucking job, Naomi. I can’t drink, defend your honor, pull an all-nighter, or overexert myself. I’m an old man. You deserve more.”

“That’s bullshit,” I seethed, standing. “You don’t have to do this. You’re choosing this, armed with a lot of bullshit excuses.”

“It’s not,” he said, pausing to lower his voice. “I’m all out of options, Naomi. I can’t... We gotta cut our losses. I don’t want to say it, but one of us has to.”

“To say what?”

He walked over to the door, holding it open, looking like he was about to throw up. “It’s over.”

I walked into the hall, hearing the door close behind me.

I pounded on the door once. "If you love me, you're a coward! And if you don't, you're a liar!"

When he didn't open it, I hurried down the stairs, stopped in the lobby by Darby.

"Naomi," she said, unsure. "What are you doing here?"

I looked past her, trying to think of something polite to say to get me away quickly, but then I had an idea. "I came to see Zeke."

"You did? How, um... That's really great." Darby said the words with conviction. She meant them, but she was surprised. "It's real quiet without the boys here."

"Hey, Darby," a woman said as she passed. She was wearing coveralls, peeled down, the sleeves tied around her waist, her once-white tank top covered in grease and dirt.

"Oh, hey!" Darby said, her pageant smile switching on. "Naomi, this is Reese. She's the head mechanic on the Forestry helicopters."

"We've met," Reese said, flashing a bright smile, dimples sinking in both cheeks.

"Hi again," I said, shaking her hand a few times. She had a firm grip, I'd give her that, and I respected any woman breaking into a male dominant field. "You're staying here?" The question was innocent at first, but then I said it aloud and wondered if this stunning, long-legged brunette was the reason Zeke was so quick to dismiss me.

"I am. Just checked in yesterday. A fire broke out in Cali, so we're going up there soon. They're sending Helitac out first so we can get the boys airborne."

"How long will you be gone you think?" Darby asked.

Reese's mouth pulled to the side. "It's been burning for two weeks, and it just keeps growing. No telling."

"Is Ellie with them?" Darby asked.

"I'm not around her much, but yeah. Last time I saw them trekking up, she was with them."

"Stay safe," Darby said.

Reese waved to us, typing on her cell phone as she walked to the elevator bay.

“Has Zeke said anything about the Alpines?” I asked. I glanced at Reese. “Has he been talking to her?”

Darby looked over her smile and tried to suppress a giggle. “I don’t think he even notices. All he can think about is you, his career, his health, and you ... oh, and you,” she said, giggling.

I looked up. “Doesn’t seem like he’s thinking about me at all.”

She sobered. “He doesn’t want to drag you through all this, especially since you’ve been through so much already.”

“Well, I get to decide that, he doesn’t.”

She stared down at the floor. “He’s not himself. He’s been awfully down in the dumps. He doesn’t know anything but fightin’ fires. They have to let him back in.”

“I don’t think it’s going to happen, Darby.”

“Well, I believe in miracles. I’ll keep praying for healing, and that everything can go back to the way it was, including you two.”

“Thank you, but,” I began, raking my hair back with my fingers. “I hate to ask you this, Darby, but I’m sure you can relate. Could you talk to him again? He won’t listen to me. He needs treatment.”

“He loves you,” she said in her sweet Southern drawl. “It’s the situation he hates. He feels like he’s screwing everything up, and that man... God bless you, Naomi, he’s a runner. Since that old girlfriend of his broke his heart, I don’t think it works right. The second he thinks you might leave him...”

“He bails.”

She nodded, seeming apologetic. “Zeke is a good man. He’ll come around. I know he wants to fight for you, he just doesn’t know how.”

“He doesn’t have to fight for me. I’m already his.”

Darby’s bottom lip jutted out, and she brought me into a hug, squeezing me tight. “It’s going to work out.”

When she released me, I fled the lobby before tears tumbled over my lashes onto my cheeks. I sat in the FJ, grabbing the steering wheel

tight and bowing my head while my shoulders shook with grief. *It doesn't matter how someone you love leaves. Loss is loss.*

I didn't drive home, instead cruising the streets of Colorado Springs for two hours before deciding to take the highway north toward Denver. My mind jumped from sad to angry, from sympathetic to spiteful. I knew why Zeke was pushing me away. I was an independent, strong woman, and it had always been an issue meeting someone secure in himself enough to pursue any kind of relationship. Zeke didn't want to feel weak next to me. He didn't want to get sick and die and put me through another funeral. For those reasons, it was hard to stay mad at him, but I was damn sure going to try.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter thirty-four

clean

Zeke

The white walls of my hotel room were the only things I could stand to keep me company. The cheap painting of the mountains—none that I'd seen in Colorado so far—didn't judge me, and no one on the television sent me thoughts and prayers. The Maddoxes were with their girlfriends, most of my friends were either at their Southern homes or with family, and I was in my shithole hotel drinking Ensure and feeling like a waste.

Brad and Jenn were calling twice a day, but the longer I went without speaking to Naomi, the less I wanted to talk to anyone. So I sat. I sat in my green chair next to a dozen or so bottles of prescriptions, and I stared at the wall. Anger helped, but I missed her more than I thought possible. My heart hurt in ways that was worse than death, and some days I wished for it. Still, knowing she was waiting for me to call, I sat here in misery and felt sorry for myself.

A knock on the door forced me to move for the first time since I'd rolled out of bed. I trudged across the room and peeked through the peephole.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Reese leaned closer, her eye misshapen in the glass. "Open the door, Zeke."

"No."

She crossed her arms, a white plastic sack hanging from one wrist. "Watts called me. I drove all the way over here, and I'm not leaving."

Open the damn door.”

I narrowed my eye then sighed, yanking it open.

Reese covered her nose and mouth. “Oh my ... oh my God,” she said in a muffled Long Island accent. “What are you doing in here? Collecting shit and mold?”

“Waiting to die,” I said, setting my Ensure on the table.

She walked in and looked around for two seconds before collecting empty pizza boxes and other trash.

“What are you doing?” I asked, annoyed.

“Making it tolerable. No wonder you’re depressed. You’re lucky I owed you a favor. Fucking gross.”

“You owe me a favor? I think it’s the opposite. You hooked me up with your sister’s kitchen, remember?”

“We can talk about it later.” She handed me the sack. “Clean clothes. Take a shower. I’ll clean up.”

I stared at her, holding the sack in my hands, confused and unmoving.

She stomped into the bathroom, turned on the shower, then came out, pointing behind her. “Shower! Now!”

“Fine! Christ, Reese. I got a heart condition, you know.”

“Don’t wanna hear it! Heart patients can brush their teeth and wash their asses. Get to it.”

I shut the bathroom door behind me, set the sack on the counter and undressed, trying to think of the last time I’d worn clean clothes. I stood under the hot water. Reese was right, I was already feeling more human. A human without the love of my life, but a human anyway. Week-old grime dripped to the tub and circled the drain.

It wasn’t easy knowing I was just being stubborn and also feeling like I was doing us both a favor. Naomi didn’t want to kiss Peter. I should’ve beat the shit out of him, but she’d lose her job, and I’d probably end up in the ER. It was fucked. I was fucked. I needed her *and* had to stay away from her. *Fucked*.

Brad had told me once if I talked too much sense I’d lose my mind.

He'd always known that I could get too far into my head, trying to compartmentalize and explain emotions so I could get a handle on them—mine or someone else's.

That tendency was a big problem for me, because love in any capacity didn't make sense. The beginning was perfect, the end was agony, and the middle was filled with expectations and disappointment that eventually paved the pathway to falling out of love. We could fall in love with someone, too much of something or not enough. Someone wrong for us or too much like us to get along. It was too delicate a balance, but love didn't care. We fell without reason and basked in the light of it, only to become blind to why we fell in the first place.

The flaw in it all was love made us insane, and returning to reason was inevitably the beginning of the end. Love had to be senseless to survive.

I twisted the knob and stepped out, wrapping the towel around my waist. My reflection was blurred in the steam-covered mirror. I wiped the fog away with my palm, leaving a rainbow-shaped smear that allowed a less blurry version of me gazing back.

"You're fucked," I said.

"No you're not," Reese called from the room.

I brushed my teeth, pulled on the boxers, T-shirt, hoodie, jeans and socks Reese had brought, snapping off the tags and peeling off the stickers.

I opened up the door and stepped out, in awe of what Reese had done in the time I was in the bathroom.

"Wow," I said.

"It doesn't smell like a morgue anymore." She sat, letting her wrists hang off the ends of the armrests.

"Thank you," I said, rubbing my neck. Now that I didn't feel like a piece of furniture, I was embarrassed about the state of my room. "Why did you owe me again?"

"Fish," she said simply. "He told me you made the call not to leave

him behind.”

“It was Naomi who...” I trailed off, just her name causing a sick feeling in my stomach. I sat on the edge of the bed.

“Fish is my cousin, you know. His dad’s little sister is my mom.”

“Fish is your cousin? Why didn’t I know this? You’ve been Bobby’s mechanic for two years.”

“Fish helped get me this job, and he made me promise not to make it obvious that we’re related.”

“That makes sense. He’s good with the buggy when it breaks down. Is that where you learned about engines?”

She made a face. “I learned from the same place Fish did. My mom.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That’s cool.”

“I’ve been pretty good about keeping it a secret. But when he ... when I heard over the radio the Alpines were in trouble, I holed up in the hangar so I could listen on the radio. It was torture, sitting on the concrete alone, waiting to hear if any of you were alive; if my cousin was gone, if Bobby was gone. It was quiet for the half hour before they found you. When I heard Fish was hurt, I made Bobby call in a favor.”

“Good ole’ Bobby,” I said.

“He flew after dark looking for you guys. He had more than one close call.”

“I didn’t know that.”

Reese stood. “Anyway, your room smells better and so do you.” She sobered. “I know you lost a lot when you were diagnosed, Zeke. But a lot of people, including your girlfriend, put a lot on the line to save your life that day. On a lot of days. So don’t waste it.”

She walked out, letting the door close hard behind her.

I sat alone, letting her words simmer. I stared at my phone, deciding in the moment to call Naomi and beg her forgiveness. Her number was at the top of my missed calls, and my thumb hovered over her name, wondering if I’d get the reaction I hoped for or the one I deserved.

Before I pressed the button, someone knocked on the door. I opened it, expecting to see Reese. Instead, I glowered down at Peter, who stood before me, adjusting his tie.

“Hello, Zeke.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Well, Naomi didn’t send me, if that’s what you were hoping for.”

My shoulders sagged. “Get out of here.”

I turned, letting the door close, but Peter caught it and followed me in.

I sat in the chair, glad that Reese had cleaned up and made me shower. Peter was the last person I’d want to see me in such a shit state.

“May I sit?” Peter asked.

“No,” I said simply.

Peter stopped mid-way to the corner of the bed and stood again, nervously shifting his weight.

“You’ll change your mind once you hear what I have to say,” Peter said.

“Doubt that.”

“She loves you,” Peter said. He held up his hands and let them fall to his thighs. “I can’t deny that anymore. And I can’t deny that I love her. So ... I want to help. A compromise.”

I eyed him, already suspicious.

“You know who I am, Zeke, but you’re unaware of how far my reach is or what I can do. I am the deciding vote for the Cheyenne Mountain Complex.”

“So?”

He chuckled and looked down. “Naomi really hasn’t told you anything.”

I pointed to the door. “Get out.”

He held up his hands. “Just ... hear me out. You’ll be glad you did.”

“The Complex is home to dozens of doctors and scientists from all over the world who are number one in their respective fields. We have

Dr. Shaurya Patel. He's the leading cardiothoracic surgeon in the world. Dr. Anna Phillips is our hematologist. We also have the leading epidemiologist, Dr. Jerusha Farooq, and the most published and experienced biophysicist in modern medicine, Dr. Andrew Cohen." When I didn't respond, Peter sat on the corner of the bed and clasped his hands together. "We have an entire team to treat you. Tests and trials can be completed in the Complex that can't be done anywhere else. No constraints. No red tape. Dr. Patel and his team could heal you."

"Heal me," I repeated.

"I've spoken to Dr. Patel. It's possible. He's treated thirteen patients successfully to date. The treatments are tough I hear, but he feels you're a strong candidate."

"And how much would that cost? I'm guessing your voodoo doctors aren't part of my insurance plan."

Peter sighed, nodding. "That is a concern. Once you're better, you can bid for a contract to work on the Complex's Deep Echo Fire Department for three years to cover the cost. That's a high security area with no access to the outside. Your necessities will be covered."

"So that's the catch. I'm healed or at least better, but I'm out of your way for three years."

"Not out of the way. You'll both work for the Complex. You'll be in a restricted area undergoing controlled tests, so there's that small detail."

"And Naomi is security, so she'll have access."

"Her clearance runs up to Deep Echo."

"What is that? You keep mentioning it."

"Where you'll be."

I swallowed. I didn't wake up thinking I'd be doing a deal with the Devil.

"But you'll be healed, ideally in a handful of weeks. Heart condition gone. You won't just be better, you'll be better than before."

I grit my teeth. "Naomi's done with you, Peter."

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“If you’re lying to me...”

“Naomi would never forgive me.”

I shook my head. “No. No fucking way. You don’t give a shit about me, Peter, and you’ll never convince me you do. I don’t think you truly love her either. She’s going to owe you something after this, right? That’s what you want, isn’t it? You think I’d ever want to do that to her?”

“It’s true. I don’t care for you, and I’m totally indifferent to your state of well-being. But Naomi won’t speak to me. She blames me for your split—I suppose rightfully so. I’ve tried everything else. This is a last-ditch effort for me, absolutely. I’m attempting to get back into her good graces again, and that’s the truth.”

“The truth. You think I’d believe anything that comes out of your mouth?”

“You don’t have that luxury. The offer is on the table now. Once I leave, it’s rescinded.”

Shaking with anger I looked away, fantasizing that I had the strength to tackle him to the ground and beat the shit out of him. Naomi was the toughest woman I knew, but if I wanted to be with her, I couldn’t put her through another funeral. She deserved better.

Peter’s offer felt like the only way. After talking to my doctors, ironically it was Peter who offered me any hope. I didn’t want to sit at home, missing Naomi, waiting to die. The only thing I wanted more than to be with Naomi was to protect her the only way I was able and stay away.

“If I said yes, what’s the plan?” I asked.

Peter relaxed. “You’re to call no one. Pack a small bag, because again, all of your necessities will be covered for the duration of your stay in Deep Echo. Come with me. I’ll drive you to the Complex, get you registered, past main Complex and Deep Echo security, and you’ll be immediately evaluated by doctors. Then, treatment will begin. Once you’re cleared, you’ll start for Deep Echo Fire.”

“You admit you’re just doing this to get me out of the way.”

“Freely.”

I looked down, anger flowing through me. The helplessness itself helped me make the decision. “You’re a bastard, Peter—a real low-life. You want me to just disappear for the next three plus years?”

“You’ll see her at work after you’re well and can explain then.” He crossed his arms. “Take it or leave it, Zeke.”

I stood, Peter’s eye line following me. He scrambled to stand, seeming nervous.

Leaving Naomi without saying goodbye. Every time I weighed what that might do to her, I replayed Peter’s promise that we would still see each other at the Complex. Technically, I’d see her more, and I would be well.

“I’ll start packing,” I said.

“I’ll wait for you in the hall,” Peter said.

The door closed behind him, and I stared at my phone, wishing I could warn Brad and Jenn and my brothers and sisters... Naomi. I knew exactly what she’d think. But I had to get better. Going with Peter was my only chance.

chapter thirty-five

gone

Naomi

The Complex felt different. The walls made unfamiliar noises, the water leaking from the walls sounded louder, the smell danker. I hadn't slept much, but I was alert enough to notice. Trex and I walked the corridors. He yawned, then I would too, both of us tired for very different reasons.

"You okay?" Trex asked, yawning again.

"Yes, quit that. That shit is contagious."

"You're not okay."

I pressed my lips together. I was afraid if I talked about it, I might cry. "Not right now. Maybe later."

We kept walking, passing the stairs to Peter's office. Peter stepped off the last step, barely acknowledging me as he passed.

Trex walked until we could no longer hear Peter's footsteps, then stopped, grabbing my sleeve. "All right, talk. Peter just acted like he didn't know you."

I looked toward the end of the corridor, feeling my throat tighten. "Please, not now. Later, okay?"

He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "Are you gonna cry?"

I frowned then punched Trex in the arm—hard. "No. Fuck off," I said, walking.

"I know that look," he said. "And I know that punch. Did you and Zeke get into it?"

"You could say that," I said. "Remember that favor I owed Peter for

letting us go get the Alpines? He called it in. He was sure if I kissed him I'd remember my feelings for him. He didn't care that Zeke was standing right there."

Trex turned, walking the other way. "I'll kill that motherfu—"

I grabbed his arm and yanked him back. "Zeke knew the circumstances. It was just an excuse. He was going to dump me anyway. That's why he went out and drank himself into oblivion. Peter being there was a convenient way to pick a fight. After the kiss, Zeke wanted to throw a punch but realized he couldn't. That was all he needed to walk away. He wouldn't return any of my calls or texts yesterday." I swallowed. "It's over."

"Damn it, Nomes. C'mere." He tried to hug me, but I pushed him away. "Not here."

"What can I do?"

"Not mention it at work? I'm struggling to keep it together here."

He nodded. "Copy that. Let's check the end and hassle the new guys. Deep Echo transition was today."

"Aw, man. I kind of liked those assholes."

"Well, now we have new assholes."

The metal grid beneath our feet echoed with each step until we were stopped by the huge blast door that led to Deep Echo. The same alarm chirped, but a different guard spoke through the speaker. I could see through the glass that he seemed anxious; fidgeting and blinking his eyes a lot.

"Step back, Mr. Trexler," he said.

Trex made a face. "It's just Trexler."

"Step away from the door, Trexler. You have ten seconds."

"What's your name?" Trex asked.

He hesitated. "Gibbs."

"Gibbs," I said, nodding. "What kind of name is that for a soldier?"

"Five seconds," he said, clearly at the end of his patience.

"Have a great nine months, asshole," I said, smiling and waving as we walked away.

“Hey. Hey!” the guard said through the speaker.

We turned.

“I’ve heard about you. I’m not Lieutenant Dean. I’ll hog tie your asses and throw you in the brig. I don’t care if you’re main house’s head of security.”

Trex smiled. “I’d like to see you try.”

We kept walking, staying silent until we were outside of earshot.

“He’s Navy or Marines,” Trex said. “Air Force and Army call holding a stockade, not the brig.”

I nodded once. “Caught that.”

“I’m thinking the next nine months at the blast door won’t be as fun as it used to be,” Trex said.

“I don’t think anything is going to be as fun as it used to be,” I said. “I’m going home to an empty house tonight. My boyfriend, possibly ex-boyfriend, is trying to drink himself to death, I had to let Peter put his tongue in my mouth, and I still don’t know what the hell is going on in Deep Echo.”

“I got three hours of sleep last night, but I got to rock my daughter to sleep twice, so that’s pretty cool.”

We passed Peter again, and again he kept his head down.

“He’s avoiding you,” Trex said under his breath. “Did you bite his tongue off or something?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. He said he was stressed about the Deep Echo transition, but something’s up.”

When we packed up for the day and headed out, I checked my phone as soon as I had service. Nothing. I clicked my most recently-dialed number—Zeke’s—and listened to it ring through my speakers. This time, instead of his voicemail greeting, a series of three tones blared into the confines of my FJ, then a woman began speaking. “We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.”

I yanked the wheel over, slammed on the brakes, and dialed again.

Same message.

I hit the steering wheel. “What the *fuck*?”

The FJ stayed in place until I could harness my emotions long enough to figure out what to do next. I drove straight to the hotel, waving to Darby on the way in. She was holding Maddie, but I didn’t have time to chat.

“Sorry, I have to run upstairs really quick.”

“Why? For Zeke?” she asked. “Because he checked out yesterday.”

I stopped, returning to Darby. “What do you mean he checked out? Where did he go?”

She shrugged. “I’m sorry, Naomi, I wasn’t here. The day employee, Ander, checked him out. He said Zeke was looking pretty rough.”

I walked away from her, interlacing my fingers on top of my head, blew a dark strand from my face, then returned. “Has he ever mentioned to you where he’d go if he left?”

She shrugged with a smile. “He talked about moving in with you. The rest, he wouldn’t really talk about anymore. Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said, staring out the glass entrance doors. I let my hands fall to my thighs. “I guess that’s it then.”

“What’s it?” Darby asked, swaying with Maddie.

I smiled at her, touching the top of Maddie’s head, and said goodbye.

“Come by for dinner this week!” Darby called after me.

“I might! Thank you!” I replied, breaking into a jog once I was outside.

I called Watts, but he didn’t answer. His voicemail greeting was new, now saying he was in Estes Park. *Of course. It’s May. Fire season.*

With a full tank of gas, I set off from the Springs and drove all the way to Estes Park and into the Rocky Mountain National Forest until I found the duty station and barracks, or whatever the hell they called; the huge shit brown dorm they lived in when they weren’t out fighting

fires.

They were doing drills and only stopped for a few minutes while Watts and Sugar answered my questions.

“He’s not here,” Watts said, deflated. He was soaked in sweat, filled out more than he was at the end of last year’s fire season. So was Sugar.

“Do you know where he is?” I asked.

“Last I knew, he was at the hotel. We had to report for duty today.”

I sighed, closed my eyes tight, then wiped my face in frustration. “He didn’t tell me,” I said.

“Tell you what?” Sugar asked.

“That today would have been his first day back if he wasn’t ... you know.”

Watts rubbed the back of his dirty, sweaty neck. “Because it wasn’t going to be, and he knew it. He’s been quietly spiraling, Naomi. Don’t feel bad. None of us could’ve done anything.”

“His phone is disconnected. Do you know anything about that?” I asked.

Watts and Sugar looked at each other, then back at me, shaking their heads.

“Damn it,” I said, turning to punch the air.

“He’ll come around,” Sugar said.

I hung my hands on top of my head again. “I don’t know. I don’t know if he will. What he hasn’t lost he threw away.”

The chief called Watts and Sugar back, so I waved goodbye. The FJ seemed lonelier when I hopped back in, so I buckled my seat belt and mentally prepared for the ride home. The drive was beautiful but long. The sun had already set behind the mountaintops. Soon, it would be dark, and I’d be alone with nothing to focus on but the road and my thoughts.

chapter thirty-six

animal

Naomi

“**Y**ou look like shit,” Sloan said from across the table.

I poked my fork at the food on my plate, feeling bad that I had no intention of eating it. It had been nearly five weeks since Zeke left. I didn't have his mother's number, and Watts and the rest of the guys had been busy in California. I missed him. I missed him the way I missed Matt. Going home to an empty house was torture. My bed smelled like him for a while, breaking my heart all over again. After his scent went away, I cried myself to sleep every night for a week.

He'd left a T-shirt behind, and I'd put it on almost as soon as I got home. I was barely existing. If it weren't for food delivery, I would have starved.

“Naomi,” Trex said.

I looked up. “What?”

“I was giving you shit just now,” Sloan said, his mouth full. “You didn't answer, and it hurt my feelings.”

“Oh,” I said, sitting up. “Sorry.”

The team traded glances.

“Okay,” Martinez said. “It's time to tell us what's going on.”

“I don't want to talk about it,” I said.

“Too bad,” Sloan said. “That's what we do. We talk about shit.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He pointed his knife at me. “Don't you come at me, Nomes. I'm not in the mood.”

“Okay, everyone, calm the fuck down,” Trex said.

I dropped my fork, letting it clang against the sectioned plate. “He’s sick. He has a heart condition. He doesn’t want me stuck with an invalid the rest of my life.”

Kitsch stroked his beard then frowned. “Is he that sick?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. But it could become more serious if he doesn’t seek out treatment soon. They wouldn’t let him re-up with the Alpines or anyone. He appealed, but they don’t want him having an episode in a remote area and dying before they can get him out.”

“That’s possible?” Harbinger asked.

I nodded.

Harbinger’s brows shot up. “Damn.”

“He’s angry,” I said. “Things hadn’t been great. We’d been fighting a lot.”

Trex wiped his mouth with a napkin then threw it on the table. “If you ask me—”

“I didn’t,” I said.

He grimaced. “Let me rephrase. Men are intimidated by you. He was okay with it before, but now he’s not—for obvious reasons. He’s fought for you once, right? It’s gotta bother him that he can’t do that for you or anyone ever again. You make him feel even weaker.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask you,” I grumbled.

“This could be good news,” Harbinger said. “He could come around once he comes to his senses.”

“He’s lucky,” Kitsch says. “If he wasn’t sick, I’d beat his ass for doing this to you.”

I reached across the table and held Kitsch’s hand. “I know you would.”

“Hey, Caroline is talking about grilling out tonight. I can get extra if you all want to stop by.”

We all nodded, never a group to turn down a meal.

“Uh, there’s one thing,” Harbinger said, clearing his throat. “She got on really well with Senator Bennett. She asked if I’d invite him

too.”

“It’s not my party,” I said with a shrug.

“You sure?” Harbinger asked again.

I nodded.

“Okay, see you after rounds then around six thirty tonight.”

I parked in front of Harbinger’s house, noting that everyone else—including Peter—had already arrived. I brought a pie into the house and set it on the kitchen counter.

“Hi, sweetie,” Caroline said. She hugged me with her free arm, cradling Maddie in the other.

“Wow. She’s bigger already,” I said.

Caroline grinned. “That’s why you enjoy every second.”

“Do you want me to do anything?” I asked.

Caroline looked around. “Everything’s almost done. I just have to finish up a few things. If you’d just take Maddie,” she said, carefully transitioning her into my arms.

“Oh,” I said, feeling my arms become stiff and awkward again. “Hi,” I said, looking down at her rosy cherubic cheeks. I wasn’t sure why I was suddenly so terrified of her wiggling out of my arms, she was asleep.

“Now that’s a sight I thought I’d never see,” Peter said, leaning against the doorway, his hands in his suit pockets.

“You wore a suit to a BBQ?” I asked.

He stood upright, walking toward me. “Came straight from work. Had several meetings today with some higher ups.”

“How did it go?” I asked.

He winked at me. “As planned. I always get my way.”

I glared at him. “That’s not attractive, you know. It stinks of spoiled rich kid.”

Peter touched his chest. “Me? Nah.”

He took a step toward me.

“Stop right there.”

“Naomi,” he said, disappointed. “I’ll never try to kiss you again ... unless you want me to.”

“I won’t.”

I wasn’t sure if I should sit, stand, or go to the backyard with Maddie, so I just stood in place, trying to bounce her with my suddenly cumbersome body.

Peter smiled at her. “She’s so beautiful. May I hold her?”

“Sure,” I said, handing her over as I passed him to walk outside.

Peter walked out behind me, and I watched him as I sat at the picnic table with the others. He was so natural with a baby in his arms, unafraid of how small she was or how limp. Her arm was hanging down, her lips pursed with spittle bubbling in the center. She was like a little drunk baby doll, and to everyone else it seemed completely normal.

Kids had never been my thing.

Trex smiled. “You’ve got her again?”

“Sorry,” Peter said. “I like babies.”

“She won’t be small for long,” Trex said. “It seems like she grows every day.”

“Where’s Darby?” I asked.

“Still at the hotel,” he said. “She’ll be here later.”

Harbinger was at the grill flipping burgers and hotdogs, Henry and Miles were squealing and making shooting noises as they played war, Kitsch was having a beer with the rest of the boys, and Peter and Maddie were in a lawn chair, having a quiet, one-sided conversation.

“Don’t get too attached,” I said. “Trex is pretty dead set on keeping her.”

Peter laughed. “He said the same thing.”

“I didn’t realize you liked babies so much.”

He looked up at me with a smile. “Maybe you don’t know me as well as you thought.”

“I doubt that,” I said, returning to the kitchen to help Caroline.

Martinez and Sloan came too. Caroline loaded us up with serving dishes, and we carried them outside. When Caroline came out with her famous southwest potato casserole, everyone clapped.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, setting the glass dish on the wooden picnic table. “Boys?” she called.

Henry and Miles came running, watching their mom load their plates with their favorites. Harbinger made them a cheeseburger and a hotdog each, then set down two huge plates of hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and hotdogs onto the table. The team patiently waited for Caroline to make her plate, and then they dove in like rabid dogs.

“Want me to take her?” Trex asked Peter, already chewing.

“Nope,” Peter said. “Enjoy your food. I’ll give her back when you’re finished.”

“You know, you could put her on a blanket,” Caroline teased.

“Yeah, but as fast as she’s growing, she’s going to be eighteen like tomorrow,” Trex said.

Caroline’s sweet laugh rang throughout the yard. “Oh, Trex. It’s good to see you so happy and settled.”

I looked back at Peter, hoping he would let them stay that way, even once he realized I wasn’t going to give in. Something was different about him, though. Peter was more confident but seemed less pressured, as if he had all the time in the world for me to change my mind.

Once Trex finished, Peter made a plate, and Sloan and I started collecting dirty dishes, taking them into the kitchen. We scrubbed, and Sloan slung suds in my direction, but that reminded me of Zeke, sucking the fun out of it like a spaceship hatch had been opened.

“Hey,” Sloan said, elbowing me. “You okay?”

I used my wrist to wipe my nose. “I just miss him.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?”

“I don’t know.”

Martinez strolled in with a smile on his face.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” I asked.

“Mia? She’s at work.”

“Why do you ask who we’re talking about? Do you have more than one girlfriend?” Sloan asked.

“Fuck off. Over there,” Martinez said, pointing.

“Can’t. Dishes,” Sloan said.

Peter came in just as we were finishing up, bringing his dirty plate. “No worries, I’ll take care of it,” he said.

“You sure are chipper today,” Martinez said. “Which is weird since you’ve been avoiding Naomi for weeks.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “I was giving her space. I assumed I was the last person she’d want to see after...”

“You were right,” I said.

“What about now?” Peter asked.

Sloan popped the top off another beer and took a big gulp. “Damn, it’s getting hot.”

“NORAD said maybe the hottest in a decade,” Peter said. “We’re outfitting the Complex with better fire suppressants and deterrents around the perimeter.”

“I feel safer already,” Sloan said.

My stomach sank. The year before, I was falling for Zeke. Everything was so different. “You know,” I began, trying to keep my voice cheerful, “I’d better get home and get some laundry done. I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night. I’m going to try to get the house in order then turn in early.”

I dried off my hands, grabbed my keys, and headed for the backyard. “Dishes are finished! Thank you!” I said, waving to Harbinger and Caroline.

Caroline stood and jogged over to hug me. “Thank you. Come see us more often, okay?”

“Will do,” I said with a smile.

I headed home, walking through the door to a quiet house. Everything reminded me of Zeke: the television, the couch, the

kitchen, the bed. I enjoyed it when Zeke was there. Now, it felt like a cage.

The laundry was already finished and folded, so I put it away, showered, then slipped Zeke's oversized T-shirt over my head. Just as I pulled back the covers, a soft knock made me freeze. I rushed down the hall and through the living room with the smallest bit of hope, only to be on the verge of tears when opening the door revealed Peter.

"That look in your eyes breaks my heart. I am sorry, you know. I'd never want you to hurt like this."

"Get the hell out of here, and don't come back." I slammed the door in his face and sat on the couch.

With my elbows on my knees, I covered my head with my arms and rocked back and forth, sobbing.

The next morning, I woke up alone and half an hour later than usual. I rushed around and pulled in just as Trex closed his driver's side door.

"You're cutting it close, aren't you?" he said.

"Aren't you?"

"I just forgot something. I've already been inside and back."

I snarled at him, and we walked together to the locker room where we gunned up and had a quick team meeting before making rounds. The day was mundane, almost boring. It sounded like a good idea at first, to have a job where we could hold a gun and still be home for dinner. But we were all itching for action. Walking the halls just wasn't enough, at least not for me. Thoughts of re-enlisting crossed my mind, or maybe going back to Arizona.

After a quick lunch, I escaped to the gym, working my arms, back, and abs until my muscles shook from fatigue.

"How are you going to be worth anything working yourself that hard in the middle of your work day?" Peter asked from the doorway.

I took a towel and wiped my face. "It keeps me from killing you."

"Maybe I should have tried that the first month or so after Paige left. I felt like dying several times."

I shot him a look. “Over election day? Because you never loved Paige.”

He looked down at his shoes, his hands in pockets, raising his brows. “That’s true. I was wondering if you’d like to grab a bite to eat tonight. Nothing fancy. Just dinner.”

“I’m not going on a date with you,” I said.

“Not a date. Just two friends eating. You need to eat a decent meal, Naomi. You’ve lost some weight.”

I looked down, my ab muscles protruding more than usual. “Fuck off, Peter.”

“Fine,” he said, walking away.

I retired to the showers, peeled off my sopping wet sports bra and athletic leggings, before scrubbing off a half-hour’s worth of sweat. In ten minutes, I was clean and back in my uniform, on my way back to the locker room.

Trex frowned at me. “What’s your deal today? You’re never late.”

“Sorry, my workout ran long. I lost track of time. Won’t happen again.”

Trex nodded, then went down the checklist. “Okay, we’re changing things up. Naomi, you’re with me in Alpha through Delta. Kitsch has Echo, and Martinez has the warehouse and the perimeter.”

We were all confused. We’d had the same assignments since we’d started. Trex could see that and explained.

“We all need to be familiar with the entire complex and everyone we encounter. Names, faces, and every corner should be ingrained in your mind.”

“Why?” Sloan asked. “No one can get in this place. I feel like an old fucking lady fast-walking through the mall.”

“Because when shit does go down, we should be prepared, that’s why,” Trex said. “I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“Okay, team, move out,” Kitsch said.

We cleared the corridors in order, from Alpha to Delta. I passed Peter a few times, and instead of avoiding me, he’d stop and chat.

The last time we walked away from him, Trex made a half-growl, half-humming noise. “What’s up with him? He was all about Maddie at the BBQ. I didn’t know he liked babies that much, did you?”

I shook my head.

“He wouldn’t even look at you before. Now he’s stopping to chat every time you pass each other.”

“He came over last night. I slammed the door in his face. I’m afraid any second he’ll send us all packing. I feel like my balls are in a vice.”

“What?” Trex asked, stopping in the middle of the hall. “Naomi, he’s taking advantage. He knows you’re lonely and sad.”

“I am lonely and sad.”

“Then come hang out with us.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” he asked, confused.

I fidgeted. “I don’t want to offend you.”

He shot me a look of impatience.

“It’s Maddie. She makes me uncomfortable. When she gets older like Henry and Miles maybe I can, but until then she gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Maddie makes you uncomfortable? She can’t even talk.”

“Exactly, and she doesn’t have teeth, and she drools and craps her pants. It’s weird.”

“I hate to break it to you, Naomi, but you started out the same way.”

“It’s not that I don’t like your kid. I just don’t like any kids.”

Trex couldn’t hide that he felt slighted.

“C’mon, don’t take it personal,” I said.

“You think my kid is creepy, and you don’t think I’d take that personal?”

I shrugged. “I guess not? I wouldn’t, because kids *are* creepy.”

“No one thinks kids are creepy. People think Peter is creepy.”

“At least he has teeth and doesn’t chew on his fists.”

Kitsch approached us at full speed, breathing hard before he could

speak.

“What is it?” Trex asked, frowning.

“I ... was down in Deep Echo.”

“Did they kick you out?” I asked with a smile.

“I’m not sure,” he said between breaths. “I could be wrong, just keep that in mind. But ... while I was down there, I swear I saw Zeke.”

Trex and I traded glances.

“Kitsch, that’s impossible,” Trex said. “He doesn’t have credentials. He has no experience in security. Those guys are well-trained bad ombres.”

Kitsch shook his head, still struggling for breath. “Not security. He was wearing a”—

he touched his chest—“patch, and so were the guys with him. He’s some kind of fire team.”

I looked at Trex to give me a reason not to hope, to not be afraid. There could be dozens of frightening reasons why Zeke was down there, and worse, he’d been down there for weeks.

I took off in a sprint, not knowing or caring if Kitsch or Trex were behind me. My boots slamming on the metal grid path rang out, echoing against the curved walls. By the time I reached Deep Echo I was out of breath, but that didn’t stop me from looking in through the thick glass on each side of the blast door. I was pounding on it before security could sound their typical warning blast.

“Zeke?” I yelled. He wouldn’t have been able to hear me even if he was close by, but I was hoping he would once they told me to back off through the speaker.

“Back away, Abrams,” Gibbs barked.

I approached the display. “Is there a man in there named Zeke Lund?”

“That’s classified information, Abrams.”

I looked through the glass again. Behind the security team was a commons area, a few tables, some chairs, and non-security were ambling about.

“You have ten seconds, Abrams.”

Trex finally arrived with Kitsch. “Gibbs,” Trex said. We need confirmation about a man who might be in Deep Echo.”

“Fuck off, Trexler.”

Trex’s jaw ticked under the skin. “Just a yes or no will suffice.”

“We’re not at liberty to give any information on the employees in this restricted area,” Gibbs said.

I scanned the room, hoping Trex could buy me enough time to see the person Kitsch had.

“There!” Kitsch said, pointing to the hall.

Zeke was walking with two other men, looking down at papers in his hand.

“Zeke!” I screamed, pounding on the glass.

Zeke looked up, even though he couldn’t hear me. He knew I was there.

“Three seconds,” Gibbs said.

Zeke jogged over, placing his palm against the glass with a small smile.

I did the same, shaking my head. “What did you do?”

Zeke looked confused, but then pointed at the glass and looked up at Gibbs, speaking words I couldn’t hear. Whatever response Gibbs gave him made Zeke turn to me, an unsettled expression on his face. He pointed away from the door as Gibbs counted down.

Go, he mouthed.

Trex yanked me away, pulling me down Echo corridor, but I fought his grip, struggling to see Zeke watching me forced away with a desperate expression until we rounded the corner.

I yanked my arm away from Trex. “Why in the *fuck* is he in there?” I asked, pointing down the corridor. “Since when does Deep Echo have their own fire team?”

“Maybe they always did. Looked to me like Zeke just came out of training.”

I put my hands on my hip, so angry I wanted to fight someone.

“Peter said they were doing something new with the fire system because of the higher risk this year...” I trailed off, my eyes wide. “Peter.”

“Naomi,” Trex warned.

I ran to Peter’s office, glaring at the guards in front of his door. “Don’t touch me.”

They stepped aside. “Senator Bennett said you’re welcome to come and go.”

I pushed through the doors, pausing in front of Bianca. “Is he here?”

“Yes, but...”

I stomped past her into Peter’s office.

“Abrams, I have to announce you fir—”

I slammed the door in her face.

Peter smiled at first when he saw me, but it vanished once he recognized the expression on my face.

I pointed at him, walking toward him. “You knew. You probably orchestrated the whole goddamn thing. You put him back there and didn’t tell me. You watched me fall apart and pretended to console me. You sorry son-of-a-bitch!”

He held up his hands. “There is an explanation. He was lost, Naomi. He was unemployed. He wanted his old job back. This is what he wanted.”

“And you were all for it, I’m sure. Couldn’t separate us fast enough. Did you tell him, Peter? Did you even hint that he can’t leave?”

“Of course.”

“Bullshit! He smiled at me. He has no fucking clue! This is false imprisonment; do you understand that? What you’ve done isn’t legal. I don’t give a shit who your father is!”

“Naomi, please calm down.”

I lunged for him. I didn’t realize his guards, Trex, and Kitsch were behind me until they held my arms.

“Is it true?” Trex asked. “Did you manipulate Zeke into taking a

contract in Deep Echo?”

Peter opened his mouth to speak then chuckled nervously. “Of course not. Zeke came to me.”

“Why don’t you let us ask him,” I said. “Let him come out.”

Peter frowned, losing his cool for just a moment, long enough for me to see his true motive. “Absolutely not!” He flattened his tie, attempting to mask his sudden outburst. “Part of Zeke’s contract is for him to undergo treatment he can’t find anywhere else. He has to stay under constant supervision of his doctors.”

My throat felt tight, my eyes burned. “You’re experimenting on him?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Peter said, waving me away. “It’s a new procedure and treatment Dr. Cohen has developed with his stem cell research. Remember, he’s the top biophysicist in the country. Every PhD here is the top of their field. It’s really exciting stuff what they plan to do.”

“You’re experimenting on him,” Trex said, angry. “Let him out of there, Peter. Naomi knows what you did and why. She’s not going to just forget.”

“I’m not worried about myself. Zeke is going to be well and get his life back. He’s very excited. You should be too. He’ll be released once his contract ends, and you can discuss it then. In the meantime, I won’t dismiss protocol, facility security, or the law for your pet project.”

“How long until his contract ends?” I asked.

“Three years,” Peter said.

I yanked away from Trex and the guard. “Are you insane? How did you even get him back there? He has zero clearance.”

“I’m capable of doing a lot more than you give me credit for,” he said, tightening his tie.

“You crossed a line, Peter. I will never forgive you for this.”

He smiled. “Yes you will. You always do.”

“Not this time.” I went after him again, struggling against Trex.

“You’re dead. You are fucking dead to me!” I spat on his desk.

Peter’s smile faded as Trex and Kitsch pulled me away. They guided me back to the locker room where I leaned against the lockers and slid to the floor, holding my hair from my eyes with my hands.

Kitsch took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “That’s not legal, is it?”

“Don’t say anything else,” Trex said, looking up.

I folded my arms on my knees and bowed my head, feeling helpless.

OceanofPDF.com

chapter thirty-seven
in the deep

Zeke

I took a deep breath, Dr. Patel's cold stethoscope feeling like it was burning a hole through my skin.

"Sorry," he said, realizing too late and rubbing the metal against his coat. He tried again, writing down his findings.

"How are you feeling?"

"Weak."

He nodded. "That's normal. We could lower the intensity of the treatments; however, it could double the time."

"No."

He nodded. "How's the pain?"

"A five most of the time. Sometimes a six."

He nodded again, writing down my answers. "Any relief?"

"No."

"Are you taking the medication?"

"Everything but the pain pills."

He wrote more, then signed his name. "Chest X-Ray in two hours. You've got training before then?"

I nodded. "That's all you'll let me do. I need to start as soon as I can, so my contract can begin."

"I understand." He put his stethoscope away. "We'll get you there."

"When?" I asked.

"Can't be certain, but you're progressing along nicely. Better than previous patients. On average their treatments took nine weeks. At

this rate, you'll be shaving at least two weeks off of that. Maybe more. Your last treatment could be the next one."

I nodded. "Good."

Dr. Patel stood, shook my hand, and let the door shut behind him. It was the first time I'd seen a doctor who did house calls, or, in my case, cell calls. My room wasn't awful. It was twice as big as my hotel room, and I was next door to Dean, the former security head. He'd been given a job deeper in the facility, and although he wasn't allowed to speak about it, he was happy to talk about anything else.

After a short knock the door opened, and Dean walked in wearing a gray T-shirt and flannel pajama pants. "Damn. That one took it out of you, huh?"

"Try getting shunts and shit fed through all your veins and valves and electrodes shocking the shit out of you, making you feel like you're having a heart attack every day? Yeah, it tends to leave me feeling a little off. And that's not including the blood work, the biopsies, the—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. You're going to make me throw up." He sighed, sitting in corner chair. "I'm so sorry, Zeke. I know it's tough. You look like hell."

"Thanks," I said, leaning back and staring at the ceiling. "It's going to be a long three years."

Dean got quiet.

I turned to face him. "What?"

"Is that what they told you? Three years?"

"Yeah, why?"

"It's just that ... most people down here don't leave, not without an outside mission or task anyway. The security team turns over, but we're moved to other areas unless they think they can't trust you."

"Where do those people go?"

Dean shrugged. "Nowhere good."

"I'm getting out of here. I'm a civilian for fuck's sake."

"So are the docs. They don't go anywhere either."

"How did you get stuck down here?"

Dean grinned. “I volunteered like everyone else, having no fucking clue what I was signing up for.” He thought about that for a moment, then snapped out of it. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit, but whatever they’re doing is working. I get stronger every day.”

A loud bang sounded down the hall, and something cried out.

Dean laughed at my reaction.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked.

“Probably something getting treatments like you and complaining just like you.”

“*Something?*”

Dean’s expression changed like it always did when we got too close to a conversation about Deep Echo. “I’d better go. You should get some sleep.”

“I can barely keep my eyes open, but my brain’s not tired.”

“I keep forgetting to tell you. I saw your girlfriend this morning.”

“You saw Naomi? In here?”

“No, dumbass, she can’t come back here. I’ve told you that. Everyone has told you that. I saw her through the corridor entry glass. She was patrolling.”

“Damn it. How do I keep missing her?”

“You’ll see her again eventually. She’s upped her stops here to four times a day instead of once.”

“How did she look?”

“She’s a fine piece of ass.” I didn’t respond, and Dean began to laugh. “I’m kidding, my dude. She looked good! She takes no shit off our security team, that’s for sure.”

“If her team is so specialized, why does she just walk the halls all day?”

He shrugged. “I’ve asked myself that several times. The rumor is that Bennett brought her here. They were married or something when they were young and split up because he didn’t like her getting deployed. He created the team, added her and her crew so he could

keep her out of the field.”

“Sounds like a rumor to me,” I said.

“Yeah, but around here the rumors usually turn out to be mostly true. You just have to figure out which part. Her team has to be bad asses, though. They’re the last line of defense before anyone or anything gets to Deep Echo.”

“Is there treasure down here or something?” I teased.

“You don’t want to know what’s down here,” Dean said, his smile gone.

I stood.

“Where are you going?” Dean asked.

“To look for treasure.”

He grabbed my arm, shaking his head. “Zeke, you don’t want to do that. Besides, most of it is blocked off by checkpoints.”

“Then I’ll go as far as I can. I haven’t even been past the offices.”

“There’s a reason for that. Just ... let it go.”

I lay back, lacing my fingers behind my head. My chest ached, my back, too, and my head was throbbing. “I need to see Naomi. If you see her again, find me. That’s what’s most important.”

“Will do. But, Zeke? If they find out you know more than you should, you might not ever get out. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not prisoners.”

“Try to leave. See how that works out for you.”

“We’re contracted in a high security facility. There’re protocols. Stop being so paranoid.”

Dean stood. “I guess it’s easier to believe that. Get some rest.”

“Thanks,” I said, staring at the ceiling.

When the door closed, I sat up, waiting for Dean to get back into his room and the stars to clear from my eyes. A sharp pain stabbed through my chest, and I pressed my fist against it, rubbing in circles until the sensation leveled off. The stars came back, and again I waited.

Once the dizziness went away, I stood, shuffling to the door in bare feet. The hallway seemed longer than usual, but I set out anyway, hoping to either see Naomi or prove Dean wrong.

I passed the quarters, then offices, the kitchen, the commons, and arriving at the blast doors.

I looked up, squinting even though it wasn't that bright. The meds Dr. Patel had given me made my eyes more sensitive to light. "Gibbs," I called.

He looked down at me from the platform the entrance security team manned.

"Didn't you get banned from the blast doors, Lund?"

"What is the protocol for passing through those doors?" I asked.

Gibbs breathed out a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"If I wanted to get some fresh air for a day."

"No one walks through those doors," Gibbs said, amused. "Not during a contract. Not unless you're brass."

"So I can't leave? I'm a civilian. That's false imprisonment."

Gibbs laughed, and so did the rest of his squad. "Yeah, I guess it is. You'll find the rules in here are very different. That's why you're able to get the treatments you're getting."

"Is that why I keep hearing screaming deeper down the corridor?" I asked.

Gibbs' smirk vanished. "What screaming?"

"It sounded like an animal. Are they doing experiments down there?"

"You didn't hear anything, Lund. Trust me."

"Nazi Germany," I said, nodding and looking away from Gibbs as I tried to nonchalantly take in all the info I could on the blast doors. If there was a way out, the entrance wasn't it. "I willingly agreed to forgo my rights and live in Nazi Germany. That's great. Just great," I said, walking back toward my room.

I sat on my bed and leaned back against the wall, emotionally and physically exhausted. Peter knew I'd never get out of here. He dangled

my health in front of me, knowing I couldn't turn it down. All he had to do was get me past the blast doors.

I cupped my hands over my nose and mouth. Would I ever see her again? Would I ever see my family again? See the sky again? Breathe fresh air?

Jesus. What have I done?

OceanofPDF.com

chapter thirty-eight

savage

Naomi

The apartment was clear of bugs of cameras after four sweeps with Kitsch. At least Peter wasn't a total scumbag. While Kitsch swept my bedroom and bathroom a fifth time, I unrolled the Complex blueprints that covered almost my entire table, setting candles on all four corners to keep it flat.

Trex knocked twice then came in. "Sorry I'm late. Darby couldn't get away, so I brought Maddie to her."

"No problem," I said, touching my lips while I stared at the schematics.

"What the hell is this?" Trex asked.

"I was going to ask the same thing," Kitsch said, coming from the hall.

"The Complex," I said.

"It's complete and dated four months ago. How did you get it?"

"Peter's house."

"Isn't his place gated and heavily secured?"

I shrugged. "Wasn't that hard."

Trex put his hands on top of his head, lacing his fingers. "Naomi, you're going to get yourself imprisoned for a very long time. Possibly for life. I have a family. I can't be involved in this."

I looked at him. "You're right. You should go." I looked at Kitsch. "You go too."

"I'm staying," Kitsch said.

Trex sighed. He was conflicted, and I could see it was killing him.

“Go, Trex. Now,” I said.

He sighed, walking backward until he reached the door. He turned and twisted the knob, letting in a gust of cool night air. “There might be another way,” he said.

“There’s not,” I said. “Don’t say anything to anyone else. Especially Harbinger.”

Trex looked at me over his shoulder, nodded, then closed the door behind him.

“What do you need from me?” Kitsch said.

I rested my hands palms-down on the table, looking down. “We need a plan, then a plan B and plan C. I don’t see anywhere in or out of Deep Echo except the blast doors.”

“What about that?” Kitsch said, pointing to a ventilation system.

I crossed my arms, bending over. “Is it large enough for me, much less Zeke?”

“It’s a crawl space. Can his heart handle a mile-long army crawl?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what kind of treatment he’s been undergoing. I saw him last Tuesday. Looks like he’s not allowed near the blast doors anymore. He looks miserable but healthy.”

“So what are our obstacles?” Kitsch asked.

“We don’t know Zeke’s schedule or his ability to escape. Even if I make it into Deep Echo, if he’s not right there I’ll have to wait, increasing the risk of detection.”

“So we need his schedule and his health status. How do we get that?”

I shook my head. “We don’t need his schedule. We just need to find where he sleeps.”

“Abscond with him in the middle of the night? Not many distractions at night.”

“But the typical person is tired, slow, and unsuspecting.”

Kitsch nodded. “All right then. This is a night mission.”

We followed the air ducts and ventilation, mapping out my escape,

locating the Deep Echo Fire team's headquarters, but the sleeping quarters weren't specified.

"You're going to have to be patient, Naomi. It's a disadvantage that Peter knows you so well."

"How patient?"

"They'll be watching you. Give it a few weeks."

"I'm not known for being patient."

"Too much at stake not to be. We need the right night, and if it's too soon after one of Zeke's procedures, you'll have to drag him out, and he might not survive it."

"Dr. Cohen would know."

"How are you going to get that info without him alerting Bennett?"

"Because scientists want the world to know about their discoveries and successes. They are in the business of change and discovery, and you can't do that keeping it all to yourself. It's in their nature. Leave it to me."

Kitsch nodded. "Too risky. We'll have to find another way."

I stood upright, perching my hands on my hips, frustrated. "Copy that."

After giving Peter the silent treatment for two and a half weeks, he called me into his office. I sat in the chair across from his huge mahogany desk, glaring at him. "Is he really necessary?"

Peter looked up at the enormous armed guard next to him. "You've tried to attack me and have threatened me multiple times, so yes."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't recall you being such a pussy when we were kids; otherwise, I wouldn't have been so interested in you."

Peter leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. "You need to make a choice. Either you accept things how they are, or you'll have to move on."

"What are you talking about?" I snarled.

“I can’t keep you here behaving so hostile. My authority is beginning to be questioned. The general brought it to my attention, and I simply can’t afford not to have his respect.”

“Hostile? I haven’t spoken to you.”

“It’s a hostile work environment, Naomi. The general has noticed. Either stop pouting and being subtly defiant or pack up.”

“By pouting and defiance, you mean I’m no longer treating you like a friend, and I’m not allowing you in my home?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Are you threatening to fire me and my team?”

“Yes. And you’ll all be sequestered.”

“*Sequestered?* For *what?*”

“This is a top-secret facility, and you’re disgruntled employees. The risk is too high to terminate your employment and turn you out into the general public.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Peter. You’re really going to go through all that trouble, ruin lives, because I’m not in love with you? Where is your pride? Where is your integrity?”

“It goes far beyond that, Naomi.”

“No, it doesn’t. You’re a spoiled child. The one thing you’ve always wanted is the one thing you can’t have. You’ve broken numerous laws to get me, including interfering with my military career, my deployments, and now false imprisonment; bending rules of a government facility to keep your childhood crush close, and experimenting on a human being via coercion—not sure what the official term for that one is, but I’m certain it’s illegal.”

Peter glanced up at his bodyguard, who was stone-faced. “You’re distorting the facts.”

“Those are exactly the facts.”

“Did you not hear what I said?” Peter asked.

“Yes, play nice and pretend what you’ve done to Zeke is not evil and you won’t put me under house arrest. Is that about right?”

“Slightly biased account, but yes.”

“Just tell me, Peter. Tell me what you said to Zeke to get him to agree to this.”

“I didn’t have to convince him, if that’s what you’re asking. He was out of a job as a hotshot, he’s sick, he felt unworthy of you for both of those reasons. I gave him a job he loves and treatment he needs to be the man he wants to be for the woman he loves.”

“As if you care,” I grumbled.

“You’re right, I don’t. It was convenient for certain, but you’ve forgiven me for worse. Paige, for instance.”

“You marrying Paige is not even close to tricking my boyfriend into a three-year contract underground to keep him away from me.”

“Well, that’s one perspective.”

“Did you tell him he couldn’t leave once that blast door closed? Tell me the truth—if you even remember how.”

Peter shifted in his seat, clasping his fingers together. “It came up briefly.”

“*Briefly?* He’s not military. He doesn’t even have the appropriate clearance! How did you get this by the general?”

“I’m not required to.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“How often will he fight fires down there?” I snapped back.

“Naomi, really. You have no idea what goes on in Deep Echo.”

“Then tell me.”

“You know I can’t.”

My eyes blurred as tears filled and toppled over and down my cheeks. “Just ... at least tell me how he is. What he’s doing. You said he’s going through treatment. Is he okay? Is he in a hole somewhere? Just give me that, Peter. You owe me that.”

Peter sighed then gestured for his bodyguard to leave. Once the door closed, Peter leaned back in a more casual position. “What is Zeke doing ... let’s see. In the last report, he’d completed his training with flying colors. He’s not in a hole for Christ’s sake; he stays in the best living quarters in Deep Echo aside from science, medical, and

brass quarters. He has his own room, which is more than I can say for the rest of the fire crew and DE security. He's a hard worker, but he talks about you a lot. He was unhappy after seeing you and asked to be let out. Since finishing the training, he spends his time redesigning the fire suppressant and plan in Deep Echo. They put out a significant mechanical fire in zone Sub6-B. He collapsed shortly after, *but*," he said, holding up his finger in response to my expression, "since then, he has gone through several treatments with doctors Patel and Cohen. They're not easy, but manageable. They start at noon and are finished within the hour. It's not the torture you're imagining, Naomi. His heart has already begun to show significant signs of repairing itself, and after the final treatment—which Dr. Patel says should be soon—Zeke's heart will be programmed to continue to repair itself on its own.

"Dr. Patel wasn't certain he'd be able to return to full-time duty as a hotshot, as it's one of the more physically intense employments, but he will get his life back. If I haven't convinced you we belong together by his release, well ... you have my word. I'll leave you both alone."

I stood. "I'll play the game, but your word is worth nothing to me."

"What if I told you for every hour you spend with me, that is one less hour of Zeke's contract he must fulfill?"

I scanned him from head to mid-section, disgusted. "Still not worth it."

"Naomi," he called after me.

"Have a good afternoon, Senator."

Bianca watched me leave, seeming suspicious.

Once I reached the bottom step, I wiped the tears from my cheeks and smiled.

The locker room was empty when I returned. I began to radio Trex to find out his location, but the door opened, and Bianca peeked through. I heard a click, then she stepped in.

"What is that?" I asked, gesturing to the small black rectangle in her hand.

She held it up. "I use this when the senator or the general are

moving through the building or having private conversation they wouldn't want recorded. Click it once, it moves the nearest two surveillance cameras back ten minutes. Click it twice, it moves it back twenty minutes."

"Then what?" I asked, staring at her hand.

"Then it resets and returns to live mode." She held it out to me. "Take it."

I arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

"You can't imagine the horrors I've seen in this building. Especially in Deep Echo. If Senator Bennett truly took Zeke away from you to keep you for himself, if Zeke is down there against his will, you should get him out."

"That's a felony, Bianca."

She looked down. "And so is giving you that device. I hope it can help."

"Do you know what's happening to Zeke down there?"

She looked at her watch. "I don't have much more time. He is getting treatments, and from what I hear they're working, but it's excruciating. If you're getting him out of there, you should do it soon."

"Where does he sleep?"

"He has his own quarters. If you find a way through the blast doors, go straight, pass the cafeteria, and make the next left down the hall toward section Sub1-C. Zeke is the thirteenth door on the left. He's usually back in his room by nine-thirty."

"Why are you helping me?"

She glanced at her watch again. "I'd like to say it's because I want to help, but it's revenge."

"For what?"

"I have to go. The hall surveillance is about to reset." She peeked out of the door before pausing to look at me over her shoulder.

"Bianca, why? Otherwise how do I know this isn't a trap?"

"He's been with Paige, he's a public figure, so I've been patient." She breathed out an indignant laugh. "Now they're finally divorcing,

and it turns out he's been in love with you this entire time." Her expression turned severe. "No one uses me."

The door closed quietly behind her, and I looked down at the small device in my hand. "Holy shit," I whispered, putting it away quickly. I squeezed the radio pinned to my shirt. "Trex, come in, over."

"Halfway down Echo."

"Copy that. On my way, over." I burst out the door, passed some offices, the control room, and DFAC, then jogged down Echo until I reached Trex.

"How was the meeting?" he asked around the toothpick in his mouth.

I shook my head. "Not here."

He nodded once, and we proceeded. When we reached the blast door, we noticed the security team was slow on the draw. Soon, it became evident they weren't there at all. Trex pounded on the door with the side of his fist while I leaned forward, looking through the thick glass at the empty commons area.

"What the hell?" Trex said, looking up. "Gibbs?" he called.

My heart began to thump so hard that I was sure Trex could hear it. *What if there had been a fire? What if there had been a gas leak? What if one of their experiments had gone horribly wrong? What if they were all dead—including Zeke?*

"I don't have a good feeling about this," I said.

He shook his head, still looking up, adjusting the toothpick in his mouth. "Something's up. Maybe they're training?"

Zeke walked across the hall wearing his navy blue fire uniform. He passed the tables and chairs in the commons with something thick and oblong in his hand covered in foil.

I began pounding on the glass. "Zeke!"

Zeke didn't appear to hear me, instead unwrapping the burrito and placing it inside the microwave. He pressed a few buttons while I continued to bang and scream.

Trex used the butt of his rifle, but Zeke didn't seem to be able to

hear us.

“Zeke!” I yelled again. “Why can’t he hear us?”

“Blast doors and glass are too thick. We’ve always used the security’s speaker system before.” Trex look around then reached out to press a button.

Zeke turned to look, his eyes wide. He left the burrito unattended, running to the glass, placing his hands against it. He mouthed my name, but I couldn’t hear his voice.

I shook my head, trying not to cry. “Where is everyone?”

Emergency training, he mouthed. *They’ll be back any minute*. He held up three fingers. *Three years*.

“I know,” I said.

He outlined my face. *I’m sorry*. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the glass. When he finally looked at me again, I spoke.

“I’ll see you soon.”

He shook his head, and I nodded mine. He seemed confused.

I offered a reassuring smile then winked.

Zeke glanced around then looked at me, his eyebrows shooting up halfway to his hairline. He pointed at me then the ground.

I nodded.

When? he mouthed.

I held my finger to my lips.

Don’t come here, he said.

I pointed at him, then me, then jerked my head to the side, gesturing that we were getting out of there together.

How?

I winked at him again. “Are you okay to hide for a few hours? Small space?”

His brows pulled together, but he nodded.

“See you in a few days,” I said.

I pointed behind Zeke, letting him know to go back because Trex and I were leaving. Zeke kissed two fingers and held them against the

glass. I did the same then watched him walk away.

Trex and I got halfway down Echo to a private corner, and I clicked the button, hoping to Christ Bianca wasn't lying.

"What's that?" Trex asked.

"Short story, it sets back the surveillance cameras."

"Where did you get it?"

"Bianca."

"You trust her?"

"Never underestimate a woman scorned. We have ten minutes."

Trex nodded. "He looks a little weak, but otherwise better. Did you see the base of his neck?"

"Yeah, looks like fairly extensive bruising. I don't know what they're doing, but he's getting the shit beat out of him down there." I subtly glanced down at the device in my hands, tipping off Trex. "You might not see me this afternoon. Try not to notice."

"Where are you going to be?" he asked. He was following my lead.

"Don't ask."

"Naomi," he said, scolding me. *Trex is actually a damn good actor.*

"Just don't ask, okay? Don't draw attention to it. If you need me, I'll be at the old silo on the north side of town for two days, then I'm heading north."

"Just you?"

"I said don't ask."

I checked my watch then signaled Trex to keep walking.

chapter thirty-nine

desert flower

Naomi

I left the Complex at three p.m., using the device to mask my exit. No one stopped me, no one asked to look at the mound of blankets in the back seat of my FJ. I drove until I was sure no one was following me, then I parked deep in the Black Forest, monitoring the silo from there.

Hours passed with no sign of anyone from the Complex, not even a passerby. This was my test for Bianca's device, and it seemed to have worked. *Unless they predicted this test.*

It was a chance I'd have to take.

Two days later, I left the house as I would any other day, not taking anything with me—even Matt's box—making sure not to tip off anyone that I didn't plan to return. I even left behind my beloveds, including Vicky. In the early morning, I faked a spark plug problem with the FJ and rode to work with Trex.

The day went as usual. My team didn't seem to know anything was different, and I was both relieved and sad. I couldn't tell them goodbye. No hugs, no warning. At lunch, I watched them all chew their food and fork chicken noodles and dumplings into their mouths as if they were ravenous. I smiled as I remembered the many lunches we'd had, the dinners, the cookouts—even starving in a desert with them was a fond memory. I loved those boys, and I couldn't tell them.

"What?" Sloan asked. "You're smiling at me."

"Nothing. Just day dreaming."

“About me?” Sloan joked.

“Nope,” I said, keeping my thoughts to myself. I could have easily brought up an old memory, but I didn’t want to risk tipping anyone off if I was being watched.

At the end of the day, I brought the backpack I’d been adding supplies to for thirteen days to the gym. I did my usual workout, showered, changed into clean, dark clothes and sneakers. As I packed my things, I found a torn off piece of paper with words written in Trex’s handwriting.

You’re a desert flower.
-Trex

I held the paper to my chest then shoved it in my pocket, using the device to get me down Charlie corridor undetected. I slipped into an unused storage closet and waited.

The air was stuffy; I was surrounded by broken mops and brooms, solvents and old cans of paint. I sat on the cold cement floor for a while then leaned back to try to catch a few hours of sleep. The night would feel like years, and I had to be alert and keep my strength up. It was a possibility I’d have to carry Zeke for several miles if he was too weak to make the trek on his own. In a lower corner of the Black Forest was a second car I’d bought off some old man with cash two days after Peter had told me about Zeke. I checked my watch again. Time seemed to slow down, and waiting to slip into the ventilation shaft around the corner made me consider going into Deep Echo with guns blazing more than once. But finally, after nearly going mad, my watch showed it was midnight.

I stood, stretched, and clicked the button. When I cracked the door open, nothing happened. My shoes didn’t make a sound as I walked heel to toe down the hall and pulled a screwdriver from the lower pocket of my cargo pants, quickly working four screws from the cover. Once inside, I had to reach behind me and pull the vent closed—no

small feat. Anyone taller than me wouldn't have been able to do it.

For forty-five minutes, I army crawled through the ventilation system, using my hunting knife to mark my way in case Zeke had to make his way back without me. When the air kicked on, it was ten minutes of heaven. In between trying to move quickly, breathing stuffy air, and dripping with sweat, was most certainly a type of Hell. I could only hope Zeke could follow me for at least most of the way, or making it out would mean a bona fide miracle. My planned exit out of the warehouse would mean an even farther journey.

Just under an hour, the ventilation shaft became twice as wide, signaling I'd passed from the main building to the newer system of Deep Echo. I was finally able to push up onto my hands and knees to crawl. My muscles were screaming, inching along for that long so restricted, but my adrenaline pressed me onward.

Every ten feet or so I would pass over vents. Some rooms were empty, some contained scenarios I'd have to cover my mouth to keep from crying out. Things I would pretend didn't exist long after I'd seen them with my own eyes. I kept crawling, tears running down my cheeks, wondering what they'd done to Zeke while I waited for the right time to rescue him.

Even in the middle of the night, the screams and moans from the vents surrounded me, filtering up through the vents in front of and behind me. Suddenly, the shaft took a 45-degree dive down, and I couldn't see the bottom.

This wasn't in the schematics.

I tried to use my fingertips and sneakers to slow my fall, but I gained momentum and ended up rolling at the bottom to help muffle some of the noise. When I looked up, the numbered vent I was looking for was right in front of me. My adrenaline spiked again as I pulled out the screwdriver and went to work.

Once the device made its tell-tale click, I crawled from the vent. The commons area was dark and empty; trying too hard to look homey but smelled like a deep cave inside a mountain.

Soundless, I crept past the cafeteria, then took a left, half thrilled that I had gotten that far, half expecting for the lights to come on and to get caught at any second.

The sign said Sub1-C.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four...

Thirteenth door on the left.

I reached out my shaking hand and twisted the knob, pushing. It was unlocked, so I snuck in and closed the door behind me. A few moments passed while I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark, and then I could hear Zeke whispering just a few feet away.

“You won’t be able to see. There’s no light for your eyes to pull from. Is that you?”

I breathed out, feeling my chest and throat tighten. I fished for a small pen in my cargo pocket then clicked the button. “It’s me, babe. We don’t have much time.”

I shined the tiny pinpoint beam on him, seeing he was still lying in bed. I kneeled next to him. “Can you move?”

“My last treatment was today, so I’m not feeling so good. But they said that last time too. It usually just lasts an hour or two then I feel better.”

He was pale, dark circles pooling under his eyes, his irises lined with blood. “We don’t have two hours. But I’ll carry you out of this godforsaken place if I have to.”

He held his hand against my cheek, and I leaned into his palm.

“I was stupid,” he said, breathless and emotional. “I’ll never leave you again, I swear to God.”

My bottom lip quivered. “I know. Let’s get you out of here.”

I helped him put on his work jacket and pants, then socks and shoes. “Hook your arm around my neck. Three, two, one...” I said, standing with him. When we stood, we nearly fell backward.

“Sorry ... sorry ... got dizzy,” he whispered.

I put the pen in my mouth and flashed the light on my watch. “We have four minutes, Zeke,” I whispered around the pen. “We have to go.”

Zeke nodded, taking a step. We crept from his room, and I supported him while we walked to the commons’ vent. We stood right in front of it just a few feet from escape when our shadows flickered on the wall, surrounded by bright flashlights.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

“Don’t. Move,” Gibbs said from behind us.

I held up my free arm, and Zeke held up his.

“Turn around,” Gibbs said. He stood in front of five other men, a skeleton crew on call overnight. It wasn’t the army I was expecting. Peter hadn’t counted on a rescue mission after all.

“Let him go. Get on your stomach on the floor, palms down, face down.”

“If I let him go, he’ll collapse. Look at him, Gibbs. He’s one of you. What the fuck have they been doing to him?”

Gibbs looked at Zeke, for a moment his stoic expression failing him. “He’s sick. They’re providing treatment.”

“Look at his eyes, Gibbs. Look at his chest. Have you seen treatment like that? You know what goes on in this place. It’s a torture chamber. He’s a human being! Let me take him away from here.”

“Gibbs,” Zeke said. “I’m not going to last much longer down here, man.”

Gibbs swallowed, considering whether to do his duty or listen to his conscience. He snapped out of it and lifted his radio. “DE Gibbs to main house security, over.”

“Gibbs, goddamn it!” I yelled. “Don’t make me do this!”

“DE Gibbs to main house security, do you copy?”

I looked up at Zeke. “Can you walk?”

He nodded.

I leaned into Zeke’s ear, my voice just above a breath. “Follow the

knife markings in the wall. When it stops, turn right. You'll end up in the warehouse. Walk out the yellow door near the big rigs to the cliff where we found you and your hotshot crew. There's a dirt bike there. Take 25 north to Black Forest. Second right, two miles on foot you'll find a car with a full tank of gas. Keys behind the driver's side tire. Go find my father."

"In Arizona?" he breathed into my ear.

"We'll be safe there," I whispered.

He shook his head. "I'm not leaving without you."

"Zeke," I hissed, trying to stay quiet, "you can't stay here another day. I can take care of myself, remember? I'll catch up with you."

He leaned back to look into my eyes, seeming conflicted. *Promise?* he mouthed.

Tears burned my eyes. "Promise."

"Do you copy, main house?" Gibbs looked at me in horror then took a step back. The rest of his team did too.

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

"What is this?" Gibbs barked. His tone didn't fool anyone. He was afraid.

Trex stood next to me, then Kitsch, Sloan, Martinez, and Harbinger climbed out, pointing their rifles at the Deep Echo team.

"It's a fucking rescue mission," Trex said. "Didn't they warn you who we were before we walked the halls here?"

Zeke's mouth fell open, watching my team train their weapons on the men in front of us.

"You made it," I said, leaning in as Trex kissed my sweaty, dirty cheek.

One of Gibbs' men reached for his sidearm.

"Go ahead, peckerhead, I dare you," Sloan said. "I haven't gotten a headshot in a while."

"Stand down," Gibbs said. He glared at Trex. "You're all going to federal prison."

I held up the recorder, letting it play. My voice filled the dark room,

then Peter's.

"I'll play the game, but your word is worth nothing to me."

"What if I told you for every hour you spend with me, that is one less hour of Zeke's contract he must fulfill?"

"That son-of-a-bitch," Zeke said through his teeth.

"Tell Peter not to follow us," I said. "I have the entire recording of our conversation uploaded, and if I don't check in every week, it will go straight to every news network in the world."

Gibbs glared at me then looked at Trex. "Now what?" Gibbs asked.

Trex kept his eyes on Gibbs and his team but spoke to me. "Get him out of here. We have forty minutes before their comms are back online."

"Trex," I began.

"We have a plan B, and you've got the recording. I'm sure Bennett will be even more willing to negotiate."

I hugged him, and he kissed my forehead. "What's your plan B?"

"We'll just say I called my old boss in Cali. He's sending someone. Now, get outta here, and don't forget about my note. You'll understand later."

I nodded then took Zeke into the vent.

As I predicted, we struggled. It took twice as long to get half the distance, and we still had farther to go, but Zeke was hanging in there. When the vent got smaller, that was when I had to reach back and pull him along by the jacket. The alarms began to sound, so I moved faster.

Finally, soaked with sweat, Zeke and I reached the warehouse. I grabbed two helmets, and he sat behind me as I drove one of the ATVs to the smaller door. I jumped off, opened the door, then climbed back on. We soared through the grass and over rocks, only slowing down when we reached the back gate. It was chained.

"What now?" Zeke yelled over the engine.

I got into my backpack, handed him a water, then pulled out wire cutters. I snapped the chain, opened it, and we burst into the night at full speed.

A pair of headlights shined into my eyes, and I gripped the brakes, sliding sideways to a stop just before we hit the small SUV in our way.

A puff of dust and dirt provided enough cover for me to grip the throttle. Just as the engine revved, a man jumped out, pointing a Glock at us.

I slammed on the brakes again.

“Who are you?” he yelled.

Zeke and I pulled off our helmets and I stood, shielding Zeke.

“Your code name!” the man barked. “I’m not fuckin’ around, lady. You have five seconds to tell me what I wanna hear.”

“I don’t...” I began, remembering what Trex said before I left.

“Desert Flower,” I said. “I’m Desert Flower.”

Zeke looked at me, confused.

The man jogged back to the SUV, opened the back door, and flashed his FBI badge. “Get in.”

I turned off the ATV and grabbed Zeke’s hand and my pack, leaving everything else behind.

Zeke got in first, and I scooted in behind him.

“Trex said Sasabe, right?” the man said, slamming on the gas toward the highway.

“My father is in Sasabe. We can hide there.”

“Hope you’ve got an army,” the man said, glancing at me in the rearview.

“I do, actually. They’d be stupid to come for us there.

“I’m guessing your name isn’t really Desert Flower?”

“My name is Naomi, and this is Zeke.”

“You look familiar,” Zeke said, exhausted.

“You okay?” I asked as he lay in my lap.

“Yeah. The water helped. I just need to rest.”

“Don’t die on me,” I said.

“I swore I’d never leave you again. I meant it. I’m feeling better. Plus, my girlfriend’s like ... a motherfucking superhero, so there’s that.”

“What if I wasn’t your girlfriend anymore?”

He frowned. “Where is this going?”

“Marry me,” I said, touching his cheek.

Zeke laughed, surprised. “Are you proposing?”

“Doesn’t that sound like something I would do?”

He offered a tired but appreciative smile. “Hell yeah, I’ll marry you.”

I bent down, kissing Zeke’s lips. “I love you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know why, but I love you too.”

“Sleep. We have forever to go.”

Zeke’s eyes closed, and his head wobbled back and forth as we drove over the rocky terrain. He was unconscious within seconds, but I checked his pulse and it was strong.

I sighed, letting my head fall back against the seat. “I can’t believe that worked.”

“Hey... I have medical supplies in the passenger seat if he needs it,” the driver said. “And we’re going to be fine. Trex has an exit strategy, and he tells me you have leverage? We’ve got coverage all the way to Arizona. No one will touch you.”

“Thank you,” I said, keeping my hand against Zeke’s cheek to stabilize his head.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s just sleeping. He’ll be okay once he gets some rest. Trex said he called his old boss. Does that mean you’re with the FBI?” I asked.

“Undercover. My brother sent me. Nice to meet you. My name’s Travis. Travis Maddox.”

the end.

epilogue
Zeke

The sky slowly transitioned from a hint of color in the darkness to vivid splashes of pinks and purples. I had to wake up early to appreciate it because I'd been warned that once the sun was in the sky, the Arizona heat would make it difficult to appreciate much of anything.

I turned in the threshold of the open double pivot doors, seeing Naomi still asleep in bed, one bare leg hanging off the mattress, her cheek smashed against the pillow. Her hair was a mess, but she was wearing my old Metallica T-shirt, and to me—and any other man on earth—she looked like perfection.

A collective yell turned my attention to the bottom of the small hill our cabin was perched on. Naomi's father, Victor Marcel, was a commanding officer of the Arizona Border Recon, and the squadrons were already in formation at the flagpole that set center to the 200-acre camp. I wasn't sure what to expect since I was unconscious when we arrived and woke up in their sick bay after dark. I'd been sleeping off and on, but what I was looking at was damn near magical. An organized, sovereign town in the middle of a desert, and I was standing in a cabin I now shared with the love of my life.

"Good morning," Naomi crooned from behind me. She sat up and stretched, her hair in rats, her skin already darker from the desert sun. In the morning light, at home and away from the Springs, she looked more beautiful than I'd ever seen her. "I called Jenn and let her know you were good. I had to make up a story. I'm sorry I had to lie to her."

“It’s not like you could tell her the truth. She probably wouldn’t have believed you anyway. Is she okay?”

“She is now. How are you feeling?” Naomi asked, sitting on her knees.

“Good,” I said, unable to stop staring at her bare knees and thighs. “Better every passing hour.”

She tensed. “Has anyone heard from Trex?”

I gestured outside. “They got here at five a.m. They’re staying in the cabin next door.”

“All of them?” she asked.

“All of them.”

She covered her face with her hands, then climbed off the bed and strolled over to me. She wrapped her tone arms around my middle, and her lips touched my neck.

“You look amazing in my shirt. I’m still amazed you got Watts to send my things here on time.”

She smiled sleepily. “I am known to push men to be their best selves.” She touched my cheek. “You look like you’re feeling so much better.” She closed her eyes and let her head fall back, taking in a deep breath. “It doesn’t seem real. We’re going to be okay.”

I wrapped my arms over hers, pulling her tighter against me. “I am. I am better. Does that mean I have something to look forward to tonight?”

As I nuzzled her neck, she giggled. She was a different woman behind the safety of the Recon’s fences. It didn’t take me long to realize why.

“All right,” Vincent said in his low, gruff voice. He stepped onto our wooden porch, his reddish-brown handlebar mustache bordering the large cigar in his mouth. He clamped the unlit tobacco in his teeth. “It’s too early for that shit.”

Naomi wasn’t tense in the presence of her father, instead relaxing against my chest and raking her hair back with her fingers.

“How’s he feeling?” Vincent asked.

“Dad. Ask him, he’s right here,” Naomi said.

Vincent hesitated, but when he decided to address me, he looked me in the eyes. “Any improvement, Lund?”

“You can just call me Zeke. Everyone else does,” I said.

Vincent eyed me, waiting for the response to his question.

Naomi giggled. “No one has a first name here except him. Even Foley.” She looked at her dad for validation.

Vincent gave her a courtesy nod.

“Foley is...?” I asked.

“The HMFIC,” Vincent said.

I looked at Naomi, and she obliged. “Head Mother Fucker In Charge,” she said. “Dad’s militia was first organized in the US, but Tim Foley runs the Arizona Border Recon. Dad’s people merged with the ABR. Dad can turn an altar boy into a bad ass, but Foley is more organized.”

Vincent didn’t appreciate the remark, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he chewed his cigar before talking. “I asked about Lund because we’ve got incoming.”

Naomi’s demeanor and posture instantly changed. “When?”

“They’re about fifteen clicks out. A US military caravan kicking up a lot of dust.”

“Oh shit,” I said, my eyes dancing between Naomi and Vincent.

She held her palm against my chest. “We’ll be okay. Short of blowing us to shit, they can’t breach our walls. Plus, I have a deterrent.”

“A what?”

Below, the previously organized squadrons were now running to various stations, guns in hand.

“You think it’s Peter?” I asked.

“Of course it is,” Vincent growled. One corner of his mouth turned up. “I’ve been waitin’ for that little shit to come at me for a long time.”

“Dad,” Naomi warned, watching Vincent walk away.

She turned, rushing to the closet. In less than a minute, she came

out in a tan shirt and desert camouflage utility pants, the pattern different than I'd seen on any soldier. Her elbows were forward as she tied her hair into a low bun and fastened it with the black band she'd held between her teeth. She bent over to tie her boots, then stopped abruptly to look at me. "You coming?"

"Uh ... yeah. Yeah."

"They put clothes for you in the closet. Hopefully they fit. We don't have time to stop at the tailor."

"You have a tailor?" I asked, following her into the closet.

Once dressed, Naomi led me outside and down the hill. I could tell she was making mental checks of my breathing. She grabbed for my hand once, slyly holding my wrist while she checked my pulse.

The longer I walked and the harder my heart worked, the more excited I became. I wasn't winded or dizzy. I felt strong, but as thrilled as I was, I couldn't ignore Naomi's contagious grin.

"What?" I asked.

She bit her lip. "I don't know. I think it's a combination of being home, being here with you, and facing off with the US government."

"That's a good thing?"

She shrugged. "It reminds me of my childhood."

I frowned, letting her pull me along to the front gate where a group of forty or fifty militia were standing with her father, and that was only a section of their militia.

Foley radioed from his position. Everyone was where they were supposed to be, ready for anything.

"Mornin'," a deep voice said behind us.

Naomi turned and jumped into Trex's arms. "Trex!"

Trex laughed, and Sloan, Kitsch, Martinez and Harbinger chuckled behind him. She let him go only to hug the other four.

"You shouldn't be here," she said to Harbinger.

"You think Caroline would want it any other way?" he asked.

"I was supposed to tell you as soon as possible. The Alpines send hugs and kisses."

“Do they know?” I asked.

Trex glanced at Naomi. “They know you had a procedure and you’re here with Naomi while you heal, and probably for the foreseeable future.”

I nodded. “That’s all they need to know.”

Someone from the gate yelled, signaling the arrival of the caravan. Vincent and Foley climbed up.

“Morning, Vincent,” Peter’s voice came over a megaphone.

“Senator Bennett,” Vincent said. “Lovely to see you, as always.”

“You know why I’m here. I’m afraid you have someone who happens to be property of the United States Department of Defense.”

“And who might that be?” Vincent asked.

“Zeke Lund,” Peter said without hesitation. “We know he’s here. If you’d kindly turn him over, we’ll turn around and be on our way.”

“He is indeed here,” Vincent said. “He won’t, however, be traveling back with you today. You see, he’s had several illegal medical procedures, and he’s healing inside our impenetrable compound. As a citizen of the United States, it’s the priority of the Arizona Border Recon Militia that Mr. Lund’s rights are upheld, and as such, you’ll be turning your sissy ass around and headin’ on back to your desk job.”

“Impenetrable? You may have noticed, Vincent, that I didn’t come alone,” Peter said, amused.

Vincent seemed unimpressed. “You know what I don’t see? Tanks. That’s the only thing getting you inside these walls.”

“Send him out, open your gates, or become an enemy of the United States, Vincent. Militia laws don’t cover that.”

Vincent smiled and chewed his cigar. “Do what you will, Senator.”

“Don’t be a fool, Vincent! Your daughter’s behind those walls!” Peter yelled, his voice cracking.

Naomi climbed up, standing next to her father. Peter was surprised for just a few seconds before starting to speak, but Trex, Sloan, Martinez, Kitsch and Harbinger joined them, and I followed suit.

“Come out, Zeke,” Peter said, his voice calm. “You don’t want

anyone dying for you, do you? Come back and finish your contract. Simple as that.”

Naomi took a step in front of me. “He’s staying.”

“We’ll come in and get him if we have to, Naomi. Don’t make me do this,” Peter said. “Because I will.”

“Don’t make me shoot you in the face,” Naomi said. “Because I will.”

“You’re not serious,” he said.

She cocked her sidearm, but kept it pointed at the ground. “Try me.”

“You’ll all be arrested!” Peter yelled, waving his arm around.

“Did I ever tell you what I got Naomi for her birthday last year?” Vincent began. “Of course not, because I don’t talk to trash like you. But I’ll tell you now. I bought her a recorder. It’s a tiny thing. Fits inside a shirt pocket or under your sleeve. Have you ever said anything to her you didn’t want to go public, Peter? Think about it. Anything about your personal life? How you’ve misspent tax dollars for a crush? How you’ve manipulated, lied, and put lives and entire military operations at risk because you’re a goddamned infant who can’t stand to share his toys?” Vincent patted Naomi on the back. “Not that you’re a toy, baby girl. No offense.”

“None taken,” Naomi said, glaring down at Peter. “Leave. I’ll send those recordings to every major news outlet from Fox to Al-Jazeera, I swear to God.”

“Naomi,” Peter began, the megaphone away from his mouth.

“You want a war? You can have it,” Vincent called down. “We have hundreds back here ready to go.”

“Send Naomi then,” Peter said. “I’ll allow her to negotiate.”

“Fuck off, you spineless cunt!” I yelled.

Vincent handed me a sidearm. “You know what to do with this?”

“Yep,” I said, cocking it. I followed Naomi’s lead and kept the barrel pointed at the ground.

Vincent smiled at his only daughter. “I like him.” He looked down

at Peter. “You can try to come get her. I don’t think she’ll go quietly.”

Steps sounded behind us, and Kansas and Spenser stood on each side of me, gripping their rifles.

“Spenser! Spense, would you please talk some sense into her? I don’t want this. It’s senseless. Zeke has to come back with us. Naomi and her team have committed serious crimes.”

“Eat shit and die, Peter,” Spenser said, chewing on a wad of gum. She winked at him.

“You think this is going down?” Kansas asked.

“Not sure,” Naomi said.

“Maybe I should,” I began.

“No,” Naomi, Spenser, and Kansas said in unison.

Naomi shot a knowing look at Trex, and he motioned for his team to follow him down the wall. They jogged across the compound and out of sight.

“Are they going to light this place up?” I asked. “I don’t want anyone inside these walls getting hurt over me.” No one answered. “Naomi,” I prompted.

“You go with Peter, and *I’ll* be hurt,” Naomi said. “Jenn will be hurt. Brad, your siblings who are all waiting for you to come home, by the way—will be hurt.”

“If you leave with Peter,” Kansas said. “No one will ever see you again.”

I turned to look behind me at the men and women on the ground. “I can’t let them—”

“Zeke,” Naomi said, looking up at me. “You promised.”

I nodded. “I did. Okay, then. We’re at an impasse.”

“It’s over, Peter. You’ve got nothing,” Vincent called. “You push this, and you’ll be destroyed.”

“Are you threatening me, Vincent?” Peter asked.

“Did it sound like I was asking you to dance?”

With one command from the front, the US soldiers trained their guns on us. The men and women were kneeling in the hot sand behind

their trucks, waiting for the order to squeeze their triggers.

Vincent gave his order, and the militia did the same.

“Bennett,” Foley yelled. “Don’t make me call your daddy.”

Peter narrowed his eyes. “Can you live with this, Zeke? Because one way or another, you’re coming back with us.”

“Naomi,” I began.

“No,” she said quickly.

“Babe.”

“I said no!” Naomi yelled.

A bright white dot formed on Peter’s face, and he lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the light. He turned to see someone reflecting the sun on a small mirror from a large dune behind them.

Half the US soldiers were ordered to turn around and guard their six.

Once the mirror was put away, I could make out Trex and his crew—minus Sloan—belly-down on the sand, staring down the scopes of their rifles.

Trex waved. “You’ve been flanked, fuckers!” he yelled.

Furious, Peter turned around, mouthing *fuck* before getting back on the horn.

Spenser handed Naomi her own megaphone, and she held up the recorder to the speaker and pushed play, amplifying Peter’s voice for everyone to hear. From what I could tell, she’d recorded everything he’d said each time they were together, even before he’d moved her to Colorado Springs. Naomi even had some conversation between Peter and another woman. He paled as he realized the extent of Naomi’s evidence.

“Stop!” Peter yelled over his own voice. “Stop, Naomi!”

She cut off the recording and handed Spenser the small silver rectangle that could destroy him. “Do you understand now, Peter? It’s not just me. Turn around. Go back to Colorado. Leave us alone, and never come back. That’s the deal.”

Peter seemed hurt. “Naomi.”

“I never pretended to play fair. You knew better. And I told you. You’re dead to me,” she said.

Peter glanced around at his small army of confused soldiers. They’d been following the wrong side, and they were more than happy to follow the command to stand down.

The soldiers did an about face, turning their backs on Senator Bennett.

“Turn around!” Peter screamed. “Target the walls! Now!”

He sounded whiny and pathetic, the man he would be to me, to Naomi, and to everyone else who’d witnessed this day for the rest of his life. That was exactly the punishment he deserved.

“I said turn around, damn it!” He stomped.

Bennett’s army packed their gear and loaded up in the back of their transports. Peter watched helplessly as they yelled to each other to move out. He had no choice but to leave with them. He stared at Naomi for a long moment, the desert wind blowing his tan suit jacket and beige tie before he finally ducked into the back of a Humvee. Soon, all that was left of Peter and his demands was a cloud of dust and sand.

I gripped the ledge of the wall, relieved.

“You okay?” Naomi asked, touching the small of my back.

“Yeah. I’ve just never been in a standoff before,” I said.

Vincent slapped me on the back—hard. “You’ll get used to it.”

Aside from the lookouts, everyone climbed down off the wall, and the rest of the militia returned to their training.

Naomi and her team walked with me back to our cabin, the sun stifling hot and bearing down on us.

“Did you hear that?” Trex asked. “Vincent likes you. He doesn’t like anyone.”

“He likes family,” Naomi said.

“Where’s your mom?” I asked.

“She was down there,” Naomi said.

Trex pointed back down to the bottom. “Did you see the sniper on

the other side of the wall with her rifle trained on Peter? That was Christine. No one fucks with Christine.”

“I didn’t. You’ll have to introduce us,” I said to Naomi.

“We’re having dinner there tonight if you feel up to it. How’re you doing?” she asked.

I took her hand in mine. “In disbelief that we just went toe to toe with the US military, but otherwise feeling strong.”

She smiled, leading me up the stairs and to the small dining table. The cabin was nice, a studio layout. The only room was the bathroom off the kitchen area. Naomi sat a glass of water in front of me, and Trex and Harbinger sat with us at the table while Kitsch, Martinez, and Sloan stood.

“Hate to say it, but that was close, Nomes,” Trex said. “Not sure how any of us can go back to the Springs. Darby’s going to be pissed.”

Naomi rested her chin on the heel of her hand. “Peter has federal agents waiting on him at the border. He’s broken too many laws to ignore. Not even his father can save him this time.”

Trex chuckled and sat back. “Well, it’s his own fault for underestimating you. He has no excuse.”

I took a sip of water, glancing around at Naomi’s friends. They didn’t seem fazed until Spenser and Kansas knocked then let themselves in, then they were all smiles discussing the varying scenarios that could’ve played out and how they would’ve handled each one.

“Was kind of hoping we’d see what Zeke could do with Uncle Vince’s Smith & Wesson. I’ve never seen him hand over his gun, have you?” Spenser said.

Naomi smiled at me. “Nope.”

Trex leaned over and patted my shoulder. “Pretty honorable of you to offer to go with them peacefully. Stupid, but honorable.”

Everyone tried not to laugh, but failed.

“What are you going to do now?” Harbinger asked.

“We always need people on the fire brigade,” Spenser said. “Just a

couple of actual firefighters on the squad. The rest are volunteers.”

Kansas nodded. “They’d be happy to have someone experienced.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” I said, a surreal feeling overwhelming me. I’d somehow gotten back what I loved twice over. The nightmare was over.

“We’re engaged,” Naomi blurted out.

Everyone erupted in celebration, and Kitsch stood and pulled me with him to encompass me in a hug. That started a line, including Spenser and Kansas.

My brain didn’t work in ways that planned out and executed military strategy, yet I didn’t feel like an outsider. I was one of them. “I didn’t dream that?” I asked, stunned.

Naomi covered her mouth and chuckled, the others laughing too. “Is that good or bad that you’re not sure?”

“No, it’s good. It’s fucking perfect,” I said. She crawled into my lap, and everyone cheered again when she planted a kiss on my lips.

With Naomi’s hands cupping my jaw, her mouth on mine, and her friends and family patting my back and shoulders, I felt like I belonged. I’d found a loving home near the beach after spending my childhood in Hell, then spent most of my days in the mountains with my brothers and loved every second in both places, but it was in the middle of the desert where I’d finally found my family.

other books by jamie mcguire

Crash and Burn Series

From Here to You (book one)

Beautiful Series

Beautiful Disaster (book one)

Walking Disaster (book two)

A Beautiful Wedding (book three)

The Maddox Brothers Series

Beautiful Oblivion (book one)

Beautiful Redemption (book two)

Beautiful Sacrifice (book three)

Beautiful Burn (book four)

Something Beautiful (book five)

A Beautiful Funeral (book six)

Providence Series

Providence (book one)

Requiem (book two)

Eden (book three)

Sins of the Innocent, part one (book four)

Sins of the Innocent, part two (coming soon)

Red Hill

Among Monsters

Happenstance Novella Series

Happenstance (part one)

Happenstance (part two)

Happenstance (part three)

Stand Alone Novels

All the Little Lights
Apolonia

OceanofPDF.com

about the author

Jamie McGuire is the bestselling author of the Beautiful series and The Maddox Brothers series, which have sold more than three million copies in seventeen languages. She lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with her three children, and German Shepherd, Hazel.

Learn more at:

Website: **<https://www.jamiemcguire.com/>**

Twitter: **@JamieMcGuire**

Facebook: **Author Jamie McGuire**

Instagram: **@thejamiemcguire**

OceanofPDF.com

acknowledgements

A special thank you to Jessica Landers. I can't begin to articulate what you mean to me. You took on a job as my assistant to make my life easier for nothing more than a paycheck, and yet you do so much more. You've become one of my best friends. Hell, your best friend has become one of my best friends. You're humble, you work hard, you're self-sufficient, and your loyalty never waivers. I've never come across friendship so true and selfless until I met you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for loving me, for your limitless understanding of my flaws and shortcomings, for listening to me, for fangirling at the New Kids on the Block concert with me, for messaging Donnie freaking Wahlberg for me when we thought I couldn't go, and for--when I email you and request something—not emailing back until your answer is “done.” You are truly my ride or die, and I am definitely the lucky one for landing in your circle. I will never stop saying, “Worth every penny”, because it's always been true, and it will always be true.

Thank you to Jason Beguin. I couldn't have finished this book if I hadn't met you. I wasn't sure I had it in me to write about love, but you've changed everything; not just for me but for all my readers, present and future. You came into my life twenty years after we first met when I wasn't at my best but was pretending to be. You were completely unexpected and full of smart-ass retorts. From the beginning, you've challenged me, you've built me up, you've reassured me, and you've opened my eyes to so many things about myself. Thank you doesn't seem to be enough, but I'll try as long as you'll let me;

To Misty Horn. We've known each other a long time, and quite honestly, I don't deserve you. Thank you for educating me on foster parents and CASA, thank you for helping me move, for driving Jess up, for moving crazy heavy boxes of books and introducing me to your mind-blowing noodles and white sauce. Thank you for what you do for at-risk children every single day. Thank you for being the kind of

friend I try to emulate;

To Tyler Vanover, thank you your continued stories and consult on what it means to be a hot shot firefighter, but most importantly, thank you for being one;

To Robin Gowen, from indirectly introducing me to the best man I know to helping me move in, and even helping me bathe my skunked dog. Most of all, thank you for reminding me it's okay to prioritize wisely, and for your limitless, sound advice.

Christie Kersnick, thank you for your service and for being an invaluable resource on the military portion of this book, from jargon to procedure, you never hesitate to answer my seemingly endless questions.

To Stephanie Otis and Susan Dunnagan, who were fantastic resources on all things ER and medical related;

To the FBI, Pentagon, NSA, Homeland Security, and Air Force, thanks for not arresting me over all the weird information I look up on a daily basis, particularly for this novel.

To learn more about CASA and how to help or advocate for foster children, please visit **<http://www.casa.org/>**.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://www.oceanofpdf.com)

out of the woods

Darby

“**W**hat is it with wedding days and cold toilet seats?” I grumbled. My elbows were nestled in my lap, my hands clasped together atop my knees.

“D’you say somethin’, Darby?” Carly asked from the other side of the door.

“Nothing. Inside joke.”

“I know your inside jokes, sister. I know ‘em all.”

I smiled even though she couldn’t hear me. “You do. I’m glad you’re here.”

“What?” she said louder. “I can barely hear you with all the music outside. It’s like a party out there.

“It kind of is,” I said.

I reached for the white stick on the back of the toilet and stared at it. The first one I’d taken the day before I’d barely glanced at, and then I had to take a second look. Now I knew what to expect, even if I didn’t believe it. One. Two. Two pink lines. *Oh, my good Lord.*

I was already dressed, a halo of flowers on my head, the silk and lace easier to maneuver when I sat and stood than the gargantuan travesty I’d worn at my last wedding. Trex was waiting outside for me, surely looking handsome in his suit, and Harbinger, Kitsch, Sloan, Martinez, Zeke, and the Maddox twins, Taylor and Tyler, were standing with him at the flower-adorned trellis at the end of a white aisle runner. I’d caught a glimpse of them earlier when I’d checked on Maddie, taking turns holding my barely one-year-old daughter as they

stood around the guest book table, looking as proper as I'd ever seen them.

Carly had earned her maid-of-honor status by absconding with me from my last wedding, and she was standing dutifully outside the door with Zeke's girlfriend, Naomi, Trex's sister Hailey, Caroline Harbinger, my former boss and best bartender in Colorado Springs, Stavros, Tyler's fiancée, Ellie, and Taylor's wife, Falyn.

All had become good friends, kind humans who'd helped me through the stress of being a new mom, a new business owner, and the nightmares of the night my abusive ex, Shawn, was killed before he could kill me and our unborn child. Hailey called when I didn't want to talk. Falyn gave me new mom advice. Ellie shared the invaluable knowledge she'd learned in therapy when I was depressed or anxious. She also connected me with the best psychologist in the area. Stavros was my rock as I took over from him ownership of the hotel. Caroline was a fellow Cheyenne Mountain Complex security spouse, and Naomi was Trex's best friend—and now one of mine.

They'd all been instrumental in getting me to this point, and now they'd be the first to hear collectively that I was carrying Trex's baby. They smiled at me as I opened the bathroom door and stepped out, holding up the positive test for all of them to see.

"Oh, my Lanta," Carly said, her eyes wide.

"Are you fucking serious?" Naomi said, covering her instant smile. She grabbed the stick from my hand, focusing on the results. Then she handed it to Hailey.

"I'm going to be an aunt again?" Hailey squealed.

"Careful, or you'll catch up with me," Falyn said, rubbing her round middle.

"You okay?" Ellie asked.

"I'm..." I let the realization set in. "I'm okay. This isn't the same. It's Trex. He's been through this before when I was pregnant with someone else's child. Imagine how he'll feel now ... right?"

"*Right?* He's going to be so fucking happy. It's the best wedding

day gift you could give him,” Naomi said.

“You look beautiful,” Stavros said.

He was a bridesman, but he wasn’t the only one in a suit. Naomi opted to wear one too, but her curves and the tailor’s lines made her look stunning. She wore a tank top under the blazer, the tie hanging loose from her neck. She was especially excited about the suspenders underneath.

Stavros held up the pink shot in his hand. “I was going to offer you this, but it seems inappropriate now.”

“Thank you,” I said. “But I don’t need it. I’m getting married surrounded by my best friends.”

“Did your mom call?” Ellie asked.

“Ellie,” Falyn scolded.

“It’s all right,” I said. “No, she didn’t. And, that’s okay. I only want happy people here today who love me.”

“And we do,” Hailey said. “So much.”

They all crowded around me and squeezed, then Hailey squealed again when Zeke brought in Maddie. I kneeled down to wait for her chubby legs to propel her forward slowly, waddling, leaning and pausing like a drunken sailor.

“Baby girl!” I said.

My bridesmaids cooed when Maddie reached me. She was in a white dress too, with a soft fern green satin sash, her blonde curls tamed by the flower halo.

Naomi kissed Zeke goodbye after he handed her the flower basket. “You might want to hang on to this until it’s time,” he said. “She’s going to be good at dodge ball, I can already tell.”

“I’ll take it,” Carly said to Naomi with a smile.

“Oh, thank God,” Naomi said, pushing it toward Carly.

Zeke kissed Naomi one more time before stepping outside to join the groomsmen.

“Mama,” Maddie said in her sweet voice.

“You’re beautiful, baby. Okay,” I said, dabbing my under eyes with

the back of my hand. I took my cascading bouquet of wildflowers from Carly. "I can do this. We can do this. Let's do this!"

My friends stepped outside the log cabin as a group, lining up in order in front of me as we waited for the processional.

Billie Eilish's "Come Out to Play" began to filter through the trees.

"That's my cue," Ellie said, walking first.

After Ellie, Falyn turned the corner to walk down the aisle, then Naomi, Stavros, Hailey, Caroline; then it was Carly's turn. She handed Maddie's basket to her.

"Follow me, darlin'." She winked at me. "See you at the top, sugar."

"Mama?" Maddie said.

"Follow Miss Carly and throw your flowers! Show Daddy how good you are."

She grinned then waddled after Carly.

I knew Maddie was making her way down the aisle even though I couldn't see her because of the oohs and ahs from the guests. Then, I knew she'd made it down the aisle because the bridesmaids' song faded and Landon Pigg's "Falling in Love at a Coffee Shop" began.

The audience turned to watch me step out from behind the trees and vines. An audible gasp filled the forest around us, but I barely noticed, seeing Trex at the end. Once his gaze fell on me, he covered his mouth and took a step back. Harbinger patted his shoulder.

Trex's side was filled with his family and old war buddies, and my side with locals and hotel employees and their families. They were there out of love, to witness one of the best days of our lives, but I could only see him. He beamed in his light gray suit, his blue eyes glossed over.

Hailey held Maddie, Harbinger's sons stood next to their dad as ring bearers, and I leaned down to kiss them all on the cheek before handing Carly my bouquet.

Reverend Lewis began to speak, but his introduction was drowned out by Trex's whispering.

"You are the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Trex said,

squeezing both my hands in his.

I smiled up at him. Our compromise was to be wed outside of a church, but by a local pastor. Trex would've married me anywhere, but I wanted our wedding day to be as much his as it was mine.

The reverend spoke about love, about commitment, and about marriage in general. He quoted I Corinthians chapter thirteen, verses four through five. Trex didn't seem to mind. He just gazed at me like it was the first time.

"I'm not good at writing anything," Trex began. "But I'm good at talking about you, Darby. I'm good at keeping promises, so when you asked me to write my own vows, I knew that it was something I could do."

"You can do anything," I whispered.

He took a deep breath. "This is the best day of my life. You are the best thing to have ever happened to me. I love you. I love you more now than the day I recognized that's what the crazy, antsy, giddy, slightly obsessive feeling I had for you was. That said, I'll love you more tomorrow and fifty years from now. That's my first promise to you, Darby. Not only will I love you for the rest of my life, but I'll show you every day, and I'll fight for us every day. I promise to love no one else the way I love you. I promise to be faithful and truthful, to honor you, to cherish you in good times and bad; to be a strong, caring, thoughtful husband; to protect you, to be your partner in all things, and even though I can't promise you'll never be sad, I can promise to wipe your tears and give you the support you need until you're not anymore.

"I promise to be a good father and grandfather. I will love Maddie always, and whoever else comes along. Hopefully. Someday," he clarified.

The guests chuckled, and it took everything I had not to blurt out my news right then.

Trex continued. "I promise to be thankful for our family every night, and to celebrate every new day I get to spend with you. I

promise to be your rock, our family's foundation, to build our life together side by side with you, and to carry our love up hills and over oceans ... to the stars if I have to."

"Darby?" the reverend prompted.

"I thank God every day for you. For whatever reason, you were brought into my life. You loved me before we ever met, and that only strengthens my belief of a good and loving God. I promise to love you always, until we're wrinkly and old with huge ears and even bigger noses."

Trex laughed out loud.

I continued. "I promise to celebrate every anniversary with joy in my heart, to cherish you, to honor you, to be your best friend and other half..."

"Better half," he said with a wink.

"It is clear to me now that everything in my life has led me to you. I think back on all my choices and consider even the bad ones blessed, because if I had done even one thing differently, I might never have met you or be standing here witnessing my dreams come true in real time. You are my family, and I want to be there for you in all things. I am so excited to be your wife and share in every moment—not only the good times, but the learning experiences too. I vow to take from every moment the opportunity to love, to nurture, and to grow, and to never forget how lucky I am."

Trex's lips formed a hard line, the corners slightly turning up. *Love you*, he mouthed.

"The rings?" Reverend Lewis asked.

Harbinger bent down, carefully untying my ring from one pillow, then Trex's band from the other. He opened his palm, allowing me to take Trex's first.

I held the gold band at the tip of his left ring finger.

"Repeat after me, Darby," Reverend Lewis said.

I repeated him in sections. I was nervous and had to ask the reverend to say the words again.

“You’re doing great, babe,” Trex said.

I relaxed, eventually making it through. “I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have.

“I honor you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“With this ring, I thee wed, and all my worldly goods I thee endow. In sickness and in health, in poverty or in wealth, till death do us part.”

I pushed the ring over Trex’s knuckle to secure it at the base of his finger, and he beamed.

“Trex, repeat after me, please.”

Trex took my ring from Harbinger and did the same, sliding the champagne gold band and diamonds over my knuckle to secure it next to my engagement ring. He closed his eyes as he kissed my knuckles.

“Trex?” I said, watching his lashes pop up as he looked at me. “I need to tell you something.”

He smiled, a little nervous. “What is it? Wait. Let me kiss you first.”

He leaned in, but I pressed gently against his chest.

Trex fidgeted and shifted his weight, all in the few seconds after I stopped him from completing the ceremony.

He lowered his chin, speaking low. “Everything okay?”

“You tell me,” I breathed out.

The guests began to murmur.

Trex looked back at his clueless groomsmen, then leaned over to peek at Naomi. His brows pulled together as he met my gaze again.

“Darby...?” he began. He shook his head, clueless.

Instead of an exciting build up to the news, Trex looked tortured.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurted out.

He blinked. “You’re what? Really? I mean ... really?”

“I know. I took the second test just before the wedding. It’s for sure. I’m pregnant.”

Trex glanced at my bridesmaids and man. Carly held up the test. “We’ve got a new Trexler on the way!”

Trex held his fists in the air and yelled in triumph.

The guests clapped then began standing, giving us an ovation.

“Pronounce us, Reverend, please!” Trex begged.

“I ... pronounce you husband and wife!” Reverend Lewis said, a little flustered, but loudly and quickly.

Trex grabbed me and planted a kiss, his tongue sliding between my lips, his arms enveloping me.

The guests cheered louder, and our wedding party joined in.

Trex took Maddie from Carly, and we bounced together. Maddie belly-laughed, hugging her daddy tight. She had no clue why we were so happy, but she mushed Trex’s cheeks with her chubby hands and pecked a tear falling down his cheek.

“Take her, take her, take her,” he said quickly, handing her over to me.

I held her close, watching him bend over and grab his knees, trying to catch his breath as his groomsmen patted him on the back.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, taking deep breaths between laughs. “I just didn’t think this day could get any better, babe. Just taking it all in. I’ll be fine.

Tyler Maddox raised his arms. “This man needs a drink! Let’s get our party on!”

Everyone cheered, and our little family was led to the reception tent in a caravan, the energy so high and so overwhelming half of everyone there were in tears.

After the last person in the receiving line, a woman approached us. She was a tiny thing, but her eyes were calculating, her long, shiny dark hair and slick tailored suit told a distinct story of her personality, but she seemed to be there for a purpose.

“Trex?” I said, picking up Maddie.

The woman was standing a few feet away—at our wedding—and I had never met her before. Part of me wondered if she’d known Shawn, and instinctively, I took a half-step behind Trex, shielding our daughter.

Trex glanced at me, and it was obvious he didn't know her either. "Hi," he said, curiosity in his voice.

"I'm Special Agent Liis Lindy. I had your desk in the San Diego federal building for about five seconds before I was promoted."

"Congratulations?" Naomi said, noticeably perturbed.

Trex shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Liis. Why are you here?"

She glanced at Taylor and Tyler. "It had to be me. The special agent in charge sends his best wishes for you both."

"Who?" I asked.

Trex leaned into my ear. "I'll explain later."

"And of course, I offer my congratulations to you, Darby," Liis said to me with a controlled smile.

"Thank you," I said.

Carly put her hand on her hip. "That's lovely and all, but you didn't answer the question. Why are you here?"

"I do apologize for crashing your wedding," Liis said. "However, we just wrapped up a case, and I had a delivery."

"A delivery?" Trex asked, frowning. "Here?"

Liis glanced around. "If we could speak in private, with just your wife and your team, it would help."

"Zeke's staying," Naomi said without hesitation, watching Liis closely.

Trex rubbed the back of his neck, but without being asked a second time, Carly, Taylor, Tyler, Hailey, Ellie, and Falyn all excused themselves.

Naomi shifted her weight, preparing for whatever Liis might say. "All right, fed. Talk."

"Kitsch?" Liis said.

We all turned to him.

Trex looked at his friend, confused. He pointed to Liis. "You know her? How? And why don't I know this?"

Kitsch held up his hands. "I get it. This looks bad..." He looked at me and all of his colleagues. "But we don't lie to each other and—"

“Omitting is lying,” Sloan said.

Kitsch nodded. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. But...”

Trex narrowed his eyes.

Kitsch swallowed.

“You can do this, Kitsch,” Liis said.

He continued. “The only thing more important to me than all of you is my family.”

“Kitsch,” Martinez said, rubbing his face in frustration.

A woman appeared behind Kitsch with two young children, and, like an invisible force, Trex, Naomi, Harbinger and his wife Caroline, Martinez and Sloan all took a step back looking almost as if they’d seen something impossible.

“Congratulations, Trex,” the woman said, hooking her arms around Kitsch’s arm. “I’m glad we could make it.”

Caroline covered her mouth with shaking hands and began to cry. “Kitsch, what on earth?”

“Trex?” I said. All color had left his face. “Trex, what’s happening?”

Kitsch kissed the woman’s forehead. She was a few inches shorter than him, shoulder-length copper hair, her big green eyes dancing between us nervously.

“You remember Karen,” Kitsch said.

“It’s good to see you again. All of you,” Karen said.

Caroline began to sob, and Harbinger held her.

“*What* is happening?” I insisted, unable to wait.

“I...” Trex began, but he shook his head, unable to answer.

“Talk, Kitsch,” Naomi said, her voice breaking.

Zeke seemed as clueless as I was.

Kitsch looked at Liis, pleading in his eyes.

Liis took over. “The tour you were on when Kitsch received the news about Karen, Emily, and Dylan’s death was your first tour back after some time stateside, correct?”

“Correct,” Trex said.

“I, uh...” Kitsch said, nervous. “I did some contract work for the

son of a Japanese business owner just before. It went south. Turned out the family was in all kinds of business, including human trafficking, drugs, dark web, you name it. The son died in the hospital, and they came after me, Trex. They came after Karen and the kids.”

Trex took a step forward. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“They stepped in immediately,” Kitsch said, referring to Liis. “I couldn’t.”

“I was a fucking agent!” Trex said, his voice raised.

“It was East Coast Division,” Liis explained. “The case wasn’t transferred to us until they hit a wall, and I came on board.” She spoke the words almost as an afterthought. She was curiously detached.

“I didn’t lie,” Kitsch said. “But, in order to protect my family, I had to ... allow you all to be told with me that they had died.”

Martinez blinked. “He did talk about them as if they were alive.” He patted Kitsch’s arm. “Good to know you’re not crazy after all.”

“What about the holidays? You being depressed? Us worrying you were going to off yourself?” Trex asked.

Kitsch made a face. “I *was* depressed. I was away from my family on Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays. I missed games and recitals and milestones. But their safety was more important.”

Caroline grabbed Karen and hugged her.

“The case has been wrapped up. The Kitschs are free to go about their lives,” Liis said, checking the button on her blazer.

Karen smiled at Caroline. “We’re moving to the Springs.”

“You are?” Caroline squealed, hugging her again.

“Karen...” Naomi said, bringing her in for a hug. “This is Zeke.”

Zeke hugged her. “Wow, this is bizarre,” he said. “But glad you’re back.”

Trex hugged Karen, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “He wanted to tell you. It was killing him.”

Trex shook his head. “Just glad you’re home.” He kneeled in front of Dylan. “Last time I saw you, you were a baby!”

“Was not,” Dylan said with a smile.

“Hi, Emily,” Trex said to Dylan’s little sister. “Remember me?”

Emily’s long, wavy brown hair swayed while she shook her head.

“Well, Trex said. “I remember you, and I’m so happy you’re home, because Maddie will need a friend.”

Emily nodded quickly.

Liis checked her watch then waved goodbye, and just after we all greeted Karen, Dylan, and Emily, the DJ announced the wedding dance.

“We should...” Trex said to Karen.

“Of course. Go, go!” she said with a chuckle.

Trex led me to the center of the dance floor, the twinkling lights hanging from the tent’s ivory ceiling above us, and flashes going off all around us, just beyond the border of the wooden boards we stood on.

Trex sighed. “Wow. Definitely a day for the books, and we’ve had some doozies.”

I nodded, leaning my head against his chest. “You think we’ll start having normal days now?”

“Definitely. If you count working at a high-security facility with a new junior senator running things, and buying and running a hotel while raising a toddler and a newborn normal.”

I looked up at him with a tired but content smile. “Sounds like heaven to me.”

He leaned down, slid his fingers into my hair at the back of my head, and pressed his lips against mine, warm, soft, and full of emotion. No one had loved me like he did, and as every day passed, I knew he would only love me more.

“You happy?” he crooned.

“So happy. Sometimes it doesn’t feel real.”

“It’s real. We’ll be a family of four this time next year.”

I kissed him again. “Can’t wait.”

I glanced over at Kitsch and Karen, Emily, and Dylan chasing Henry and Miles Harbinger in circles around Hailey, who was holding Maddie.

Martinez was standing behind his girlfriend, his arms around her, swaying to the music. Even Trex's parents seemed content. From that day forward, I wouldn't just believe in miracles. I would live it.

"See?" I said. "Miracles are possible. I hope one day you'll see it."

He smiled and shook his head. "I wake up to one every day."

"Are you flirting with me?" I asked, batting my lashes.

"Damn right I am, Mrs. Trexler."

I lifted my chin. "Say it again."

He leaned down, kissed my forehead, his lips gently moving against my skin as he spoke. "Mrs. Trexler."

I closed my eyes, trying to ingrain every sight, smell, and sound into my memory so it could last forever. "Say it again."