



Callahan's Haven

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Description: My daughter's in danger. Those four words send Marine veteran Callahan "Cal" Rothe and his former Elite Squad to Colonel Duncan Sheppard's only child's college campus. But their covert operation comes to light when a turn of events throws Cal right in the middle of the young woman's life. Damn, if I didn't break protocol in a big way! Haven Sheppard has no idea where the hulking ginger man with freckles for days came from at just the right time, but she's glad he did. Did he just yell, "Mine"? Haven has to trust this stranger with her life whether she likes it or not. But the more she's with Cal, the more she thinks she might just trust him with her heart as well. I'm not leaving you! When the Colonel's enemies make their presence known, Cal must fight to save the woman he's come to love. But if he fails... Will Callahan's Haven be lost forever?

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What the hell are we doing here?

“Cal.”

Marine Captain Callahan “Cal” Rothe frowned and nodded at CWO3 Declan Carter’s low rumble of his name, before glancing up at the black-haired giant of a man. The Marine gunner’s narrowed blue gaze remained trained on the interrogation taking place in the center of the dusty basement of the abandoned tenement, his face set in stone.

Cal’s gaze wandered across the room, skipping over the wooden table secured to the floor, and moved on to the rest of his former Elite Squad in Counterintelligence and Human Intelligence. Their technical surveillance and countermeasures specialist, Second Lieutenant Garrett Wallace, and linguist, Sergeant First Class Solace Davidson, stood casually enough in the opposite darkened corner, but they too were grimly focused on what Cal could only describe as a man losing control.

A slap rang out through the room followed by a stifled cry. Behind the interrogator’s back, Solace took a step but stopped when she caught Cal’s eyes and slight shake of his head. She grimaced and arched a blonde brow, her golden-brown eyes flashing her displeasure. She hesitated only a moment before stepping back in place with a stilted nod.

He didn’t like it either, but they’d been ordered to follow Major Roland Celeski’s directives—orders the major had made crystal clear to them.

Cal and his team were to stand aside while Celeski and his men, Lieutenant Morton and Sergeant Woosley, handled the interrogation, regardless of what they witnessed.

He wasn't one to disobey, but God help him, he was with Solace on this one. Celeski had gone beyond established protocol thirty minutes ago after nearly three hours of unproductive questioning, and things were escalating with the other man's level of frustration.

Cal focused his attention back on the young woman seated at the table under the dim overhead light. Hell, she was more of a kid—eighteen or nineteen at the most—and so slight she couldn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds. He scowled at the shackles securing her wrists in one of four sets of cuffs bolted to the tabletop and chains binding her to the chair. What? Did someone honestly believe she'd somehow overpower a squad of Marines and escape?

"You will tell me what I want to know," Celeski yelled in the woman's native Turkish tongue while grabbing the hair at the back of her head. He twisted the long dark brown strands in his grip and forced her head up and back, and then pulled her hair tighter and grinned when she winced. The sadistic bastard was enjoying himself. "Now, once more. Where is Sadik? Where is your base of operations?"

Mazhar Sadik.

The rebel leader had been a pain in the ass to several government officials in this small Turkish province for more than a year. Cal couldn't blame Sadik for inciting citizens within certain districts and municipalities to oust the governor and his cronies. He and his team had witnessed the corruption first hand and knew how Sadik's people were suffering.

But why had American military forces been brought in?

The US alliance with Turkey was iffy at best, and he doubted the Minister of Interior would appreciate their interference. With the covert nature of the operations, he questioned whether the Turkish leader was even aware of their presence.

In fact, this particular operation had been just one more questionable maneuver in the past seven months since his team had been assigned to Colonel Robert Whitman. And damn if it didn't make him miss the days under their former commander, Colonel Duncan Sheppard, even more.

It had been more than a year since Colonel Sheppard had retired to be with his terminally ill wife. Since then, the former Elite Squad in CI/HUMINT had been attached to various units requiring interrogation and intelligence gathering throughout the Corps.

It was a damned shame when they did get a permanent assignment it was under Whitman, who had immediately deployed them to this special unit in Turkey where they took orders from Celeski.

His team hated it.

Not only because they couldn't stand the entitled little shit. It was the fact they'd been informed their primary directive was to find and bring in the elusive leader of the rebels by any means necessary. But they hadn't been told what constituted any means or who would retain custody afterward.

The whole thing was hinky.

Again, case in point, the handling of this young woman who'd been caught up in a raid at one of the rebel encampments the previous day. She alone had been singled out for questioning, with Celeski leading the squad and Cal piloting them to this remote site in an UH-1Y Huey under cover of pre-dawn darkness.

“You might as well tell me.”

Cal narrowed his gaze at Celeski’s whispered words against the captive’s already bruising cheek, and then he tightened his fists when the other man jerked her chair back onto two legs. A grimace of pain crossed over her face as the action pulled her arms impossibly taut. “You’re as good as dead anyhow.”

She hardened her features and remained silent—her straining hands closing into white-knuckled fists in the too-tight restraints the only chink in her otherwise stoic facade.

Celeski let the chair back down with a thud before wrenching her head back by her hair again, the cords of her neck standing out in relief, and then bent close to her face. “We can protect you.” Celeski licked his lips and ran his gaze over her heaving breasts made more prominent by her arched position. “I might just ensure your safety personally.”

Declan tensed.

“Easy, brother,” Cal said under his breath while the young woman visibly swallowed, her sawing breath loud in the room as blood trickled from her nose and split lip.

Declan huffed while Cal met Solace’s narrow-eyed gaze as she stared a hole through him. Beside her, Garrett gripped the butt of his sidearm while his moss-green glance went from Celeski back to Cal with a raised brow.

Cal was going to have to intervene.

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“Yeah, we’d like to protect her too, Major, wouldn’t we Woosley?” Morton laughed and elbowed the man beside him. Woosley didn’t laugh, but the heated gaze of the tall, lanky man with dirty blond hair did wander over the woman, his face flushing as he said under his breath, “I’d protect her, alright.”

“Fuck my orders,” Cal said on a low growl.

“About fucking time,” Declan muttered.

Cal stepped out of the shadows with the young woman’s swollen gaze flying to his. Her unusual sea green eyes held no recrimination, only an intensity he found hard to ignore. He held her stare for a few seconds before tearing his focus away to confront Celeski. “That’s enough, Major.”

Celeski raised his head and let out a snorting laugh. “What did you say?” He released his captive’s hair and gave her head a hard shove before moving directly behind her. She tensed when he ran his hands from the back of her head and cupped each side of her jaw. He kept his daring eyes on Cal’s, and then pressed his fingers into her flesh while pulling her head back against his stomach. Celeski’s grin widened when she gasped as his fingers dug in deeper.

Cal met the young woman’s eyes again, her battered features strengthening his resolve, before staring full force into Celeski’s smirking face. “I said, that’s enough.” He took another step while the other man eyed Cal’s hand on his gun. “This isn’t how we do things. So back away.”

Celeski glared at him. “This isn’t how your fucking Elite Squad used to do things

when you took orders from that pussy, Sheppard.” He gave Cal a full smile while moving his hands down the woman’s cringing body where they hovered over her breasts. “Here, we do things Whitman’s way.” He narrowed his gaze at Cal. “So, see menotbacking away.”

Cal clenched his jaw when Celeski rubbed his hands over the young woman’s breasts while his men snickered.

“Damn,” Celeski said, laughing over his shoulder at his men. “She likes my hands on her.”

Cal made quick eye contact with a glowering Declan and then nodded over at Solace and Garrett before motioning for them to spread out.

“You two shouldfeelhow hard her little nipples are right now,” Celeski said, squeezing her breasts. “They’re like sharp points digging into my palms.” He squeezed harder, turning back and leering down at her as Cal’s team took their positions. “I bet you like a little pain with your pleasure. Don’t you?” he said, kissing the top of her head.

She replied by throwing her head back and bashing his chin.

“Bitch!” Celeski rounded on her and pulled his sidearm, prompting Cal to rush at them from across the room. She cried out as Celeski’s sudden backhanded strike whipped her head roughly to the side, with the large signet ring he took such pride in tearing a bloody gash into her face just below her left eye.

Cal stopped short when Celeski pressed his gun to her temple while rubbing his chin with his other hand. “And here I thought we meant something to each other.”

Cal pulled his own weapon and pointed it at his ranking officer. “Drop it, sir.”

Celeski's men pulled their weapons while Cal's team did the same. Cal and his people kept their guns on Celeski, while Woosley and Morton—outnumbered and focus divided—took their time about pointing their guns at one of Cal's team and then another. The tension was high, with only heavy breathing filling the void for several seconds while they each took stock of their prospective opponents.

Celeski finally broke the silent standoff with a low chuckle. "Sir? Really?" He shook his head and pushed the gun harder against the woman's temple, her resigned gaze closing. "You drop it. I'm under orders to get answers from this prisoner however I see fit." The other man narrowed his gaze on Cal. "Which gives me permission to do whatever the fuck I want."

The major grabbed her hair again and caressed her cheek with the tip of his gun. "And what do you think you're going to do?" He glanced around at the drawn weapons. "We may be outgunned, but you won't shoot us without one or more of you getting shot in return." He grinned again. "Not a smart move on your part."

"Maybe not," Cal said taking up a stance across the table from Celeski and the woman. Declan moved farther to his left while Garrett and Solace took up flanking positions, further dividing the other men's attention. "But they're not our target."

Cal had his first reason to smile since entering the interrogation room when Celeski's gaze bounced off each of his team's weapons and took in a quick breath.

"You are."

Celeski turned his focus back on Cal with a hard stare.

"We might get shot," Cal said, shrugging. "Hell, one or two of us might die. But not before all four of us unload what we've got..." He raised his gun higher and pointed it toward Celeski's head. "Into you."

Celeski swallowed hard, a fleeting expression of fear crossing his face before he tightened his features. “What you’re doing is mutiny.”

“Nah, I’d just call it some friendly insubordination.” He motioned with his head to Celeski’s men. “Anyhow, I’d suggest you tell your people to stand down. Now.”

“You’re too much of a Boy Scout to disobey orders. You’re certainly not going to shoot me.” The room wasn’t hot, but sweat rolled down Celeski’s face. “Besides, if you shoot me, the last thing I’d do is blast a hole through this bitch’s head.”

“Sh-sh-sh-shoot him.” The woman’s accented words grabbed everyone’s attention. “Do it,” she said, her eyes on Cal bright with relief.

Celeski chuckled. “Oh, so not only do you speak, but you speak English.” He took in a deep breath and had another look around. With a resigned sigh, he lowered his gun. “Morton, Woosley, lower your weapons.”

“But, sir,” Morton sputtered. “We—”

“I’m not dying for this rebel filth.” Celeski placed his gun on the table and pushed it toward Cal, then took several steps away from the woman’s chair with his hands raised. Cal picked the gun up and stuck it in the back of his pants.

“Davidson,” Cal said, glancing over at Solace, “take his men’s weapons.”

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“Yes, sir.” She holstered her gun and walked over to the two men while Cal, Declan, and Garrett covered her. She took the weapons from their loose grips and then removed the magazines and emptied the chambers before putting the guns on the floor and their ammunition in her pockets.

“Make sure they’re not carrying anything else.”

She nodded at his command and began patting Morton down, telling him in an exaggeration of her Georgia drawl, “Don’t you go getting excited now, ya hear?” Morton glared up at the ceiling while she worked her way down his body where she found and pulled a knife from his boot. She turned it back and forth in her hand. “Nice blade,” she said, looking up at him while sliding it on the floor over to Garrett, who reached down and picked it up.

Cal didn’t trust Woosley and his loose-limbed posture as Solace straightened away from Morton and began her pat-down—nor his grin when she got to his groin. “Now don’t you start getting excited, sweet cheeks, because what you have there is the only extra weapon I’m packing.”

“That’s your dick?” she said, frowning up at him and patting the front of his pants. “Wow, how embarrassing. But who knows, maybe you’re a grower.”

“Barracks whore,” Woosley yelled while making the idiotic mistake of lunging for her. He found his legs knocked out from under him and his face planted on the floor within seconds, with his arm bent behind him and hand twisted up between his shoulder blades.

“Arrr... You broke my tooth, you fucking bitch.”

“Now, is that any way to talk to a lady?” Solace asked, bending to his ear from where she straddled his back. The action put more pressure on his arm and elicited a painful groan from the prone man as he dribbled blood. “You really need to start working on your pick-up lines.”

Cal held in a laugh. Solace was five-foot-nine, with blonde good looks most people didn’t see as a threat, but she could take down a man three times her size given the right motivation. Hell, he’d watched her take down Declan a time or two—much to his six-foot-eight friend’s consternation. Poor, stupid Woosley, with his slight build, hadn’t posed much of a challenge.

“I wouldn’t,” Declan said, pointing his gun at Morton when the other man shifted his stance.

“Shit! Looks like that hurts,” Garrett said, peering down at Woosley and shaking his dark brown head before squatting in front of him. “You really shouldn’t have messed with her when she was that close to your goods.” Woosley snarled and strained his neck to look at Garrett, who was obviously enjoying himself. “Last guy lost his nuts.”

“That’s enough, Wallace.” Cal motioned with his gun at Celeski while Solace maintained her hold on Woosley, who had finally ceased his struggling. “Check him out, then take his keys and get the prisoner loose.”

Garrett holstered his weapon. “Gladly.” He went over and patted the major down, then shook his head at Cal after finding no additional weapons. He located the keys in Celeski’s front shirt pocket and set about removing the chains securing the young woman to the chair.

Their captive didn’t flinch but kept her eyes glued to Cal’s, their depths filling with

hope while the wrist cuffs were taken off. She rubbed her raw skin, then wiped her bloody nose, but ignored the line of blood dripping down her left cheek. The wound from Celeski's ring had cut deep and would probably leave a scar.

"Carter," he said, glancing at Declan, "grab those standard cuffs on the table behind you and take charge of the prisoner." He turned back to the woman whose expression had hardened. "We're not releasing you." Her lips tightened more as she nodded. Declan readied the cuffs and took hold of her arm to help her from the chair. She stood, but was unsteady on her feet and swayed against him.

"Can you walk?" Declan bent and asked her in a gentle tone. She nodded before he secured her.

"Now, you two," Cal said, indicating Celeski and Morton. "Sit."

Cal kept his gun trained on the men who reluctantly sat while he grabbed a third chair to place under the table. Garrett assisted Solace in manhandling Woosley up off the floor and forced him to walk over and sit down as well.

"Each of you, put a hand out on the table."

Celeski frowned at Cal. "You aren't seriously going to use these restraints on us?"

"You think I'm going to leave you free to follow us?" Cal let out a gruff laugh and shook his head. "You've clearly underestimated my intelligence."

"I'd be insulted," Garrett said, taking Celeski's wrist and snapping the cuff around it. "You know," he said, closing and tightening the ends around the man's wrist, "just on general principle."

Cal rolled his eyes. "Just finish getting the other two secured."

“Yes, sir,” he said, grinning and getting on with his task.

“So, you’re just gonna sit there?” Woosley was one mouthy bastard.

Celeski raised his shackled wrist. “What do you suggest I do?”

“Nothin’,” Woosley mumbled under his breath and slumped in his chair.

Morton kept his mouth shut, but visibly searched the room.

After the three were secured, Cal motioned for his team to gather at the foot of the stairs. Declan brought his charge with him, saying, “We set?”

Cal met the gaze of each member of his team. “I am. But it was my decision to take charge, so if—”

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“No way,” Garrett interrupted, shaking his head.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Declan said with a scowl.

Solace chimed in with, “I can’t believe you’d even think it.”

“Okay. Okay,” Cal said, raising his hands.

Solace took a step toward him. “You know we’re—”

“Fucking idiots is what you are,” Celeski called out.

Cal wasted a look at Celeski. “We’re going straight to Central Command and General Younces with her.” He turned back to his crew. “We all have the same story.” He glanced at their captive. “Who knows, maybe our guest here might have a word or two to say. If not, her face tells its own story.” He gave the table and the men shackled to it a final glance. “We’ll send someone.”

Cal followed his team and their captive up the stairs while the major’s men shouted obscenities and Celeski threw verbal darts at their retreating backs. “Your hands are just as dirty now. Just like Whitman wanted.”

Cal frowned but kept going. Celeski’s laughter followed him to the top of the stairs, his final words echoing in Cal’s ears as he shut the basement door behind him.

“Just wait. You’re finished. You and your whole team!”

Three years and two months later.

Haven Sheppard pulled her VW Bug to a stop at the top of the rise overlooking the small valley near Williamsburg, Virginia and let it idle. Her sigh of satisfaction filled the confines of her car as she soaked in the picturesque scene—the towering Compton oaks bursting with vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges, the winding creek running between them, and finally the white reclaimed farmhouse with black shutters and red front door.

Home.

Her mom had spent years using her expertise in architecture and design to transform the original house into the sprawling home it was today, with seamless additions to the main structure and renovations inside that could have easily filled a spread in any of the home and garden magazines Sheppard Innovations had been featured in.

Best of all, it had been a permanent home.

Her dad had been a Marine, and life in the Corps could be hard on families—never knowing from one year to the next where you'd be stationed, building new relationships and friendships, finding a place to fit in over and over.

But Duncan and Patsy Sheppard hadn't wanted that for their only child. They'd wanted her to have as normal an upbringing as possible. So, they'd purchased this property two-and-a-half hours from the Capitol where her father returned after each deployment.

She smiled thinking back to all the video chats with her dad in undisclosed locations, posing for pictures her mom had insisted on taking of Haven doing everything, and

hour upon hour of video recordings just so her dad didn't miss out on anything.

At the time, Haven had taken it all for granted, not realizing exactly how much of a sacrifice her parents were making or how precious the time was when they were together.

They'd been wonderful parents who'd attempted to give her what they'd felt was the perfect childhood. And it had been until...

Haven closed her eyes and tried to still her trembling lips. It had all come crashing down in February of her junior year of high school. What had begun a few months earlier with her mom's clothes starting to bag on her curvy frame had progressed to lethargy she just couldn't shake. Her dad had finally convinced her go to the doctor when the nagging cough that had been plaguing her for weeks refused to go away.

"It's just allergies," she'd insisted but had reluctantly followed her husband's insistence.

The prognosis they'd received within a few days had been devastating—non-small cell lung cancer—a rare diagnosis for someone who had never smoked a day in her life. She'd been given less than a year to live.

Her dad had taken early retirement immediately and come home.

They'd filled the next nine months by spending as much time together as they could, with the last few weeks finding her mom too weak most days to do much more than get up for a few hours from the hospital bed her dad had set up downstairs.

But one Saturday morning in mid-November, her mom had awoken early and roused Haven and her dad, determined she wanted a fun day out together as a family. She had been so full of life—almost like before the cancer had taken its toll on her body.

So, for thirteen glorious hours, they'd forgotten about cancer, and treatments, and the sense of dread that had hovered over them.

They'd gone to her mom's favorite restaurant for pancakes—something she'd insisted on even though she could only take a few tentative bites—then driven through the mountains to enjoy the last of the fall colors before stopping at a local nursery on their way home.

Haven opened her stinging eyes and let them wander to the dogwood they'd dubbed their Four O'clock Tree at the front of the house. Her mom had been set on finding a dogwood with deep pink blossoms and had spotted the perfect one sitting all by itself right away. Her mom had smiled over at her dad who was eyeing the pitiful little tree with a doubtful expression—one Haven had been sure matched her own.

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“Patsy, hun,” her dad had said, taking his wife’s frail hand. “They’ve got other trees over there with more—”

“Life?” her mom had interrupted with a sad smile. “I know it doesn’t look like much.” She’d brushed the fingers of her other hand over one of the branches. “But see this leaf turning red here?” She’d looked up at him with sorrowful hazel eyes. “There’s still life in it.”

So, of course, they’d brought it home and planted it, finishing right at four o’clock. They’d spent the rest of their evening laughing and telling stories after eating a light meal and then reluctantly going to bed at the end of their perfect day.

One week, four days, ten hours, and eighteen minutes after planting the tree, Patsy Sheppard was gone.

Haven’s eyes misted looking down at the coral red leaves she could see from a distance. Even though it was nippy outside, she turned the air conditioning on full blast to let it blow in her face. She scrubbed away the tears threatening to fall, and then took deep, calming breaths. It wouldn’t do for her dad to see she’d been crying. He’d know why. The anniversary of her mom’s death was a few weeks away, but she was determined to be strong. It had been almost five years after all, and life went on.

She frowned down at the yellow Maserati parked in front of the garage on the left side of the house.

It had for her dad. Devon Franks was here. Great.

There was just something too polished about Devon—too perfect. She certainly wasn't anything like Haven's mom. Patsy Sheppard had been vibrant and adventurous—always willing to play in the rain and run through the mud with you. Haven laughed to herself imagining Devon doing anything like that. She wouldn't. She'd be too worried about keeping her deep auburn hair from frizzing and her designer clothes clean and dry.

“Oh, well,” Haven said on a sigh and put her car in gear, “might as well start putting on my happy face now.” She drove down the hill and parked alittletoo close to the driver's side of Devon's car. “I hope she doesn't ding my door.” Haven grinned at how pissed Devon was going to be while getting out of her car. She grabbed her overnight bag out of the back seat and took a deep breath to ready herself before shutting the door.

“Mmm...” The aromatic scents coming from the slightly open kitchen window drew her to the side entrance of the house. “Hey, Mrs. Pruitt,” she said, walking in and letting the door bang shut behind her, chuckling when their housekeeper/cook did a little startled jump and whirled toward her.

“Haven!” Mrs. Pruitt clutched her spatula to her chest and let out a short laugh. “You scared me.” Martha Pruitt had been with them for years. She and her husband, Carl, who kept up the property, had a little place of their own behind the main house. Haven couldn't imagine their lives without the older couple.

“What smells so good?” Haven set her bag down and crossed the rust-colored tile floors to look past the older woman's shoulder at what she had cooking on the professional gas cooktop. “Oh! I see capers,” Haven said, reaching out a hand.

Mrs. Pruitt gave it a half-hearted whack with her spatula before putting the utensil down and pulling Haven in for a hug and quick peck on the cheek. The older woman leaned away and threw a wary glance at the open archway leading to the dining room.

“We weren’t expecting you until late tomorrow afternoon.”

“I know, but my Management of Law Enforcement professor called out for tomorrow and cancelled class, so I decided to come home early and make it a long weekend.” She smiled to alleviate the other woman’s obvious discomfort. “I saw Devon’s car. It’s fine.”

Mrs. Pruitt frowned at the stove. “But I’ve only got enough veal piccata started to feed two. Maybe—”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Haven told her, putting a staying hand on her arm when she started toward the refrigerator. “I’m assuming you’ve got some delicious goodies in the freezer.” The older woman nodded and blushed at the compliment to her cooking. “I’ll find something.” She snuck a couple of capers from the open jar and popped them in her mouth, enjoying the briny taste while letting her own gaze wander toward the archway. She leaned against the counter, crossed her arms, and grimaced at Mrs. Pruitt. “So, bag or no bag?”

Haven wasn’t a kid anymore, and she hadn’t reached the ripe old age of twenty-one—virgin or not—without understanding the need for sex and companionship. She recognized her father was a vital, handsome man with his premature silvery hair and tall, commanding presence, not to mention his pale blue eyes that were such a contrast to his naturally tanned skin. It wasn’t surprising women were drawn to him. It also didn’t hurt that for a forty-five-year-old man, he was as muscular and fit as any of the jocks at her school.

Add in his wealth and he was quite a catch.

So, while her father having sex wasn’t anything she liked to think about—at all—it was something she had accepted.

She frowned at the archway again. And Duncan Sheppard was definitely having sex with the thirty-something-year-old woman he'd been seeing for the last nine months. Devon wasn't the first woman her father had seen since starting to date a couple of years after her mother's passing, but she had lasted the longest. And Haven wasn't quite sure how she felt about that.

Sure, her father was a grown man and could do what he wanted. He certainly didn't need her permission. She just wished he would at least mention to her the seriousness of their relationship—if it was serious—so she could get used to the idea.

Unfortunately, her dad had a tendency to ignore the fact Haven was an adult, even going so far as never making overnight plans with Devon when Haven was at home. Come to think of it, that probably explained the irritated looks she'd caught the other woman giving her at times when they'd all been together during Haven's two-and-a-half-month-long summer break.

Devon had been over frequently—with no bag.

"Bag," Mrs. Pruitt said with a slight laugh. "She is not going to be happy."

"You're probably right." She grinned. "Maybe I could stay at your house tonight."

"Why would you do that?" Her father's deep voice came at her from the archway, and she turned to see him walking through it with a frown on his face. She smiled and started to take a step toward him but faltered when Devon followed him in.

"You've got company." She turned her attention to the woman sidling up against her dad and wrapping a proprietary hand around his arm. "Hi, Devon. I didn't mean to spoil your evening."

"Nonsense," the other woman said with a smile—one that didn't quite reach her

brown eyes. “It’s been weeks since I’ve seen you. So, of course you’re welcome to stay.”

Haven raised a brow. She was welcome to stay?

“Oh, that didn’t come out right at all,” Devon said, patting Haven’s dad’s arm and then walking over to Haven and taking her up in a loose hug. “You know what I meant.”

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Actually, no she didn't.

"Mrs. Pruitt." Devon turned her attention to the stove, effectively changing the subject. "Dinner smells delicious. I swear," she said with a coy look over her shoulder at her father while running a hand down her slender hips, "I think I put on at least five pounds after each meal."

Haven tried not to roll her eyes, while ignoring the up and down appreciative look her father gave Devon.

"I don't see it," he said, winking at Devon before smiling at Haven. "So, are you just going to stand there, or are you going to give your old man a hug?"

"If I must," she said, with a put-upon sigh, and then took the few steps needed to be enveloped in his strong arms. She took in a deep breath and smiled, but wrinkled her nose at the overpowering scent of the flowery perfume Devon favored.

"I'm glad you're home, sweetheart," he whispered while kissing the top of her head.

"Me too, Daddy."

"Okay, everyone," Mrs. Pruitt said, waving her spatula in a shooing motion, "everyone out of my kitchen while I raid the freezer."

* * *

"Why does Sunday always have to come so fast?" Haven muttered, putting the last of

her clothes in her bag and setting it by her bedroom door. But it had been a good visit, starting with Thursday night's eclectic dinner and lively conversation—at least between Haven and her dad.

From Devon? Not so much.

Oh, she'd been friendly enough. Although Haven could have done without the knowing smiles the woman had thrown at her father throughout the meal, or the tight-lipped looks she'd covertly given Haven when her dad wasn't looking. She couldn't say she'd been disappointed when Devon had made her excuses to leave not long after the meal—with her bag.

As usual, her father had been vague about the whole Devon thing.

"You know Devon could've stayed, right?" she'd said after he'd come back inside after a long time spent telling the other woman goodbye and sat down with her in the den in front of the fireplace.

"No. It's fine," he'd told her, relaxing back into the overstuffed couch where they'd watched the fire dying out. "She had an early morning meeting anyhow." He'd put his arm around her and chuckled. "Besides, who's my best girl?"

"Dad—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm not a kid anymore." He'd patted her shoulder. "Humor me. I'm old."

"You are not old," she'd said, laughing. "Do you know how many of the girls in my dorm want copies of the picture I keep of you in my room?"

"Honey, I'd rather not know." He'd leaned back and looked at her with one side of

his mouth kicking up in a half-grin. “As you would say, that’d skeeve me out.”

She’d let out a short laugh and laid her head on his shoulder. “Yeah, I get it. But anyhow, about Devon—”

He’d given her a little squeeze. “Baby, no one is ever going to take your mother’s place.”

And that was it. It was all she’d gotten out of him—all she’d ever gotten out of him.

She should have known better than to try. Her dad was a professional when it came to manipulation and evasion. Not only had he led some kind of intelligence squad for the final five years of his military career, he’d continued the same work in civilian life as a contractor through the State Department after Haven had started college. So, ferreting information out of him was usually a lesson in futility.

It didn’t mean she wouldn’t keep trying though.

Anyhow, no one had brought up the subject of Devon again over her stay—not while Haven had spent Friday canning homemade apple butter and her favorite pear jam with Mrs. Pruitt, or all day Saturday out four-wheeling and open range shooting with her dad.

It had actually been kind of nice.

Haven put on her jacket and gave her room a once-over to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything.

All right. It’s time to go.

She left her room and headed downstairs. “Dad. I’m about to leave,” she called out

when she reached the bottom step, and then frowned when he didn't respond.

Where was he?

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She wandered through the lower level of the house, first peeking into his empty bedroom, then checking down the hall in the living and family rooms, and then finally the kitchen.

Was he working?

She went to his study at the back of the house and knocked on the closed door. “Dad?” She tried the handle. It was locked.

“Just a minute,” he called out. She pressed her ear to the door but didn’t hear anything, then took a step back when the lock turned and the door opened. “Sorry,” he said, his eyes troubled and face tense when he stepped into the hall and shut the door behind him. “I had something unexpected to come up.”

“Are you okay?” It had been years since she’d seen such a worried expression on his face—not since those last few days they’d had with her mom. Alarmed, she grabbed his arm. “Has something happened?”

“What?” Her dad took in a deep breath and smiled, his features relaxing. “Nothing’s wrong,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “At least nothing you need to be worry about.” He hugged her tighter.

“You’re sure?” His heart pounding fast in her ear slowed to a normal pace. Maybe it was one of those secret things he couldn’t tell her.

“Positive.” He let her go and reached for her bag. “I’ve got this.” He put his arm around her shoulders and walked with her through the house to the front door and

then out onto the porch in a comfortable silence. They went down the steps to the driveway and stopped at her car. “Do something for me.” He opened the driver’s side door and put her bag in the back seat as she stood beside him.

“Sure. Anything.”

He straightened from the car and faced her, grabbing both her shoulders and stooping to hold her gaze. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“You—”

“I know I tell you this every time you leave, but I’m working out of Norfolk over the next few weeks instead of DC and won’t be as close to Middleburg as I normally would be.” His fingertips dug harder into her shoulders. “Just...” He grimaced. “Just take extra precautions. No being alone with people you don’t know. No late-night strolls through the quad.”

“That’ll be kinda hard since my schedule changed at the campus library and I’ll be closing a couple of nights a week.”

“Call security before you leave.” He pulled her in for another hug. “I have to know you’re safe.” He squeezed her against his chest, whispering, “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you too.”

Tears pricked her eyes at her dad’s concern for her, but she blinked them back. “Dad,” she said, patting his back. “I promise you nothing is going to happen to me, and we’ll see each other again in less than a month for Thanksgiving.” She pulled out of his arms and smiled up at him. “So don’t worry. Okay?”

“I’ll try not to.” He gave her a smile and swift kiss on the forehead, although his eyes still seemed troubled. “You’d better get going. I don’t want you to have to drive in

the dark.”

She shook her head. “I should get there well before sunset.” She stretched up and gave him a kiss on the cheek and then hopped in her car, saying, “Love you.”

“Love you too,” he said, as she shut the door. He backed up as she pulled away.

“Dads,” she chuckled to herself. She looked in her review mirror as she went down the drive to see he was still standing where she’d left him but with a cellphone in his hand. She focused back on the road. “Always worrying about nothing.”

3

Someone once said when you have children, your heart forever walks outside your body. Right now, his was about to drive off in a lime green VW.

Duncan Sheppard pulled the untraceable burner cell he’d taken from his study wall safe out of his jeans pocket and held it to his chest. He squeezed it while watching Haven start up her car and leave, and didn’t look away until her car topped the rise in their road and disappeared.

His girl was smart. She could take care of herself. He’d made sure of it.

Because while Patsy had taken their daughter to dance and ballet, Duncan had taught her self-defense and how to shoot. He had needed to know his sweet, pink-loving, dress-up playing, all girly-girl daughter could kick ass if necessary. And she could. So, she wasn’t some helpless damsel needing him or any other man protecting her.

Usually.

But nothing was usual about what had transpired in the last hour.

Nothing.

It wasn't that he hadn't foreseen something like this could happen. He had. He'd just let himself become complacent over the years when it hadn't. His work with counterintelligence in the Marines and now in the civilian sector hadn't made him popular with some of the darker elements in the world, but he'd honestly believed they would come after him before his family. He'd never anticipated someone would use Haven as leverage against him.

It was a stupid assumption on his part.

Needless to say, he was warned not to report anything to his handlers. They had eyes on him and they'd know. That directive he could handle. The bitch of it was, he couldn't warn Haven. She was under surveillance as well, and if she deviated at all from her normal activities—gave any inkling she was aware of the situation—she was gone. She would also be just as gone if Duncan didn't do exactly what they had directed him to do when he met with the Turkish Minister of Interior and Mazhar Sadik in less than three weeks for peace negotiations.

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The person calling him hadn't specified how Haven would be gone, but any scenario he could come up with scared the shit out of him.

Haven was clueless about his activities. She thought he worked in intelligence as a contractor for the State Department, and he did—on paper. He actually worked for an organization that literally had no name. Those in his circles just called it, The Cooperative. His job was to do what couldn't be done through the normal chain of command or in the realm of the public eye, whether it be negotiations, interrogations, or coordinating and leading a myriad of other covert operations no one could know about.

Now, it seemed, he was in the untenable position of either losing his integrity or losing his daughter. His choice was a no-brainer. He would choose Haven over anything or anyone—even his own life or that of Sadik.

But how did they know about the summit he was mediating between the Turkish rebel and the Minister?

Duncan turned on the phone and pulled up the texting screen.

I NEED THE TEAM

He turned and walked toward the steps leading up to the front porch but stopped when the phone still in his hand rang, and then answered before it could get to the second ring without bothering to check the caller ID.

“My daughter's in danger.”

“Here she comes,” Declan said, sitting up straight in the front passenger seat of Cal’s dark blue SUV. “God, she’s killing me. The naughty librarian takes off her glasses. She shakes out her long strawberry blonde hair.”

Cal cut his eyes over at Declan, still mumbling under his breath, and then followed his friend’s binocularized gaze toward the front of the library to the two young women chatting and walking down the steps. They were Haven’s best friends and roommates, Hope Danford and Destiny Maddox.

“Hope doesn’t wear glasses,” Cal said, grimacing at his friend.

Declan frowned but didn’t bother looking at him. “A guy can fantasize. Can’t he?”

“Sure... But we’re supposed to be watching for anyone paying particular attention to Haven. Colonel Sheppard’s daughter. The daughter who’s in danger.”

They’d been on campus for almost two weeks and so far all had been quiet. It reminded Cal of some of their assignments in the Corps—long days and nights of watching nothing, but always prepared for something.

It had been three years since their last assignment, and he had to admit he’d missed working with his team. Because as it turned out, the good major’s parting shot had been right. The Elite Squad had been finished.

Just probably not the way Celeski had envisioned.

They’d caught all kinds of hell from Colonel Whitman when they’d turned the prisoner over to General Younces. Whitman had threatened to bring court-martial charges up against them for that and their treatment of Celeski and his men. He

probably later regretted the action since the ensuing shitstorm had brought to light more unsavory behavior from Whitman and others under his direct command.

Thankfully, no one on Cal's team had been implicated in what had ended up being a massive investigation with charges regarding the Colonel and his ties to local Turkish officials. But that hadn't done away with the fact they'd participated—unwillingly or not—in an unauthorized interrogation, nor their actions against a ranking officer. It also hadn't mattered the young woman in Celeski's custody had corroborated their own statements.

He grinned to himself. Whitman, Celeski and his men, and a handful of other officers and enlisted men hadn't fared well. Last he'd heard, all had been drummed out of the Corps and scattered to parts unknown. He still didn't know why they hadn't been imprisoned.

In the end, Cal and his team had been generously offered early retirement—something they'd had to thank General Younces and Colonel Sheppard for. So, after eleven years of Marine life, Cal had become a thirty-two-year-old retiree with full benefits. Having to leave the Corps had been a bitch, but he supposed retirement hadn't been all that bad.

But all it had taken was one call from the Colonel for him and each member of his squad to drop what they were doing and come to the aid of their former commander. It wasn't the best of circumstances to have the opportunity to work as a team again, but it had felt right—almost like no time at all had passed. They'd just come back together and...clicked.

Now if he could pull Declan's focus away from the tall, curvy-figured Ms. Danford, things would be fine.

But who was he to talk? All he wanted to do was follow Haven around like some

kind of ginger guard dog.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Declan frowned over at him and then raised his Steiner high-powered binoculars again. “I’m doing sweeps. Besides, she’s safe in the library. Solace is within yelling, well,whisperingdistance,” his friend said, grinning at his bad library-related joke, and adjusted the focus, “and Garrett’s watching her from the van.”

Cal glanced over at the strangely inconspicuous hi-tech vehicle the Colonel had provided for them where Garrett was geekily surveilling his heart out and monitoring the cameras and audio equipment they’d managed to install in and around the places Haven spent most of her time—something that had been scarily easy to do.

Security on campus wasn’t worth shit. All it had taken was appropriated maintenance uniforms and no one had questioned them. The implication of how effortless it would be for someone to get to Haven hadn’t been lost on any of them.

Cal rested his gaze on the library where their principle and the object of his desire currently sat, clueless about the danger she was in or the fact she had a man tied up in knots over her.

And wasn’t that something that had come out of left field?

Looking back, Cal figured the whole attraction thing might have started while he’d watched over her as she’d walked across the quad with Hope and Destiny the Thursday morning of that first week. His gaze had lingered on how the sun had caught the lighter strands in her dark golden-blonde hair before moving over her smiling face and then down her body. Once he’d realized what he was doing, he’d quickly refocused on those around her, but at that point it had probably been too late for him.

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Then last Sunday night it had finally hit him over the head while she'd been out with her friends at their favorite pizza place. Cal had taken up a position between Haven's little group and the door. He'd smiled at how animated she was when she talked—waving her hands and touching those closest to her—when the thought had crossed his mind she'd find it hard to talk if she couldn't use her hands. Which had led to images of him pulling them over her head with her spread out beneath him while he—

He'd shut that train of thought down pretty damn quickly and taken a long drag off his beer, wondering, Where the hell did that come from? Unfortunately, it was an image he'd been unable to get out of his mind, and one he'd jacked off to several times in the shower since.

He let out a quiet laugh at his own stupidity.

Haven wasn't only delicate, but twelve years his junior and the daughter of his former commander—a commander who would probably kill him if he knew the thoughts running through Cal's head—and the kind of woman he had no right in hell to want to be with.

She was also the woman who had somehow worked her way under his skin the more he'd been privy to her everyday life and seen the kind of person she was. So even though he knew it made no sense whatsoever for him to feel the way he did—even though he'd yet to speak a single word to her—it was true just the same

Haven was his.

He held in a groan at the idea of being her first—her only. Because he'd bet his left nut she was still a virgin. He adjusted himself in his seat and glanced at Declan, who still had his attention elsewhere. He didn't need to get a chubby right now. He'd never hear the end of it.

"Damn, she's got a great ass," his friend murmured.

Cal pulled his gaze away from the library to find Declan's binoculars trained on Hope and Destiny's retreating forms.

"Since you've got the binoculars pointed in the general direction of the parking lot, why don't you focus on some of the new cars pulling in and their occupants?"

Declan nodded while giving Cal the middle finger. Then, with a sigh, he turned his focus away from the object of his desire, muttering, "Let's see what you do when Haven walks out."

Cal grimaced at his friend. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what you know it means." Declan lowered his binoculars and leveled his gaze at him. "We've all seen the way you look at her."

Cal tensed in his seat. "Brother, you don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure he does." Garrett's laughing voice came over the comm link in his ear. "We've all noticed it."

"You've noticed nothing." Cal raised his own binoculars and scanned the area west of the library.

"Deny it all you want," Garrett said, "but we're not blind."

“And neither am I.” Cal lowered his binoculars and frowned at the van. “Garrett, I’ve seen the camera zoom-ins you’ve done on Destiny.”

“So.” He could just imagine the other man’s unconcerned shrug. “She’s one of Haven’s best friends. I have to make sure she isn’t compromised.”

“Riiigght,” Declan said, chuckling. “Like you wouldn’t want to compromise her yourself.”

“Come on, guys,” Solace’s barely whispered words came through their shared connection. “I’m trying to faux study here and all this chattering in my earpiece is starting to annoy me.”

“Hey,” Garrett said. “We don’t chatter. We have manly discussions.”

“Yeah. Right. Manly,” she whispered again, followed by a rather loud snort, and then, “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to disturb you.” She let out a low sigh. “Connard.”

“So,” Garrett said, “you’re planning on going for your master’s in linguistics to what, learn how to call me an asshole in French?” Cal had missed how Garrett and Solace loved digging at each other almost like a bickering brother and sister.

“Oh, not just in French,” she said with a quiet laugh. “There’s German—arschloch, and Arabic—al’ahmaq, and—” She paused when another female voice came over the comm, full of concern. “Are you all right, dear?”

Cal and his other two men burst out laughing while Solace told the woman, “What? Yes, um, I’m just practicing a few words out loud. You know, just to make sure I get the inflections right.”

“I wish you guys could see this,” Garrett said, laughing, while Cal and Declan

listened to Solace attempting to let the woman know she didn't need any help. "This older lady is petting Davidson's arm like she's worried she's having some kind of episode. Priceless."

"You're not funny," Solace said, her words low and tense.

"I beg your pardon?" the woman said.

Solace let out a long sigh. "I promise you I'm fine. But thank you for your concern."

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“She’s not buying it, Davidson,” Garrett called out. “Hey, did you just flip me off?”

“We’ve got to get a visual feed in here,” Declan said, looking at Cal with a grin while Solace managed to get the woman to leave.

“You...” Solace started. “Wait. Little Po Beep is on the move.”

“Little Bo...” Cal looked over at a grinning Declan. “Who came up with that?”

“Get it,” Garrett said, snickering. “She’s a shepherd.” Of course it would have to be Garrett.

“She’s a shepherd in a hurry,” Solace said, the sound of a chair scraping against the floor following her words.

“Could we not have decided on something better?” Cal rubbed his forehead. Hell, he did not need to have Haven in a Bo Peep getup running through his mind.

“I’m following. She’s at the door,” Solace said.

“We’re...” Cal sat forward and zoomed in with his binoculars. “I’ve got—”

“Someone’s approaching from her left,” Declan interrupted. “Male... Dark hair... Could be Middle Eastern.”

“I see him,” Garrett said, his previous humor gone. “Turning up the audio.”

Cal watched intently as the young man approached Haven while Solace took up a non-obtrusive position at her back. He refocused to get a good look at the young man who seemed harmless enough, but looks could be deceiving.

“Pardon me, Miss,” the young man said, stopping Haven when she was halfway down the steps.

“Yes,” she said, giving him a smile. “Can I help you?”

“Please. I’m new on campus. I’m following this map to get to Lawrence Hall,” he said, holding a piece of paper out to her, “but I can’t find this road here.” He pointed to a place on the sheet. “It’s University Way.”

“Hmm. Right. Let me see.” She took the piece of paper from him.

“I have to tell you guys,” Garrett said in a quiet tone, “this equipment is amazing.”

“Yeah, see this is an older map.” Haven moved closer to him. “They recently renamed the street to Woodson Lane after one of the alumni.” She smiled at the young man and handed the map back to him.

“Ah. Now it makes better sense.” He gave her a big smile. “Thank you. You’ve been so very helpful.” He turned and rushed down the steps, saying over his shoulder, “See you ‘round.”

Haven waved at him and then looked at her watch. “Crap.” She took off down the steps and then across the parking lot at a brisk pace.

Now where is she going in such a hurry?

Two hours later Cal found out, and it was a surveillance nightmare.

“How did we not know she was going to a party?” The four of them sat in the roomy customized van down the street from the frat house. Cal looked at Declan, Solace, and then Garrett in the light of the flickering monitors. “Anyone?”

“It is Friday night,” Solace said.

“I told you we needed surveillance in her suite,” Garrett piped in.

Solace shook her head and let out a disbelieving laugh. “That would so not have been a good idea.”

Garrett frowned at Solace. “They would’ve talked about it and we could’ve prepared.” He turned to Cal. “When I do my next sweep of their rooms for bugs, I can—”

“You’re still not doing it.” Cal shook his head when Garrett opened his mouth. “Not even audio.”

Cal had already had this discussion with the Colonel who’d insisted his daughter and her friends have at least some privacy, and Cal had agreed. Once she found out about the surveillance and how much time Garrett had spent in their rooms doing sweeps, she was going to be pissed anyhow. The Colonel had figured she’d be able to forgive the intrusion into her public life. Her private one? No.

“So what do we do?” Declan questioned, peering out the back window. “The party’s in full swing.” He looked back at Cal and then at the other two. “Well?”

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Garrett shrugged. “Divide and conquer?”

Cal nodded. “That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Solace put in her ear comm. “Assignments?”

Ten minutes later, everyone had checked in.

Solace had worked her way into the party with a soda in one hand and her eyes on Haven, while Declan meandered past the various cars parked up and down the street and watched the comings and goings at the front door.

Cal had worked his way behind the property and had topped the little rise overlooking the pool and pulled out his binoculars. The crowd had overflowed into the back yard regardless of the dropping temperatures.

And there was Haven with her friends.

“I wonder if there’s a dog I can appropriate around here somewhere,” Declan muttered in his ear.

“I’ve got Haven in my sights,” Solace said, her tone just as low. “A dog?”

Sometimes Cal felt like he had a bad sitcom playing out in his head, especially with the back and forth conversations and jabbing between his three friends.

“Realism,” Declan explained. “Blending into the background. Anything to give me a

damned excuse to be walking up and down this street talking to myself.”

“I feel you, man,” Garrett said from his place in the van, his tone serious. “But it’d have to be a suitable dog for a guy like you.”

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted a boxer.”

“I don’t know,” Garrett began, “I see you as more of a chihuahua kinda dude.”

Cal snickered as laughter filled his ear from Solace and Garrett while he set up a telescopic parabolic microphone and adjusted the sights to focus in on his target.

Solace sobered enough to say, “French poodle... Aw, piss. I’m getting looks again.”

Cal zoomed in on Solace. She wasn’t far behind the group of girls and was most definitely getting a few strange looks. He adjusted the sound to compensate for the level of noise and music. “Speak into your cup,” he told her, grinning.

“I—”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Garrett said, interrupting her. “They probably figure you’re some drunk cougar looking to score.”

“I am not old enough to be a cougar.” From his perch, Cal could see the grin on Solace’s face, even though her words were slightly heated.

Declan chuckled. “Think about it. There’s gotta be some underage guys there—eighteen...nineteen.”

“I’d say that’d put her in cougar territory,” Garrett added with a snicker.

“Come on, folks,” Cal said. “Focus.” He pulled his attention back to Haven while Solace groused about idiot teammates. “Garrett, cut everyone’s voices down by about a third for my ear comm.”

“How’s that,” he said—the volume much lower—while Destiny’s voice came at him. “Let’s stand over there.”

“Better.”

Declan and Garret continued to rib Solace, who couldn’t say much—something he was sure they would pay for later—but it wasn’t loud enough to get jumbled with the voices he needed to hear.

He smiled as Destiny grabbed Hope’s hand, while Hope took Haven’s, and Destiny’s tiny form pushed through the crowd to one of several patio heaters.

He blocked out the yammering starting up in his ear again—mainly between Declan and Garrett—and watched and listened while the three girls stood drinking and chatting. He relaxed his shoulders and let out a relieved sigh, having Haven once more in his, and, of course, his team’s, sights.

“Haven.”

Cal scanned across the patio to see a massive guy in a football jersey pushing his way through the crowd toward her.

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“Come dance with me,” he said—his speech slurred—and grabbed Haven’s wrist. Cal growled low when the drunk pulled on her to follow him while Haven resisted.

“Shit,” Solace whispered. “We’ve got trouble.” A sudden silence filled his ear comm as Solace moved in closer to the girls.

“Brayden, get out of here with your stupid, drunk ass.”

“Destiny... He’s too big,” Cal muttered when she put herself between Haven and the aforementioned drunk ass.

“What’s happening?” Garrett asked—his voice wiped of all humor—while Cal did all he could to hold himself in place.

“Davidson has it.” He hoped he sounded calm because inside he was as desperate to get to his woman as Garrett.

“Mind your own damned business, you little slut. Everyone knows...” The jock sneered as Destiny’s dark mocha complexion turned ashen. “More important, you know what you are.” He pushed her hard and she stumbled toward one of the heaters, but Hope caught her arm and steadied her while a gasp came up from the crowd.

“What just happened?” Garrett demanded.

Solace moved closer, her harsh whisper of, “Where’s my gun when I need it,” blending in with several people calling for someone to get Brayden out of there.

“Goddammit, I’m going in!”

“Stand down, Wallace!” That was all he needed—Garrett rushing in and killing the guy.

“Fuck th—”

“Garrett!” Cal knew it wasn’t easy to sit by helplessly, but they had to trust Solace to do what she was there to do. “Solace is moving in.”

“You just made a big mistake.” Haven’s deadly calm voice hit him.

Cal pulled his attention away from Solace moving up behind the bully to find Haven grabbing the hand covering her wrist. “A great big one,” she said, pulling the swaying guy toward her and then giving him a swift kick to the shin.

The drunk yelled out and stumbled while Haven kept hold of his hand at her wrist. She swung her arm up and rotated his arm—hyperextending his elbow—before grabbing the same wrist with her free hand and twisting it as she moved behind him. He yelled out again as she used the leverage she’d gained to drive him to his knees.

Cal grinned as she finished him off by planting her foot on his ass and sending him sprawling with a hard push.

Haven had taken the asshole down in seconds. It was a beautiful thing to behold.

Several people in the crowd cheered while others laughed and pointed at Brayden as he lumbered to his feet, yelling, “You fucking bitch!”

Cal took a few steps down the hill when the drunk made a move to lunge for Haven but stopped himself from dropping his equipment and running when more guys in

jerseys grabbed him and pulled him away.

“You better watch yourself,” Brayden threatened before the others took him through the parting crowd.

Cal let out a relieved breath and refocused his equipment on the trio. Haven seemed no worse for wear and basically ignored everyone else but her friends. She ran a hand over Destiny’s arm. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Destiny said, visibly shaking it off and giving her friend a small grin. “So, when are you going to teach that kung fu shit?”

Haven laughed and shook her head. “Jujitsu. And, yes, we need to look into that,” she said, pulling her in for a quick hug and then stepping back and looking between the two of them. “I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Hope pulled Destiny in for her own hug, her low, “Don’t let that asshole’s words take up space in your head,” almost too quiet for him to hear over the surrounding noise.

“Come on,” Destiny said, linking her arms with the two women flanking her. They went inside with Hope complaining about grabby men and the other two laughing.

“Declan.” Cal took off the headgear and started putting the equipment in its carrier, all the while giving instructions. “Watch the front. Make sure the girls get to their car without incident.”

“Gotcha.”

“Solace—”

“I’m following now,” she said. “Your girl’s one tough cookie.” Her voice held a definite smile and perhaps some admiration. Her tone sobered. “Garrett?”

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“Yeah,” he answered—his voice strained.

“Your girl is fine. I like her.”

“Who said she was my girl?” He let out a huff. “She’s just little and I don’t like bullies.”

Solace sighed as she disappeared into the house. “If you say so.”

Cal paused and did a final sweep of the area while Garrett grumbled about women and jumping to conclusions. He was good to go. The van was less than five minutes away, so he hoofed it down the hill to the point where he could make his way back to where it was parked. The Colonel had said his daughter could take care of herself, and he hadn’t been kidding. So...

He faltered in his steps. Maybe she wasn’t so delicate after all.

And there he went getting hard again. He adjusted himself and kept walking.

5

“Hope, as your friend, I’m not letting you go out like that.”

Haven sat on the edge of her bed and grinned at Destiny complaining outside her open doorway in the three-bedroom dorm suite they shared with Hope. She pulled on her Mukluks and stuffed the bottoms of her jeans down inside the calf-high faux fur cuffs before standing up and grabbing her belt.

“I like them,” Hope could be heard saying from her room. “They match my dress.”

“Right. You’re wearing adress.” Destiny put one fist on her hip and gestured with the other holding her spike-heeled leather boots. “With tennis shoes.”

Ah, the great shoe debate. Not everyone was as comfortable in five-inch heels as Destiny, especially Hope who didn’t want to add any additional inches to her five-foot-eleven height. Destiny caught Haven’s gaze, her dark brown eyes with flecks of gold flashing their irritation. “Help me out here.”

“Leave me out of it,” Haven said, shaking her head and snickering when Destiny cast a disgusted look at her own footwear.

“What am I saying?” Destiny said with a grimace. “You’re just as bad.”

Haven ran her belt through the loops of her jeans while walking over to Destiny in the hallway where the doors to their three rooms converged. She peeked into Hope’s middle room to find her other friend dressed in a sleeveless paisley corduroy dress with a purple long-sleeved turtleneck underneath and a pair of purple sneakers. Her waist-length, wavy hair was twisted up in a hair clip.

“Awww... You look cute.”

Hope grinned at her and did a little pirouette. “I thought so.” Hope turned, picked up her heavy jacket and book bag off the bed, and then left her room. She walked past Destiny and Haven, going down the hallway toward their combination kitchen, dining, and living area.

“Come on,” Destiny cajoled, following after, with Haven taking up the rear of their small entourage while tightening her belt, “at least wear a pair of pumps.”

Hope shook her head. “I refuse to tower over my Historical Foundations instructor.” She set her book bag down to put on her jacket. “He gives me the stink eye when he has to look up at me. Besides, it’s what I’m expected to wear. Kindergarten teachers should look casual and approachable.” Hope lifted one foot out in front of her and moved it back and forth. “You know what?” She smiled over at Destiny while giving a covert wink at Haven, her bright green eyes twinkling with mischief. “I think I’m going to get a pair of these in every color.”

Destiny groaned and pulled out a chair from their small dinette set and sat down hard. “Why do I even try?” She took her time putting on her boots and gave Haven and Hope a broad smile after she’d zipped them up. “Now these,” she said, sticking her feet out in front of her—her cheeks flushing in pleasure, “these are what I call appropriate footwear.” She stood up and adjusted her skirt. Haven’s diminutive friend was all of five foot—almost—and just managed to meet Haven eye to eye in all of her shoes of choice.

The woman didn’t own a pair of flats.

“I’d twist an ankle in those and have farther to fall than you do,” Hope said, giving a wary glance at Destiny’s feet.

“Yes, but you’d look fabulous on the way down.” Destiny laughed and grabbed the matching jacket to her boots, and then slipped it on over her slightly curved frame.

Haven glanced at the clock. The three of them still had a few minutes before needing to leave. Monday morning classes always seemed to be the hardest to get themselves out the door for, and most of the time they waited until the last second. It was also a colder morning than usual and they’d already discussed how they weren’t looking forward to going outside.

“Anyone want coffee to take with?” Haven went over to their kitchen and turned on

the Keurig.

“Not me,” Hope said, heading to the door. “I think I’m going to make tracks. Dr. Shortstuff likes us there early. Says it shows a good work ethic.” Haven grinned over at Hope’s grimacing face. “But if you ask me, I think he’s there early because his mom throws him out of her basement.”

Haven and Destiny laughed at Hope’s wide-eyed expression.

“I did not mean to say that. I’ve gotta start watching my mouth.” She let out a nervous laugh. “Anyhow, gotta go. Love you guys,” she said, giving Destiny a head nod and what Haven could only describe as a meaningful look before walking out the door and shutting it behind her.

Haven put a pod in the coffee maker, placed a small to-go cup under the dispenser, and then glanced at Destiny who had come up beside her. “You want this one?”

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“No, I’m good.” Destiny took in and let out a deep breath. “I need you to watch your back today.”

Surprised at her friend’s serious tone, Haven turned and leaned against the counter, finding Destiny’s face tense. “Now you sound like my dad,” she told her. “Why the warning?”

“Come on.” Destiny turned to pull the sweet Italian cream coffee creamer from the refrigerator. “Hope and I are both worried about what Brayden might do today if he finds you alone.” She sat the creamer on the counter and grabbed Haven’s hands, a scowl marring her expression. “He’s got a bad reputation.”

Haven squeezed her friend’s hands. She loved Destiny and Hope like they were her own sisters—maybe more, if that was possible. This was one of the reasons why. They all looked out for each other. “If he’s stupid enough to try something again, I’ll handle it just like I did Friday night.”

“He was drunk Friday night.”

“So?”

“So, I’m sure he’s sober by now. He’s also big, and mean, and he thinks the world owes him whatever he wants.” Destiny leveled her gaze at her. “You told him no. You also embarrassed him.”

“Well, he shouldn’t have been such an asshole.” Haven laughed, but Destiny didn’t join in. If anything, her expression darkened even more.

“That’s right. He’s an asshole, but an asshole who outweighs you by nearly two hundred pounds—all of it muscle.” Destiny squeezed Haven’s hands again before letting them go. “Just watch out. I don’t want to have to go to jail for murder if he touches you.” One side of her mouth turned up in a grin. “And you know I’d do it.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that, now would we?” She pulled Destiny in for a hug, smiling into her friend’s straightened black hair. “We all know orange isn’t your best color.”

* * *

“I still can’t believe you found them making out in the stacks,” Haven said, laughing with the other two student workers closing up the library, puffs of white filling the night air between them. The temperature had done a major drop, and after only a few seconds of being outside she had already begun shivering. She shut and locked the main double doors and gave the handles a little jiggle.

“Yeah,” Heather said, shaking her head. “Right there in front of the human physiology section.”

“Would that be considered irony?” Haven and her coworkers started down the steps, each of them still chuckling

Mark stopped Haven with a hand on her arm when they reached the sidewalk. “Are you sure we can’t walk with you?” he said, frowning past her. He was sweet, but it was late and she didn’t want to put him or Heather out by making them spend any more time than necessary out in the bitter cold.

“I’m positive. You guys are just over there.” She nodded toward Hampton and Fields Halls sitting side by side—only a five-minute walk, where hers was a good fifteen using the sidewalks that were better lit instead of the parking lot.

“What if we go get my car and drive you over?” Heather offered, pulling her long coat around her.

“Heather, you’re freezing. Get home.” The lights were bright in front of the library, and she could see their cheeks and noses were already turning red. “I’ll be fine.” She gave them both a playful nudge. “Go, get thee to some heat.”

Heather hesitated—her indecision clear until a gust of wind hit them. “Okay, but be careful,” she said before taking off at a brisk pace.

“If you’re sure.” Mark still seemed hesitant. He glanced over his shoulder at the quickly retreating Heather and then back at Haven saying, “Just be careful,” before turning and following after the other girl. “Hey, wait up.”

“Be careful. Be careful...” she groused, watching them leave. “Why is everyone telling me to be careful lately?” She huddled down into her leather bomber jacket and started in the opposite direction—ready to get in her warm bed.

“I should’ve driven.”

She was tired and it had been a long afternoon and evening. The library closed at eleven, but by the time the three of them had gotten the last of the stragglers—including the lovebirds—out and gathered loose books to put on carts for shelving in the morning, it had been close to midnight before they’d left the building.

She hefted her purse higher on her shoulder and contemplated calling Destiny or Hope to come pick her up but decided against it. Besides, by the time they got up, put on clothes, and drove to the library, she could already be there. She wrapped her arms around herself and started down the sidewalk.

Fifteen minutes in the cold wasn’t going to kill her.

But from now on, she needed to pay more attention to the weather. If she had, she might have at least worn a heavier and longer coat. She'd zipped up the front of her jacket over her bulky sweater, but the biting cold had gone right through what she'd thought that morning had made a cute fashion statement.

Now, not so much.

Well at least her feet weren't freezing. Destiny could fuss all she wanted, but these Mukluks were worth their weight in gold at the moment. She huddled deeper into her jacket. "I'm definitely driving next week." This walking across campus by herself in the dark and freezing cold was for the birds.

She took another couple of steps and then stopped and perused the nearly empty parking lot—then faced the nice, well-lit route she normally took on the sidewalk at night and grimaced—then back. She could just make out the outline of Fischer Hall past the few poles pooling small circles of light here and there, beckoning her to just do it. She took a hesitant step toward it but stopped. Her dad would blow a gasket if he knew she was even contemplating walking across a notwell-lit area—even if it would slice a good ten minutes off her time cutting through it, maybe more if she hustled.

A particularly hard, cold wind hit her. Okay, this wasn't the time to wonder WWDS—What Would Duncan Sheppard Do. She stepped off the curb and fast-walked across the road to the parking lot. "Okay, Haven, just hoof it."

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She had made it halfway across the parking lot with her head down against gusts of bracing wind when the snick of a car door opening had her looking up. The driver's side door of the car directly in her path stood wide open. She slowed her pace when no one got out.

"Okay. Not suspicious at all," she muttered, pushing her hair out of her face while her heart set up a rapid tattoo. She altered her path and took a wider berth around the passenger side of the vehicle.

No sense tempting fate.

She passed the car but made sure to keep an eye on it. Between the black tinted windows and the unlit spot the car was sitting in, she couldn't see inside. So, she walked faster.

But not fast enough.

Running feet came up behind her before she was thrown hard against one of the other few parked cars, knocking the air from her lungs. A hard, massive body pressed her into the cold metal frame before she could take a good breath.

"I'll teach you, bitch."

Brayden. She could almost hear Destiny's I told you so.

"No one," he whispered in her ear while pressing his lower body against hers, "especially a nobody like you, is going to embarrass me and get away with it."

Oh, God. He was hard and grinding himself into her butt. She took a few shallow breaths to keep from throwing up. He had her well and truly trapped, but if she could just get some space between them, she could do something, anything, to defend herself.

“Get off me!” she finally managed to get out while struggling in his grasp and pushing against the car to try and gain some leverage. It wasn’t working. So she stomped her feet behind her, determined to smash his toes when the glint of his knife in the dim light froze her in place.

“I’ll get off you once I’ve—”

“Mine!” The nearly inhuman roar split the darkness seconds before Haven found herself free. She turned and stumbled away from the car to find a red-haired mountain of a man knocking the knife out of Brayden’s hand before throwing him to the asphalt under a patch of light, and then landing on top of him.

“You...fucking...son-of-a...bitch...” The man sat on her assailant’s stomach and pummeled him with both fists, punctuating each of his growled words with a strike to Brayden’s face.

“Stop! He’s out!” Haven didn’t think and grabbed ahold of the stranger’s shoulder when he raised a fist to strike Brayden again. She was glad he’d shown up, but she didn’t want the man killing him. “Enough!”

The mountain stilled at her touch, his great body heaving as he lowered his arm. He hung his head and rested his clenched hands on his thighs, while his harsh breath sawing in and out turned the air surrounding him white. Brayden lay beneath him not moving.

Was he dead?

She took a closer look to make sure he was still breathing. He was.

Haven still had ahold of her savior but let go. She doubted he would harm her since he'd come to her rescue and all, but if the last few minutes had proven something to her, it was to not take anything for granted. She rubbed her unexpectedly wet fingers together and then held her hand up to the meager light.

Blood.

She looked the man over. How could she have missed the blood running from under the sleeve of his black t-shirt?

“God, you’re hurt.” She searched around the parking lot and wondered where he’d come from before letting her gaze rest on his broad back. He certainly hadn’t been out walking—not without a coat. “You need to have this looked at.” She reached out to him but pulled her hand back when he turned his head up to her, his narrowed, angry blue eyes turning soft the longer they stared at each other.

She gave him a hesitant smile—one she thought he was going to return until he closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath about breaking protocol.

“Um, maybe it would be a good idea to call campus police now.”

He didn’t say anything, just shook his head and let out a short laugh, saying, “I’m so screwed.”

Why would calling the police have him screwed? Wait...

“You’re not wanted by the police or anything. Are you?” She took a step away from him.

“No, Haven. But I have a feeling I’m going to have one angry father on my hands as soon as I contact him.”

“Hey, how do you know my n... Wait a minute. Whose father?” she asked, stepping closer to him again, her anger rising. “Notmyfather.”

Oh, if her dad had decided she needed babysitting after all these years, she was going to be one pissed off daughter. The mountain looked up at her again and gave her a hesitant nod.

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She searched every inch of his freckled face while heat pooled low in her belly at his intense gaze, and her need to vent her anger at him receded. Hewasbleeding after all, and hehadstopped Brayden. She eyed the man lying so still on the ground underneath her savior and shuddered.

She lifted her eyes to the man who she was fairly certain hadn't looked away from her. And call her crazy—maybe it was the surge of relief flooding her—but she had the inexplicable need for this stranger to take her in his arms.

It was probably because he'd saved her life.

Right, Haven. That's exactly why.

6

Cal had wantedto get up close and personal with Haven, but this wasn't what he'd imagined, especially seeing how pissed she was. Too bad he was about to make matters worse. He was getting pretty pissed himself as the rush of adrenaline began crashing on him.

He pushed away from the unconscious lump beneath him, and then stood and gave the ass a hard shove with his booted foot for good measure before rounding on her.

“You just scared the shit out of me!” Her eyes widened as she took a faltering step back. “Do you know how hard that is? To scare someone who's seen enough scary shit in his life to be mostly immune to it?” She slowly shook her head. “Well, believe me, it ain't easy. Dammit, you nearly took ten years off my life.” He ran a slightly

trembling hand through his hair.

“I... I...” Her hazel eyes narrowed while the cupid-bow mouth he’d wanted to kiss for a couple of weeks drew into a straight line. “Look here, buddy,” she grumbled, stepping into his space and poking his chest with her pointy finger. “If anyone has the right to be hacked off right now, it’s me.” She poked him again. “And who gave you the right to talk to me like that. I know it wasn’t my dad.”

“Your dad...”

He glanced down at her finger still anchored to his chest and then took a deep breath and paced away—anything to calm down and keep himself from throwing her over his shoulder and taking off. Hell, he might still for her own safety and his own sanity. He eyed the kid on the ground and resisted the urge to kick him.

Her startled gaze flew to his when he turned and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Do you have any idea what this bastard might have done to you?” He struggled to gentle his tone. The last thing he needed was for her to be afraid of him. “What if I hadn’t been here?” Just the mere idea had him close to losing it. If she hadn’t stopped him moments before...

Cal squeezed her shoulders. “What then? What would I have told your dad?”

Haven cut her eyes away from his. “I would have gotten away.”

No, she wouldn’t.

“So, what now,” she said, pulling out of his grasp, her defiant hazel eyes glaring at him. “Are you going to tell on me.” She crossed her arms. Too bad the action didn’t hide her tremors he was certain weren’t just from the cold. He had a feeling the reality of the situation had started sinking in.

An intense stare-off ensued until Cal's anger slowly drained away. The silence between them finally ended when the asshole let out a pained groan. Cal ignored him, but Haven broke eye contact and frowned at the guy. "We might need to call an ambulance when we call the police."

"We don't have to." He spared his own glance at the kid's swelling, bleeding face and shrugged. "I'd just as soon let him suffer." If the kid laid there and rotted, he wouldn't care. "It's your decision."

Her bemused expression led to a short unexpected laugh. "Yeah, well, even though I'm kinda all for letting him fester and die, I think it's best he stays alive to face the consequences." She went to where she'd dropped her purse during her earlier struggle and picked it up. "I'll call." He came up behind her while she rummaged through it and pulled out her phone. "And then I'm calling my dad to tell him I don't need a watchdog."

He reached over her shoulder, plucked her phone from her hand, and then grinned at her cute scowl when she whirled around.

"Okay, you had stopped pissing me off, but now you're doing it again." Her scowl deepened. "And don't grin at me."

"You can't call your father." He put the phone behind his back.

"Oh, I can't?" She raised one brow and smirked. "Watch me."

She reached around him and made a grab for it, but he quickly put his other hand behind him and switched hands. She went around his back, but he held it up high and then glanced over his shoulder as she stretched her arm up as far as it would go and did a few short hops.

“Look, you...you...hell, whoever you—”

“Cal.”

“What?”

“My name. It’s Cal. Cal Rothe.”

“Okay, Cal Rothe, give me my damn cell.”

She jumped several more times to make a grab for it, but with his height and long arms, she wasn’t even close. He did, however, almost drop it when with each jump she brushed against his body.

Give me strength.

He turned around with the phone still lifted high while she stomped her foot and crossed her arms.

“He’s going to find out one way or another,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “So why not let me call him? Plus, I’m ready to get out of this cold.” She looked him up and down, a fleeting look of concern crossing her face when her gaze lingered on his shoulder. “Where’s your coat? You have to be nearly frozen.”

“I haven’t paid attention.”

At least not for himself. He had paid attention to Haven shivering more and more the longer they’d stood in the frigid air. The van was still running, but letting her warm up in there would unleash a whole ‘nother set of problems. She’d see their setup. “I promise I’ll give you your phone, but first I need to make a call. Then we need to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“Do you promise?” He held back a laugh at her pinched face.

“Promise,” she said in a rush.

“Good.” He grimaced at the locked screen before lifting his eyes to hers. “What’s your passcode?”

She pressed her lips together, then let out a sigh. “One...two...three...fourfivesix.”

“Original.” He arched a brow at her slight shrug and then dialed Declan, who answered on a yawn. “Whoever this is, it had better be good.”

“It’s me.”

“What... Whose phone are you on?”

“Haven’s”

“Haven’s? Why do you have Haven’s phone? Is she hurt? Do I need to get everyone?” Declan’s rapid-fire questions didn’t give him a chance to get a word in. “Well?”

“So, I can answer now?”

“Yes,” Declan said on a low growl. “You can answer. Just tell me what the fuck’s going on.”

“Haven was nearly killed tonight.” Cal held up a hand when Haven began to protest, then used it to cover the speaker. “What?” he asked while a string of expletives filled his ear. “So...you weren’t?”

“I...” She frowned and pursed her lips. Damn, even with the mulish set of her mouth, he wanted nothing more than to kiss her. She let out an irritated huff and stuffed her hands in her pockets. “Carry on.”

He grinned and uncovered the speaker.

“Cal...Cal...Where the hell are you?”

“I’m in the parking lot in front of the library about halfway to the other side. Bring my car and a medical kit.”

“Who needs a medical kit?”

“Me. Just a nick.”

“Right. Last time it was just a nick you’d nearly severed a finger.”

It was true. “Look, I need my car here so I can call campus security. We’ll let them decide about the ambulance.”

“I’m getting a headache.” Cal grinned, imaging his friend’s grumpy expression. “You said it was just a nick. And campus security?”

“Remember the drunk from Friday n—”

“Friday night?” Haven blurted out. “You were watching me Friday night?” She looked up into the night sky, saying through clenched teeth, “Dad...”

“What’d you do,” Declan asked, with a slight chuckle, “kill him? That’d make Garrett happy.”

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Cal didn't answer right away, his focus on the slender column of Haven's neck as she mouthed complaints to the heavens.

"Dammit, tell me you didn't kill him." Declan's voice had sobered. "You did. Didn't you? Oh, man—"

"I didn't kill him—just...almost."

"Oh, okay. Well that's alright then."

"Yeah," Cal said, shaking his head. "So, are you gonna do what I asked or not?"

"I'm already at your car." A car door opening and shutting filled his ears. "Give me ten and I'll be there."

"Make it seven," Cal said, disconnecting the call. "Now. I'm going to hand you your phone," he said, holding it out to Haven but pulling it back when she made a grab for it. "But under two conditions."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Deadly."

He waited while she searched his gaze, finally saying after several long, interminable seconds. "Okay. What?"

"Thank you," he said with a sense of relief. "First, I need you to trust me and let me

handle the campus police when they get here. I'll call them as soon as Declan arrives."

"And the second?"

"Let me talk to your father and tell him what's happened." She opened her mouth and then closed it immediately—her jaw working. "Then I promise tomorrow I'll tell you everything I can."

Cal expected Haven to argue, but she surprised him instead when she asked in a solemn voice, "So, you know my dad well?"

"Very."

He held his breath while Haven turned away from him, her quietly spoken, "Do you work with him?" almost lost in the wind picking up. She visibly shivered and he'd have given anything to take her in his arms.

He hedged her question. "Tomorrow. I promise."

More seconds passed while his body finally registered the seeping cold and throbbing in his shoulder he'd ignored up until this point. It didn't matter. All that mattered was gaining Haven's trust—for him, a stranger.

She took in a shuddering breath and squared her shoulders before facing him again, her eyes swimming. "Okay. Tomorrow." She inclined her head toward him. "You promise?"

"I do."

She blinked and a lone tear tracked down her cheek—then another.

She sniffled and scrubbed one side of her face, saying with a hiccupping chuckle. “I have no idea why I’m crying.”

It was the most natural thing to step close and envelop Haven in his arms. Hell, even if she didn’t need the contact, he certainly did. “Reaction’s setting in,” he told her, holding her close. He closed his eyes, relishing how good she felt pressed against him—how right. His heart set into a rapid rhythm when she rested her head against his chest while her silky hair caught in his stubble where he rubbed his cheek over it.

This was where she should be—always. His heart beat harder when the tentative brush of her hands moved up his sides and around his waist as she burrowed against him.

Minutes passed while they held each other in the silent cold until Cal pulled away enough to look down at her. Haven blinked—another tear falling. He crouched low for his lips to capture and savor the salty taste. “Are you okay?” he murmured against her smooth skin. She took in a deep breath and nodded, brushing her cheek across his lips. He closed his eyes at the kiss-like sensation. “That’s good.”

She nodded again, turning her head enough so their mouths barely touched where she whispered across his lips, “Will you...kiss me?”

Cal groaned. He shouldn’t, but if Haven needed this comfort, he’d give it. He gathered her close and gently pressed his mouth to hers, his senses nearly overloading at the barely there touch of the lips he’d longed to taste. He kept it light—letting her set the pace—her timid exploration more exciting than any wanton kiss from his past.

The kiss was a lesson in restraint—one he used to learn the contours of her soft mouth with each tentative pass while his tongue took fleeting tastes of the little divot in her bottom lip.

He held onto his control when everything inside him begged him to take over. He didn't give in, even when her hands twisting in the back of his shirt and her body melting against his set his pulse racing. Finally, her slight whimper and the sudden, desperate press of her mouth did him in.

He growled and hauled her close—eating at her mouth while his tongue swept across her closed lips begging for entrance. She opened for him on a sigh. A groan built low in his belly at the taste flooding his senses while her tongue darted against his with each of his forays into the warm cavern of her mouth.

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She sucked his tongue deep and he nearly lost it, her moan vibrating through his body when he lifted and pressed her against the nearest vehicle. He needed her to feel what she was doing to him—to know how hard he was for her. He ran one hand over her firm ass while the other anchored itself at the back of her head, holding her in place while they owned each other's mouths. The slight weight of her legs wrapped around his middle and pulled him into her core where she rubbed against his straining cock.

God, he needed inside her in the worst way.

“Ahem.”

Nothing registered with him at first, but then the louder, “Cal,” finally reached through his lust-fogged brain enough to make him aware they weren't alone. Both of their hot, panting breaths filled the space between them when they came up for air.

“Declan,” Cal said, looking over at his grinning friend, his breathing still rapid. When had he gotten here? “You have the worst timing.”

“I know. I made it in five,” he said. “But time isn't something we have a lot of here. Now do we?” Cal followed Declan's gaze to the now rousing asshole he'd pretty much forgotten about. “I went ahead and contacted the campus cops since you were, um, otherwise occupied.”

Cal took an unsteady breath and rested his forehead against Haven's, a slow guilt filling him at how he'd lost control of himself after what she'd just been through. “Let's get you warm,” he whispered, looking into her eyes. He didn't see any condemnation there, but it didn't help.

“I’ve warmed up a lot in the last few minutes,” she whispered back with a shy smile. Her legs slid down over his hips as he pulled her away from the car.

“Come on,” Cal said, taking her hand once she was standing. He pulled her after him to where Declan had left the SUV running. He opened the passenger door—a blast of welcome heat hitting them—then picked her up and set her in the seat.

“Oh,” she moaned, sticking her hands out toward the vents. “Heat’s never felt so good.”

“I’ll be back.” He closed the door and went to Declan standing over Brayden with his most sinister stare.

“You broke my nose,” the kid complained glaring up at Cal through swollen eyes while gingerly touching his face.

“You’re lucky I didn’t rip it off.” He crouched down in front of him, the asshole’s eyes widening when he said, “If it were up to me, you’d be gone—permanently.” Cal glanced up at Declan. “You say you called the police?”

“Police!” Brayden attempted to stand, but Cal pushed him back on his ass and stood up over him.

“Again, be grateful.”

“Yeah,” Declan said. “I kinda hated to break you two apart. I figure they’ll be here in a few seconds.”

It was, in fact, a few seconds later the flashing blue lights of three campus cruisers surrounded them, with the vehicles’ occupants immediately getting out. An older officer stepped forward and took charge.

“What’s the problem here? I…” He peered closer at the man on the ground. “Brayden Collins?” The officer frowned at Brayden’s battered face. “Who assaulted you, son?”

A slow smile spread across Brayden’s mouth, but he winced before it became full-blown and pointed at Cal.

“Did you do this to him?” the officer asked, placing his hand on his gun.

“Yes, sir. I did.” Cal glanced toward his vehicle where Haven watched through the windshield and then back at the officer. “Would you care to know why?”

Officer—Cal finally checked out the name on his chest—Johnson eyed Cal and then way up at Declan before motioning his other men over. “It better be good. This boy is one of our starting linebackers.”

“He’s also an attempted rapist and maybe more.” He raised his voice over the denials coming up at him from the ground and motioned over toward the light pole where the knife had landed during their scuffle. “If you collect that knife as evidence, the only prints you’ll find belong to your boy here. I found him forcing himself,” he said the last through clenched teeth, “on the young woman sitting in my car and threatening her with it.”

“Doug,” Officer Johnson said, “put some gloves on and go collect that knife and find some kind of evidence bag to put it in.”

“I’ve got some manila envelopes,” Doug said going over to his car.

“That’ll work,” said Officer Johnson. “And while you’re at it, grab a set of cuffs.”

“Officer?” Brayden let out a slight moan. “I’m hurt pretty bad. But if someone can help me up, I can explain.”

Officer Johnson gave Brayden another once over, saying, “Don’t worry, son. We’ll help you and let you tell your side.”

Brayden smirked up at Cal while Officer Johnson pulled a pad and pen out of his shirt pocket and started taking notes.

“First of all, your name.”

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“Callahan Simpson.” He pulled his wallet out and handed the man his fake license.

After writing a few notes, Officer Johnson handed it back. “So you just happened to be close by?”

He would have to play this just right to make it all fit. “I was waiting for Haven—my girlfriend,” he said, nodding toward the car and ignoring Declan’s quick, indrawn breath. “It’s her late night to work at the library. I must’ve dozed off.” He hadn’t, of course. He’d already gotten out of the van to shadow her from a distance while cussing a blue streak in his head. “So I didn’t see her come out to pull up and get her. I guess she didn’t see my car in the dark and started walking across the parking lot to her dorm.” He gave the officer what he hoped came off as a sheepish look—one Declan coughed in his hand over. “I didn’t ask, but I’m sure she was mad at me.”

Officer Johnson held up his finger in a “wait a minute” gesture, wrote some more, and then nodded. “Go on.”

“I woke up when Haven screamed.”

Brayden tugged on the officer’s pants. “Wait a min—”

“Son,” Officer Johnson said, holding up his hand. “You’ll get the chance to give a statement soon enough.” He looked back at Cal. “So, she screamed.”

“Yes, sir. I drove across the parking, but I guess he didn’t hear me.” He shuddered at the memory of seeing the knife poised at Haven’s neck—something he didn’t have to fake. His next words had his tone growing more and more fierce. “He had her pressed

against a car and was...grindingagainst her with that knife to her neck.” He stopped and took several breaths. If the officer hadn’t been there, he’d have beaten the guy senseless again. “I jumped out of my car and just reacted. I got sliced in the process,” he said, bringing the officer’s attention to his wounded shoulder. “The blood on the knife is mine.”

Officer Johnson took a closer look at Cal’s shoulder. “Do you need medical attention?”

“No, sir. It’s just a nick.”

Declan coughed again.

The officer nodded and wrote for a few more seconds while Brayden sat fuming and giving Cal a death glare.

“You might also want to know,” Cal said, grabbing the officer’s attention, “he accosted her Friday night—”

“No...” Brayden frowned at Cal and then looked at the officer and attempted a grin. “I didn’t. She... You see, she’s wanted me for a while.”

“Sure,” Cal said, his temper rising again along with his voice, “and that’s way she knocked you on your ass in front of the whole party. It’s why you had your ass out here hoping to catch her alone!”

Declan grabbed ahold of Cal’s arm and pulled him back when he would’ve gone after the coward, saying under his breath, “He’s not worth it, man.”

Brayden glared up at him. “I was drunk.” He gave a pleading look back at Officer Johnson. “You know how it is.”

“Yes, son. I sure do.”

“Here you go,” Doug said, walking up and holding the cuffs out to Officer Johnson. “I’ve got the knife secured in my trunk.”

“Good.” Officer Johnson motioned for the other officer standing close by. “Charlie, come over here and help Doug get this young man up, if you would.” He nodded down at Brayden. “Then get the cuffs on h—”

“What!” Brayden struggled while Doug and Charlie helped him up. “You don’t understand. I—”

“You’re right, son, I don’t understand. Now, you have the right to remain silent...”

The next fifteen minutes were spent with the officers securing a struggling Brayden. Cal had actually enjoyed the show, particularly the part where they’d pepper sprayed his wounded face.

Declan had ended up giving a brief statement, saying he’d driven on campus by mistake and stopped to help—pointing to his SUV a good distance away—when he’d seen the guy on the ground. Neither Cal nor Declan acknowledged they knew each other. Cal had also convinced Officer Johnson that Haven was exhausted and too shaken to give a statement, asking if she could come in to their station the next day.

“I imagine she is,” the officer had replied, shaking his head. “You know, I got a daughter about the same age. If anyone...” He’d glanced at Haven who’d looked asleep. “That’ll be fine.”

Not long after, the officers drove away with a cursing Brayden in Officer Johnson’s back seat. Cal glanced at Declan. “How’s your car here?”

“I called Garrett and Solace on the way. They came in my car and waited in the van.” They both turned and waved over at Solace getting in Declan’s vehicle. “Garrett’ll take over the van.”

“Damn, I didn’t even notice you guys.”

“You were busy when we got here.” He glanced at Cal’s SUV. “So, what’re you gonna do?”

“Let’s just say I have a plan, but I have to run it by the Colonel first.”

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“Fair enough,” Declan said, yawning. “But from now on, let’s keep the midnight shenanigans to a minimum. Okay?” With that, he headed over to his car at a slow run.

Cal went over to his vehicle and opened the door as carefully as possible and got in, sitting back and breathing a sigh of relief after shutting it.

“I’m awake, you know.” Haven stretched and turned in her seat.

He glanced at the dash clock. It was going on two o’clock. “It’s a good thing you don’t have early class in the morning,” he said, turning to take in her mussed hair and slightly puffy eyes smudged with mascara.

God, she’s beautiful.

“Thank you for letting me handle the police.

She gave him a slight grin. “I told you I would. Are you going to tell me what all was said?” She grinned even bigger. “I saw Brayden get taken away.”

“Tomorrow.” He was surprised she didn’t push. “Yeah,” he said, grinning back, “and I don’t think he saw it coming. I think he believed I was going to be the one going off in cuffs for attacking him.”

“About that,” she said, looking down and picking at her jeans. “I never told you thank you for saving my life.” She looked up at him. “So, thank you.”

“I was just...” He almost said he was just doing his job, but that wasn’t quite the

truth. “I’m just glad I was here.”

She nodded, her brow furrowing. “But can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

She sat up straighter, her gaze searching his face. “Why did you yell mine before you tackled Brayden?”

“I did?”

“Mmmhmm.”

He should lie to her, but God help him he couldn’t.

“It’s because you are.”

7

Duncan left this bedroom and walked down the hall to his study with his secured cell clutched in his hand. He was still having trouble trying to wrap his head around his early morning conversation with Cal—if three o’clock could be considered morning. He sat down at his desk and spread his still trembling hands flat over the smooth surface, his short burst of laughter not a humorous one. Of all the things he’d expected to hear after putting a detail on Haven, her being attacked and almost killed by another student from her college wasn’t one of them.

God, he could have lost his daughter.

He scrubbed his hands over his face, then clenched his fists and brought them both down hard in front of him, rattling his desk lamp and nearly toppling family photos

and those of just Haven and Patsy.

“Damn it to hell!”

Duncan had God knew who threatening Haven and she'd ended up the target of some spoiled frat boy jock who'd decided he could do whatever the hell he wanted and get away with it.

If not for Cal.

Haven's okay.

It was the first thing Cal had blurted out before Duncan had fully gotten the phone to his ear—the litany Duncan had repeated over and over in his mind throughout Cal's report of the night's events.

Haven was okay, but Duncan wasn't positive he was okay yet.

Come to think of it, Cal hadn't sounded like he was quite okay either. His anger had escalated while relaying the information. His voice had gone hard when talking about her attacker but gentled when he said anything about Haven.

He'd also been apologetic for not telling Duncan about the incident at the frat party, thinking perhaps they should have been prepared for some kind of retaliation. Duncan had told him it wasn't anything he should worry about. Sure, he would have liked to have known, but Haven had handled herself. And if it was something she had felt he should be concerned about, she would have told him herself.

Maybe.

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He'd raised his daughter to be independent and pretty damned self-sufficient. Who was he to complain when she was exactly that?

He shook his head with a slight smile. No, Haven wouldn't have told him either. Knowing her, she wouldn't have given it another thought.

His jaw hardened. But obviously this Brayden Collins kid had. Too bad for him he'd just messed with the wrong man's daughter. His fingers itched to dial his contact with the superintendent's office of the State Police, but he'd wait until a decent hour.

He checked the time. It was going on four o'clock. He'd do it on his way to the school.

Haven may have been an adult, but she was still his little girl. He would start up there as soon as he could pull himself together and get on the road. He needed to see her for himself—hold her long enough to be sure she was okay. He just hoped whoever was watching would understand and know it was something that would be expected of him.

The asshole, as Cal had called him, had set in motion some things they couldn't control and now they had to adjust.

Duncan sat back in his seat and contemplated the plan Cal had come up with. The man had broken cover in a big way, and his presence had to be explained. And damned if it just might work.

Between, them, they'd decided Cal would give Haven as much information as

possible about their current situation after Duncan left the school later today. Neither of them wanted her to inadvertently give anything away when she saw him. As it was, Cal was sure she would raise holy hell once she found out.

He snorted. Cal had obviously learned a lot about his daughter the last couple of weeks.

And if he wasn't mistaken, Cal had more of an interest in his daughter than just as her protector—something Duncan hadn't expected. But Cal was a good man—a man he could trust. Hell, he'd trusted him enough to place his daughter in his hands.

Come to think of it, Haven might be just right for him.

Duncan righted the picture of Haven on his desk. At least he was going to get to spend time with her. He frowned. But it would need to be someplace public where anyone watching could see Haven's reactions and be assured Duncan wasn't telling his daughter the danger she was in.

He ran a finger over her smiling face. It wouldn't matter soon. Everything would be over in four days—well, more like three now. The private chartered jet would be flying him out Thursday night to make the nearly twelve-hour flight to Ankara. The capital city wasn't a neutral location, but it was the only one the Minister of Interior would agree to meet with the rebel leader.

So, Duncan was running out of time to find out who was behind the threat to Haven and no closer to being able to head off what he was expected to do once he got there—something only he and those pulling his strings knew.

Assassinate Mazhar Sadik.

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

Haven’s eyes startled open and body jumped under her blanket at Destiny’s loud exclamation in her ear. She wasn’t ready to get up. It had been close to three o’clock before she’d gone to bed, and between thoughts of the attack bouncing back and forth with those of Cal and that kiss—his declaration she was his—well, it had seemed like hours before she’d finally gotten to sleep.

And now she was surrounded. She blinked several times to bring Destiny and Hope into focus on either side of her bed before groaning and pulling the cover over her head.

“Maybe we should let her sleep,” Hope whispered. “And remember what we talked about. We can yell at her later.”

“Our best friend gets attacked and she doesn’t call us afterward, or at least wake us up when she gets home,” Destiny grouched. “Everyone is asking us because we should know. Talk about being blindsided. And you want to let her sleep. Unbelievable. Besides, she has to get up anyway.”

“Wh-wh-what?” Haven said, uncovering her head. She raised herself up on her elbows and squinted back and forth between her friends. “People want to know what?”

“Brayden Collins,” Destiny said, her bottom lip trembling.

Haven sat up all the way and rubbed the sleep from her widening eyes. “Are you about to cry?” Haven had only seen her friend cry twice since they’d met when they were five years old—other than from the occasional scraped knee. Both times the three friends had been alone in the treehouse behind Haven’s house.

The first was when Destiny's father had left her mother when she was eleven. The second was something they hadn't spoken of since the summer before they started college.

"What if I am?" A tear rolled down her face.

Haven looked at Hope, who was much more open with her emotions. Her fair complexion was slightly red and blotchy with fresh tears gathering. Hope took in a shuddering breath, saying, "What would we have done if we'd lost you?"

"But you didn't." Haven's gaze went between the two women before holding Destiny's liquid stare, saying, "I didn't want to cause you..." She shook her head and sniffled, her eyes welling up. "I wasn't sure if I was ready to talk about it yet, anyhow."

Destiny sat on the bed and grabbed Haven's hand, more tears tracking down her cheeks. "Then you could have talked about it with us sitting with you," she said, her unwavering gaze intense. "You know we would've done that."

Haven nodded and wiped her eyes.

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Hope sat on Haven's other side and wrapped an arm around her. "You know we love you."

"I love you guys too," Haven said while Destiny dropped her hand and wrapped both her slender arms around her and Hope and gathered them close.

They sat with their heads together, minutes passing while Haven whispered the fear she'd felt—something she wouldn't admit to anyone else. When she told them of her relief after Cal had barreled out of nowhere, she expected them to press her for more. They didn't. But she was sure the third degree wasn't far away. She let herself cry until she couldn't cry anymore while her best friends cried with her.

What would I do without these women in my life?

"Okay," Destiny finally said, breaking away from their little huddle and wiping her face. She'd lasted longer than Haven had thought she would. "Can I yell at you now?"

Haven and Hope laughed, with Hope sitting away from Haven but taking her hand.

"If you do, I won't tell you more about Cal."

"Yeah. Who is he? I don't recognize the name," Hope said, squeezing her hand. "Whoever he is, he deserves a big kiss for rescuing you,"

Haven bit her lip and gave them a coy smile. "I already gave him one."

“Shut up!” Destiny said, wide-eyed.

Haven nodded.

“Wow,” Hope said. “You kissed him? You, the picky woman who won’t take college guys seriously?”

“You’re one to talk,” Haven said, pursing her lips. Her gaze went back and forth between them. “Neither one of you date that much either.”

The fact was, Hope and Destiny had only dated a handful of times between them since they’d reached dating age. It had only been the last few years Hope had managed to overcome much of her innate shyness to even consider going out with someone. And Destiny? Well, she’d kept her focus on getting her education and ignored any of the guys who’d pursued her. After what her friend had gone through, Haven supposed it was as good a coping mechanism as any.

Hope playfully punched her arm. “Yeah, but you kissed one after just meeting him, and for you that’s unheard of.”

“Well, he did save her life,” Destiny chimed in, grinning. “She probably gave him points for that.”

Her friends were right. Haven could count on two fingers the number of guys she’d kissed since starting school here. She’d quickly found out most of the guys here were boys playing at being men. They’d only seemed to want one thing—to fumble around in the dark just so they could say they’d poked some girl.

Brayden Collins could actually be their poster child.

And Haven didn’t want a boy. She was holding out for a man—one who would look

at her as more than a conquest and who would care more about satisfying her than his own ego. So far, no one had met those expectations.

Until now.

At least she had sensed Cal was different. The heat already in her neck, rose up into her cheeks. After that kiss, well, she could say without a doubt he most definitely wasn't a boy.

"He doesn't go to school here. In fact, he's...he's older." Older and one damn fine kisser. He'd had her so worked up she'd tossed and turned in bed, and had finally ended up reaching into her panties for some relief before she could even try to sleep.

"He's not a college guy?" Destiny crinkled her brow. "So what was he doing on campus so late at night?"

"I'm not quite sure yet." Haven wasn't lying to her friends, even though it felt like she was. His connection to her dad worried her. She wasn't stupid. She knew there was something more to her dad's job than what he would admit. What if he was in trouble and had sent Cal and his giant friend—Devin, Derek, De... whatever his name was—to make sure she was safe if something happened to him. She didn't want to break some kind of protocol by voicing her suspicions to her friends. They'd understand later when she was able to tell them.

She hoped.

Haven frowned at her choice of words.

Breaking protocol. That's what Cal had said he'd done.

"So, what kind of kiss was it?" Hope waggled her eyebrows. "A simple peck on the

check, a full kiss on the lips, or more? And which one was he?”

“Which one?” There was no way... “How do y—”

“It’s all over social media—with video and everything.” Destiny grinned. “I especially liked the part where Brayden got pepper sprayed.”

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“It was my favorite too,” Hope said, nodding furiously and laughing.

Haven looked at her friends, dumbfounded. “Oh, my God. This is so not good.”

“You’re right,” Destiny said, a twinkle of glee in her eyes. “It’d been better if they’d tased his ass.”

Haven grimaced at her friend. “You’re so tiny and cute,” Haven said, giving her friend a once over. “No one would know what a bloodthirsty little thing you are.”

A slow smile spread over Destiny’s face. “Yeah. It’s grand, isn’t it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Hope said waving her hands to get their attention. “Destiny’s a compact commando. Now, back to the important stuff. Was he the really tall, fair-looking guy?” Hope’s eyes widened with interest. “Or the even taller dark-haired one?” She sighed. “He looked deliciously broody.”

“Deliciously broody?” Destiny wrinkled her nose and laughed “We have got to get you some different reading material.”

“What?” Hope’s fair cheeks bloomed pink. “So, I like a good bodice ripper.”

“You’d like to have your bodice ripped,” Destiny said, shaking her head, and then turned her attention back to Haven. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Which one?”

Haven let out a long sigh. She might as well tell them. They’d drag it out of her eventually anyway. “The fair one. And, before you ask, yes, Hope, he was deliciously broody too.”

“Mmm...delicious.” Destiny gave her a speculative look. “Why are you turning so red? What’d you do, climb the man like a tree?”

Haven didn’t say anything, ducking her head when heat flamed her face even more while her two friends laughed.

“I’m joking.” Destiny sobered and nudged her with her shoulder. “I know you wouldn’t have.”

Haven peeked up at her through her lashes and bit her lip.

“Wait a minute.” Destiny tilted her head and searched Haven’s face, her jaw dropping when she looked past her to Hope. “Oh, my God. I think she did.”

Hope scooted over to the middle of the bed and leaned over to give Haven her own once over. “I...” A grin spread over her face. “I think you’re right.”

“Come on, you guys.” Haven untangled herself from the covers and crawled between them to the foot of the bed and then stepped out toward her closet. “What time is it anyway?” She didn’t want to miss her ten-thirty class.

Hope and Destiny scrambled off the bed and rushed to cut her off, with Destiny blocking her way with her arms spread out. “It’s almost eleven.” Hope joined in on the human barricade.

“Eleven!” Great. She must’ve forgotten to set her alarm. “I can still make it for the last half if you guys get out of my way.”

Hope shook her head. “You can’t.”

Haven wanted to stomp her foot in frustration but figured they’d just laugh at her. “Why?”

The two other women shared a look before Hope grimaced, saying, “Your dad’s waiting for you at the campus security office.”

“He’s what?” Great. Let the hovering begin.

Destiny moved and placed her arm around Haven’s shoulder as she turned her away from the closet toward her bed. Destiny patted her back like she would a small child and said in a soothing tone, “No one’s expecting you to go to class today anyhow.”

Haven half expected to get anow, there, there.

“You know you’re freaking me out a little,” Haven said as Destiny pulled her down to sit on the end of the bed while Hope went through her closet.

Destiny frowned at her. “I’m trying to be comforting.”

“Yeah, I know, but...” Haven couldn’t believe she was about to say this. “I think I’d rather have you yelling at me.”

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“I told her she couldn’t,” Hope said, taking a pair of jeans and one of Haven’s favorite heavy pullover sweaters out of the closet and laying them out on the back of her desk chair. “But I can’t guarantee how long that will last.”

Haven scowled and looked between her two friends. “Okay. So, exactly how many people know about this? And how in the hell did it get on social media?” It had been the middle of the night and no one had been around.

Hope leaned back against her desk. “I’m pretty sure the whole campus knows—along with about a hundred thousand or more people who have viewed and shared it.”

Haven groaned and covered her face with her hands.

“One of the guys in Lackland Hall was up studying and noticed the blue lights,” Destiny said. Haven peeked through her splayed fingers to see Hope pulling her cell from her pocket. “He got close enough to record most of it on his phone.” She spent a few seconds swiping and clicking before showing the screen to her. “See, it’s under Middleburg Linebacker Gets Tackled and Maced.”

Haven dropped her hands and stared at events on the screen as they’d unfolded. “God, I hope my dad hasn’t seen that.” Cal had looked ready to kill Brayden last night, and he might have if she hadn’t stopped him.

And her dad? If he happened to see the size of her attacker, he might take matters into his own hands. She didn’t want her dad going to jail because of her.

She stood up to take off her nightwear and grabbed her jeans, frowning after she’d

pulled them up and fastened them. “Why aren’t you guys in class?” She put the sweater on over her head and pulled her hair free.

Hope smiled an almost sad smile at her. “This is where we need to be. With you.” Destiny gave a slow nod of agreement.

Haven waved her hands in front of her face when her eyes started to sting. “Don’t get me started again. I don’t want my dad to know I’ve been crying when I see him. He’s already going to be all over you and protective.” She dreaded what was to come. “Will you guys go with me?”

Destiny gave her a really look—one brow raised. “You’re kidding, right?”

* * *

“Haven!”

Haven peered over the edge of the front passenger door of Destiny’s car as she was getting out in front of the campus security office. It was her father—his long legs eating up the space between them as he ran toward her. Fresh tears threatened, but she held them back.

She slammed the door and ran to meet him halfway. Within seconds, she found herself picked up and lifted high against his chest like she was a little girl again, wrapped in his tight embrace.

“I’m already gray,” he murmured, the slight shaking of the hand stroking the back of her head speaking louder than his words. “But you’re determined to make it fall out now too. Aren’t you?”

She shook her head and smiled into his chest. “It might be a good look on you.”

“I don’t think so.” He chuckled. “So, let’s just not make a habit of this. Okay?”

She nodded and snuggled in deeper. Hovery and protective or not, she’d needed this. He took in a deep breath and pulled her even tighter—a little too tight.

“Dad,” she croaked, “it’d be nice if I could breathe.”

He loosened his grip—slightly. “You can breathe later.” He sighed against her and laid his chin on her head as he rocked her back and forth. Several moments later, he called out over her head, “Hey, girls.” She had no doubt Hope and Destiny were smiling while letting them have this private moment. Although Hope was probably sniffing at the same time.

“Hi, Mr. Sheppard,” they called out in unison, as always. Her smile broadened. It was something her best friends had done since they were little. It was good some things never changed.

She patted him on the shoulders. “Dad, you can let me down now.”

“Two more seconds.” He took at least ten, and then gave her another squeeze and kiss on the top of her head before setting her feet on the ground. She looked up at him to find him glancing to his left before smiling down at her. She didn’t want to be obvious, so she turned around to motion for her friends still standing by Destiny’s car to join them and caught a glimpse of a dark SUV she was certain belonged to Cal.

Something’s definitely going on.

Before her approaching friends got to them, her dad said under his breath, “Follow my lead and Cal will explain it all later.” She didn’t have time to react with Hope and Destiny joining them. Whatever trouble her dad was in, she’d do what she had to.

“Hey, my two other favorite ladies,” he said, giving a hug to Destiny and then Hope.
“Thanks for taking care of my girl here this morning.”

“Dad...”

He winked at her and then took a deep breath, his face sobering and jaw tensing. “So, you ready for this?”

She took a fortifying breath and nodded. She wasn’t looking forward to what was coming, but it had to be done.

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Brayden wasn't doing this to another girl.

"Okay. Let's go." He took her hand and led her inside the low building with Hope and Destiny following behind them.

Several officers and staff looked over at them as they walked inside but quickly went back to whatever they were doing.

"Ms. Sheppard." The older officer who had been in charge the previous night came out of a side room. The poor man looked haggard. "Thank you for coming in."

She nodded.

"And you are?" The officer said, addressing her father.

Her dad held out his hand. "Duncan Sheppard. Haven's my daughter."

"Of course." He looked behind them. "And the young ladies?"

She smiled at Hope and Destiny coming to stand beside her and then back at the officer. "They're my friends. Just here for moral support." Hope grabbed her hand.

The officer nodded. "I see." He looked between her friends and her dad. "I'd like to take her statement without any distractions, so if the thr—"

"I'm staying with her." Her dad's voice went hard as he reached for his wallet and flashed something that had the officer's eyes widening. "Call it a professional

courtesy,” he said, putting his wallet in his back pants pocket.

“I see,” the officer said, glancing at her and then back up at her father again. “If you two will follow me then.” He turned when Hope and Destiny would have followed too. “I’m sorry, ladies, but you will have to wait.”

Haven turned to her friends and grimaced.

“We’re good,” Destiny said.

Hope gave Haven a smile and a squeeze of her hand before letting it go. “We’ll find someplace to sit and wait.

“Thanks, guys.”

The officer led them into what she assumed was his office and shut the door as he indicated for them to take the seats in front of his desk. “I have to tell you. It was unusual for me to have been on campus last night.” He sat down and leaned back into his chair with his arms crossed. “I’d been working an event at the music building and was about ready to head home when the call came in.” He sat forward and smiled at Haven. “I hope you’re doing okay today.”

Haven nodded. “I am. Just a little tired.” She gave him a slight smile. “A little nervous.”

Her dad grabbed her hand while the officer nodded. “I imagine you are.” He pulled some papers from a folder and spread them out in front of him. “Okay, so, according to your boyfriend—”

“My—”

Her dad squeezed her hand tightly and tensed up beside her. She glanced at him, her brow raising.

“Is that not right?” The officer pulled one of the sheets. “Callahan Simpson. At least according to him and his driver’s license.” He stared back at her. “He said you two were dating.”

Simpson? What happened to Rothe?

“I...” She scrunched her face at the officer. “I haven’t told my dad about him yet.”

“Oh, I see.” The officer grimaced. “Sorry about that.”

Her father scowled down at her. “You’re dating someone? Why haven’t you said anything?” So...What? This was more of the plan? She might as well play along.

Haven let out an aggravated sigh and looked her dad square in the eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. I guess because it just suddenly came out of nowhere.”

* * *

Three hours, one uncomfortable interview, a late lunch, and a lot of evasive answers from her dad later, Haven stood alone in front of her dorm watching him drive away.

“What the hell is going on?”

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Her cell dinged with an incoming text. It couldn't be Hope or Destiny. She'd insisted they go to their afternoon classes. She pulled her phone from her purse and looked down at the unfamiliar number but opened it anyway.

MEET ME AT THE COFFEE HOUSE. CAL

She frowned down at the screen as another text came through.

PLEASE

Haven glanced around and spotted the SUV sitting a good distance away.

Her face flamed. He was watching her. She didn't want to make any obvious show of interest, so she turned and went down the sidewalk away from her dorm toward the quad. It was a walk she usually enjoyed, with the stark branches of the once white dogwoods lining the main and bisecting walkways crisscrossing between student housing, but didn't pay much attention for once. She took her time and ignored the questioning looks from some of the students she passed.

It wasn't a long walk to The Quadlife Coffee House on the opposite end of the quad next to the Student Services Building, but it was a crowded one. She just hoped none of the curious looks she was getting turned into questions about last night.

Last night. Haven slowed her pace even more.

Oh, God, she was about to face Cal.

After practically begging him to kiss her and—as Destiny had aptly put it—climbing him like a tree, she was a little embarrassed. She shivered at the memory. But something told her it wouldn't have been the same with anyone else. Only Cal.

She shook her head. Who would have thought going through a traumatic experience with a would-be rapist would have her dry-humping her rescuer in the middle of a parking lot where anyone could see?

Certainly not this girl.

She shivered again. And dear God, there had been a lot of hard flesh to grind against.

Thankfully no one had filmed any of that action. She had a feeling her dad wouldn't have been amused, even though he was in on whatever was going on. She chanced a glance over her shoulder. At least no one seemed to be talking about her behind her back. But...

She frowned and kept walking. The older student who spent a lot of time at the library wasn't far behind her. She'd spoken to the woman several times. What was her name again? Something unusual...

S-s-s-Solace. She was working on her master's thesis.

Or was she?

Haven focused ahead to see her destination was in sight. Cal had better have some answers for her.

9

Cal entered The Quadlife Coffeehouse, the aroma of fresh ground coffee filling his

appreciative senses. The place was packed, with everyone conversing loud enough to compete with each other and the whirl of blenders and grinders. He and Haven needed to be seen together, and he'd supposed this was as good a place to start as any. Now to find the right location to take up position. He scanned the spacious shop and frowned over the lack of seating. Was it always this crowded on a Tuesday afternoon?

A couch in the back corner offered the best view of the door and kept anyone from being at his back, but it was occupied by a guy who had taken up the whole thing with books, a laptop, and his coat. Too bad he was about to have to move, but not before Cal got a cup of coffee. He placed his order and leaned against the nearest wall while giving his best menacing glare at the much younger man on the couch. A few seconds later, the kid took a break from whatever he was doing to pick up his cup, pausing with it halfway to his mouth when he caught sight of Cal. His eyes went wide.

That's right. You're in my spot.

Cal grinned when the young man put down his cup and started gathering his things.

Damn, I'm tired.

He stifled a yawn with the back of his hand. It had been long day—made even longer due to his exhaustion after the previous night's lack of sleep. His early morning conversation with the Colonel had gone about like he'd expected. The man had been shaken at first and then furious.

After hanging up, Cal had tried to relax, but hadn't been able to get the kissout of his mind. The damned thing kept playing over and over each time he'd closed his eyes—on a loop, no less. Add that in with his hard as a pike dick tenting the sheet, his sleep had been fitful at best. He'd ended up taking a cold shower at daybreak just to

get awake and stroke one out. His soapy hand had given him some relief, but not enough.

So, he wasn't only still tired but horny as hell.

"Simpson," one of the baristas called out. Cal slipped around a couple of other waiting customers and picked up his dark roast Quadbuster—the coffee house's version of an extra-large—with a shot of espresso and made his way over to the now mostly vacated couch.

Perfect timing.

"Thanks, buddy," Cal said, smiling down at the young man and nodding as the kid hurriedly finished stuffing his laptop in a case and stood to put on his coat.

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“Uh, yeah, um, sure thing, mister,” the kid said, his eyes going wide again when he looked way up at Cal while hefting the strap of his laptop bag over his shoulder. “So, uh, have a nice day,” he muttered before grabbing his cup and scurrying away.

Cal sat down on the low, leather couch and sighed before taking a sip of heaven. This was his fourth cup of the day, but he’d needed the extra jolts of caffeine to stay alert. And if there had ever been a time to be as alert as possible, this had been the day.

With the Colonel on campus, the team had had to take extra precautions and checks on anyone who might show unusual interest in him or his daughter. So they’d followed the duo at a distance from several points to give them the maximum amount of coverage.

All of them except Solace who, for her own reasons, had been resolute she stay close to the dorm to make sure no one was lurking around. She’d seemed more relieved than anything when he’d agreed. Cal hadn’t asked her why she was so adamant about it since it wasn’t the worst of ideas, but he’d insisted she follow Haven after the Colonel left.

The door opened and he glanced up.

Not her.

He’d gotten to the shop well before Haven after making the short drive from where he’d watched her and her dad saying their goodbyes—after ensuring Solace had her six—a good fifteen minutes before, but he’d figured she should have been here by now. It wasn’t that he was concerned. Solace was on her. He just wanted to see her.

To go over the plan, of course.

“What’s taking so long?” he whispered with his cup hovering close to his mouth.

Solace laughed in his ear. “She’s walkingreallyslowly and keeps glancing behind her. I think she’s onto me.”

He kept the edge of his cup close, muttering into it while checking to make sure no one was paying attention to him, “I have no doubt.” Haven probably had a good idea Cal and Declan weren’t the only ones watching, so he figured she was now being particularly hypervigilant.

The Colonel had been a little reticent over the plan when Cal had first proposed it to him. But after breaking his cover, they had to have some plausible excuse for his presence.

According to her dad, Haven had come through already on holding up their ruse, starting at the campus security office. He’d called Cal as he was driving off, saying although she’d successfully covered up her initial surprise at Cal’s new status in her life, she’d given the Colonellooksthroughout the rest of their time together. He’d laughed out his parting line of, “I don’t envy you when Haven gets ahold of you,” before hanging up.

Hopefully she would continue to agree with the role he had planned for her—a role that only had to last a few more days.

Overall, it was a simple plan and one he wasn’t too worried about except how they were going to get away with it when it came to her two best friends. He grimaced with thoughts of Hope and Destiny. It was going to be tricky, and he and Haven would have to discuss the best way to handle them. He glanced at the opening door. If Cal had anything to say about it, Haven’s friends would—

There she was.

He smiled when Haven stopped just inside the entrance with her nose in the air and took in a deep breath with her eyes closed.

Ah, a coffee woman.

Cal's hungry gaze wandered over her while she searched the room—the slight smile curving her mouth changing to a frown as she visibly schooled her features when their eyes met. So, it was going to be like that. He might have his work cut out for him if they were going to be a believable couple.

He set his cup down. “Garrett, turn off the comm for the next thirty minutes,” he murmured before standing up and walking over to meet her.

“You got it.” Garrett snickered. “You hope.”

Cal ignored Garrett's words like he ignored Haven's speculative look when he took her in his arms. She was going to have to get used to him touching her until she was safe, so he might as well let it start now. He hugged her close and whispered, “I'm going to give you a kiss.” He grinned at her gasp. “But it's just for show.”

“Okay,” she whispered back. “But, Cal?”

“Mmmhmm,” he said, enjoying the chance to nuzzle into her hair.

“Let's make it a good one.”

He lifted his head and frowned at her but didn't have time to process her words before she grabbed his head and pulled it down. His heart sped up when the kiss she gave him was heated and hard. He gathered her close and gave back as good as he

was getting.

And it was very good.

“Get a room!” someone shouted, with a couple of other people clapping before she pulled away from him and licked her lips.

She looked up at him, her low words only for him as her eyes narrowed. “I figure since you’re supposed to be my boyfriend, we might as well make it look realistic.” She was aggravated, but he didn’t care at the moment.

He scowled and grabbed her hand before dragging her off like a caveman to where he’d been sitting. “Is that how you kiss your boyfriends?” he muttered, sitting on the couch and pulling her down beside him. He slung an arm around her and tried to relax his tense shoulders. It was ridiculous for him to be jealous, but the idea of her kissing anyone else the way she’d just kissed him had him seeing red.

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“Why do you care?” She snuggled against his chest and then looked up at him. The smile spreading across her face was not the natural one he was used to seeing. Again, she was following his lead and putting on a show. “Besides, I would never think of calling you my boyfriend.”

And there it was. Nothing with her could be a reality for him.

His heart—the organ that moments before had been racing from her kiss—slowed to barely beating. The truth was, any wishful thinking he had attached to her needed to be cut. He sat slightly away from her. This was a job like any other, and it didn’t include making Haven his own.

No matter how much he wanted her.

“Of course not.” He held her gaze, his jaw clenching. “I’m too old for you.”

A weighted silence met his statement—even the sounds of the coffee shop fading to nothing more than white noise—while he watched the play of emotions chasing over her face. From observing Haven for more than two weeks, he knew she wouldn’t deliberately hurt someone, so he didn’t want to put her in a position where she’d have to.

“Don’t—”

“No.” Haven reached out and ran a hand over his tight jaw, her questioning eyes searching his going soft. “That’s not it at all.” She glanced at his lips and then back up and sighed. “It’s because you’re not a boy.” A blush crept up her cheeks. “You’re

very much a man.”

She slid her hand from his jaw to his hair where her tentative fingers pulled at the short strands at his scalp. “What is it about you?” Her brow crinkled and eyes bore into his. “I should be furious with you right now,” she whispered. “You and my dad both.” She took in a deep breath. “But all I seem to want to do is...”

She shook her head and grinned, keeping her hand anchored in his hair as he cupped her warm cheeks in both hands. He didn’t sit any closer but held her gaze as he lowered his head, watching in awe as she closed her eyes and willingly met him halfway.

Their lips met in a soft caress, with slow, eating kisses that were nothing like the two they’d already shared—not the one she’d surprised him with when he’d greeted her at the door, and nothing like the one from the night before.

This kiss held what felt like a promise.

He drank his fill of her with his hands touching nothing more than her face. Haven had him hard and aching and wanting nothing more than to drag her onto his lap. But this—this kiss and her soft sighs against his lips—was enough. Her hand tightened in his hair when he drew away from her with one final pass over her mouth, her eyes shut tight. He ran his thumbs over the beautiful face still cradled in his palms and then over her kiss-plumped lips. “Haven—”

“Why don’t you kiss me like that?”

Haven opened her eyes and met his before they both turned toward the low, accusing voice. Cal gave a slight nod to a young woman staring at them from a few tables over, her smile leaving when she looked back at who Cal assumed was her boyfriend.

“I mean, did you see how tender he was with her?” the young woman said, pointing their way. Cal and Haven shared a grin, with Haven’s face taking on an even rosier hue when the other woman said, “It was beautiful.”

He felt a little flushed himself, which was ridiculous. Nothing embarrassed him.

“But, honey,” the guy said, skewering Cal with a narrow-eyed glare before making a grab for his girlfriend’s hand, “we’re in public.”

“You don’t kiss me like that in private,” she said in a fierce whisper, pulling her hand away and standing up. “Come to think of it,” she said, grabbing her purse, “I don’t think you’ve ever kissed me like that.”

Cal stared after her as she walked off in a huff, leaving her young man frowning as she waded through tables and people standing around.

Thenon-good kisserstood up and started after her but turned around after only a couple of steps and pinned Cal with snarling look. “Seriously, man, take it someplace else.” He glanced after the retreating form of his girlfriend and then back at him. “You’re raising the expectations for the rest of us too high.” With that, he took off—pushing people out of his way and calling out, “Suzy, wait!” Several people laughed with the same heckler from before yelling out, “Go get her!”

“Oh, my God,” Haven said, her shoulders shaking with laughter. “Poor guy... Or girl.” She shook her head. “Both of them.”

Cal wrapped an arm around her still-chuckling form and pulled her back into his side, a sense of utter contentment filling him when she settled under the crook of his arm.

“So,” she said on a heavy sigh, her words only for him, “we’re a couple?”

He rubbed circles over her arm and smiled when she shivered under his touch. “Yeah. It wasn’t the plan, but the Collins kid forced us to have to regroup.”

“So, how’s this supposed to work?”

He’d figured she’d cut right to the chase. “As far as everyone will know, we’ve been seeing each other in secr—”

She halted him with a raised hand. “Hope and Destiny won’t buy it.”

“You haven’t even he—”

“Doesn’t matter.” She frowned up at him. “These women know me inside and out. Even if I had been seeing someone, I’d never have been able to keep it from them.”

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“You can’t tell them anything more.”

“I don’t know anything more to tell them.” She looked down and picked at her jeans—something he’d noticed she did when she was nervous.

“Come on,” he said, wrapping his hand around hers and standing. “Let’s go for a walk.” He pulled her up from the couch, keeping a tight hold on her hand as they walked through the shop and outside.

It was getting chilly, so he let go of her hand and wrapped an arm around her—something he noticed didn’t keep her from glancing around as he led her to his car. “So, how many people besides you, Darrin, and Solace are watching me?”

He laughed. “Solace said you had made her. And it’s Declan.”

“Oh.” She nodded. After a few moments of them walking in silence, she pulled away from him, concern evident on her face when she turned and looked up at him. “Is my dad in danger?”

He took her hands and squeezed. “Yes and no.”

She frowned up at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cal glanced around and let go of one of her hands to start walking again toward his car at the back of the near-empty visitor’s parking lot, drawing her close to his side as they went. “Your dad’s in a...situation.”

He pulled her under his arm again when her steps faltered.

“Okay,” she said, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Why does a situation require people watching me? Dad wouldn’t go so far as something like this unless he thought I was in danger.” She looked up at him when they stopped at the passenger door of his car. “Wait. That’s it, isn’t it? I’m in danger.”

He opened the car door and helped her unresisting form inside. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t lie to her if she outright asked him, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to stall. He shut the door on her grimacing face before rushing around the front of his vehicle and getting in.

Haven turned in her seat—her angry glare staring a hole in him as he shut his door and turned on the ignition. It was chilly in the car—from more than just the cold outside—so he cranked up the heat setting before facing her. She wanted an answer, and there was only one he could give her.

“Yes.”

10

Haven couldn’t believe her dad hadn’t said anything to her today, she fumed, but at least Cal wasn’t pulling any punches with her.

“But it’s almost over,” he said, leaning toward her. She continued to glare at him while he tried to explain. “If this Collins thing hadn’t happened, you wouldn’t have even known we were here.”

And she might never have met him. The idea didn’t sit well with her.

“How long?”

“A couple of weeks,” he answered without hesitating. “Since the Sunday evening you got back from visiting your dad.”

She let out a huff. That explained all the careful talk before she’d left. She frowned. “How many people are we talking about?” She’d only seen the three of them, but that didn’t mean there weren’t more.

“There’s four of us.”

“And you work with my dad?”

Cal gave her a grin—the one she hadn’t been able to keep out of her mind—the one she would like nothing more than to wipe off his perfectly freckled face.

Preferably with an angry kiss.

“We used to. He was our squad commander.”

“Of course he was.” She settled back in her seat and looked out the windshield with her arms crossed, muttering, “Why wouldn’t he call in a squadron of Marines.” She stewed for several seconds, Cal’s wary expression visible in her peripheral vision. “So, how much...” She cleared her throat and frowned over at him. “How much danger am I in?”

Good grief. It must be bad if the tensing of his face and body was any indication.

She raised her brows at his continued silence. “Well?”

“Well,” he said, his steady gaze not leaving hers. “We’re here. Aren’t we?”

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Okay, that effectively answered her question.

It was bad.

“But, you say it’s supposed to be over soon. Right?”

Cal nodded, his jaw working. “Friday.”

“So, after Friday, everything goes back to normal?” Normal being a relative term since she still had to deal with the fallout from Brayden’s attack.

Normal also meaning Cal would be gone.

“What...” Oh, God. Her heart sank while her pulse raced. “Hope and Destiny,” she said, sitting up straight and grabbing his arm. The panic rising in her voice mirrored the fear taking hold of her. “Are they in danger?” If something happened to her friends because of her, she’d never forgive herself.

Cal shook his head and took the trembling hand squeezing his arm, rubbing his thumb over the back of it. “No. Nothing points to that. We’re—” He tilted his head and frowned, his gaze going distant before he gave her a quick glance. “Give me a second,” he told her, letting go of her hand.

She followed his stare through the windshield, which was the only glass not tinted almost black on the whole vehicle, to a large van sitting across the parking lot

“No, not you.”

Was he talking to himself? She drew her eyebrows together and slowly turned her head back to him.

“No, it would take much longer than a second.” He let out what she could only call a sigh of exasperation and shook his head. “Uh huh. You’re hilarious.” He paused for several seconds before nodding, saying, “Yeah. Give me fifteen minutes, and don’t—” He grimaced. “Asshole.”

“Sorry about that,” he said, looking back at her.

Haven glanced back out the windshield. “Please tell me you’re somehow talking to someone in the van.”

“Hmm?” He glanced out the windshield and then back at her with a slight smile. “Yeah. It’s just Garrett. He keeps us in communication with each other.” He turned his head and pointed at his ear and the tip of an almost invisible earpiece.

Heat suffused her face. “He hasn’t been listening to us all this time, has he?” She covered her hot cheeks with her hands while he shook his head. “Oh, God...and last night.”

“No,” he told her, waving his hand up and down in a calming motion. “I was on my own last night, and today I told him to cut my communications while we talked.” His grin wasn’t as reassuring as he probably thought it was. “No one has heard anything.”

Several deep, calming breaths later she dropped her hands. “Okay. Good.” A thought occurred to her and she narrowed her gaze out the window. “What else does he do in there?”

She looked back at him when he didn’t immediately answer. For the first time since they’d been talking, Cal looked uncomfortable. “He watches. We all do.”

“You watch...” There had to be more to it than that. “Watch what?”

The look he gave her was almost humorous. He didn't want to tell her, which told her whatever it was he had to say wasn't going to make her happy. “We have surveillance cameras monitoring you.”

“You're monitoring me,” she said, her voice flat. Her eyes went wide. Had he seen her naked? “Do you have cameras in my room?” She may have yelled that last part.

“No, not in your room,” he said in a rush. In the next few seconds, her temper grew hotter incrementally with each place he told her they did have cameras. “But we do have them in the library, your classrooms, and outside those same buildings”

“And? I sense an and.”

“And the halls of and outside your dorm. Along with audio.”

So, that explained the campus maintenance crew she'd noticed everywhere she went a couple of weeks ago. This just kept getting worse and worse. The knowledge she'd had strangers watching her and listening in on her conversations practically everywhere she went had her skeeved out. She tilted her head in question. “What about Friday night?”

He shrugged. “I was watching from behind the house with some specialized portable equipment.” He had the nerve to let out a short laugh. “Nice ass-kicking job, by the way.”

She narrowed her gaze on him to keep from smiling. What was wrong with her that his smile had her turning to mush? The man was two steps above a Peeping Tom and she still had the urge to rip his clothes off.

She might be able to give him a break since he was only following her father's orders. And since Cal and his team were former Marines under his command, it was a foregone conclusion they would have done anything necessary to make sure those orders were carried out.

She turned her attention to where her fingers picked at her jeans. But would that whatever necessary thing include kissing her and pretending they were a couple? The possibility made sense, but she didn't like it.

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He surprised her by gently grasping her chin and tilting her head up, his concerned blue eyes searching her face. “What’s wrong?”

“It just occurred to me this whole couple thing and the ki...attention you’ve been paying me was probably some sort of backup plan all along.”

He took in a deep breath, a flush spreading over his cheeks. “No. It was never part of the plan. I broke cover and it had to be explained somehow.” He gave a half-shrug. “It was the first thing that popped into my mind.”

“So, what? The kiss last night was part of the setup for this plan thatpoppedinto your head?” Great. So, what had probably been the best kiss of her life was nothing more to him than aplotploy. She’d had a few hopes resting on that kiss. Then after the one at the coffee shop...

God, I’m a fool.

Silence filled the SUV for the span of a few heartbeats before Cal blurted out, “Fuck it.”

She whipped her head up in time to see him leaning over the center console and reaching for her. Within seconds, his strong hands had her by the upper arms and hauled close until her face was mere inches from his.

“I’m not going to let you believe whatever bullshit you have running through your head,” he said low. His heated gaze raked over her face while her lips and other parts of her body tingled in anticipation. “Nothing—nothing—about what is happening

between us is faked.”

“But—”

“No buts,” he whispered, leaning in close. “Only this.”

The firm touch of his lips had her opening for him without thought. She needed to taste him again—to know if the slide of his tongue against hers was just as delicious as she remembered.

He didn’t disappoint her.

He gathered her close with one arm as a whirring filled the enclosed space. She found herself being dragged as Cal’s body went back and reclined with the position of the driver’s seat. She wasn’t about to lose contact with his mouth, so she let herself be pulled over the console until she straddled him, the ridge in his jeans pressing against her center.

Feeling him in his position was so much better than when she’d had her legs wrapped around him the previous night. A shiver ran through her body as her center bore down on all that hard, hidden flesh, then intensified when his groan filled her mouth as she rubbed against him.

They had on too many clothes.

“Haven... God...” Cal’s low words brushed over her skin while his strong hands kneading her butt held her immobile. “You have to stop,” he groaned, his fingers digging into her flesh denying her from finding the relief she so desperately needed. “I refuse to come in my pants.”

A low whimper escaped her—one he silenced with another searing kiss.

“Please,” she whispered on her next breath while squirming against the tight hold he had on her. “I need—”

“Shhh...” More kisses devoured her mouth as one of his hands worked under her jacket and sweater before wandering over her bare back to the clasp of her bra. “Stay still,” he murmured against her lips as the bra went slack. “Let me make you feel good.”

The hand at her back tickled over her ribs to slip under the loose cup of her bra and cover her breast and squeezed while the other slid around her hip and worked between their bodies to the front of her jeans.

She didn’t move—didn’t breathe—as his fingers deftly undid the button and worked the zipper down.

“Are you wet for me?” His words were a low rumble of sound. And as wet as she already was, she felt herself growing impossibly wetter. “Haven?” He kissed her cheek and ran his nose to the shell of her ear while one of his fingers brushed back and forth over the top band of her panties. “Are you?” he breathed into her ear.

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Mmm... Good.” He laid his head back on the headrest, his unwavering gaze holding hers as his hand breached the top of her underwear and slid little by little inside. “Keep your eyes on me, sweet girl,” he said when her eyes began to flutter closed. She took in a deep breath and watched heat filling his blue stare, her pulse thundering in her ears when his touch lightly caressed the seam of her pussy.

And that was all he did.

Why was he teasing her? She braced her hands on either side of his head and lifted

her hips, thinking he might need more room.

“Good girl,” he said, giving her nipple a little tweak while the fingers of his other hand lightly furrowed deeper—but not deep enough. “Very good. Stay just like that.”

“O-okay.”

She wasn't sure what to expect next, only knowing he was driving her crazy with the light petting and nothing more—that is until he pulled her sweater and bra up between the opening of her jacket and held it under her chin. Her eyes widened as his head lifted and his warm breath hovered over the nipple he'd been playing with, her breath stuttering when he gave it a lick.

Mmm... That's n—

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“Oh...” She cried out when he sucked her breast into the wet cavern of his mouth at the same time two fingers slid deep between her lower lips—the fit of his hand tight in her jeans where they worked over her flesh. The dual assault of his lips and teeth on her nipple vied with the one his fingers made on her clit. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, spreading her legs as much as she could.

“God, you’re soaking,” he mumbled around her breast.” The glide of his fingers moved lower until he filled her opening. “So wet for me.”

She nodded, unable to say anything.

His fingers moved in and out, then spread her wetness over her clit before moving back down and doing it again. He set a rhythm she was helpless not to follow, until before she knew it she was riding his hand and fingers.

“Um... Oh...” She was close—so close. She rode him harder, fighting to find the release just out of reach.

His other hand replaced his mouth at her breast—plucking and pulling at the nipple in time with the hand at her core, taking her someplace she’d never reached from pleasuring herself.

“That’s right,” he growled. Two fingers worked in and out while his palm covered her pussy. “Fuck my hand.”

And she did, grinding her clit on the fat of his palm while the fullness at her opening grew when he added another finger.

“Cal... Oh, God... I... I...” She writhed on top of him, the throbbing at the top of her pussy growing stronger. She squeezed her eyes shut and rode his hand faster and faster, chasing after that elusive end she could feel just out of reach until...

“Ohhhh!” Her arms and legs tensed as heat burst from her center and spread over her body, her hips spasming while she shivered at the fingers now furiously working her clit.

She bucked against him when his fingers filled her again, the digits spearing in and out as his thumb brushed over her clit. The fingers at her breast tightened and squeezed her nipple to the point of pain, adding to the waves of the climax rushing over her and drowning her in a dazed bliss.

Moments later, her deep shuddering breaths filled the car, as his touch changed to soft, easy glides back and forth from her opening to her clit while his mouth soothed over the tips of her breast. He continued to ease her down until her arms gave way and her limp, replete body collapsed on top of him. Her head rested over his thundering heart, her body shaking each time he coasted over her sensitive nub. It was too much, so she squeezed her legs together to stay his hand.

“I’ve never...” she panted into his chest. “That was... It was...” She blew out a breath. “I have no words.”

“Oh, I can think of several words,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head. “Beautiful comes to mind. Perfect.”

She smiled and snuggled into him, liking the fact he’d kept a possessive hold covering her inside her panties. Now she needed a nap. She frowned. But that wouldn’t be right. “Not too perfect.” She looked up at him, the multitude of freckles scattered over his cheeks almost hidden by his deep flush. “Let me take care of you now,” she told him, beginning to slide down his body. It would be a tight fit in

the floorboard, but if she tilted the steering wheel—

“No,” he said, anchoring his free arm around her waist and pulling her back up his body, a slightly pained grin on his face when she looked down at him. “This was for you.”

“But you’re—”

“I’m good.” He took her lips, his kiss gentle as his hand left the confines of her jeans. He leaned away from her. “And the only thing I want from you right now is this,” he said, bringing his fingers up to his mouth. “To get a small taste of you so I know what to look forward to later.”

She bit her lip and watched in fascination as his tongue took long, slow swipes over his three fingers, his low hum of pleasure sending a flutter through her belly.

If he was looking forward to more, maybe he wouldn’t be leaving after Friday. God, she hoped not.

He pressed his forehead to hers, his breath carrying her scent. “That was more than enough. For now.”

He tensed beneath her and closed his eyes.

“Yes, Garrett, we’re finished talking.”

Oh, God. She’d forgotten all about the other man.

His brow crinkled against hers as the whirring of the seat started again. She pulled herself away from him and climbed back into her seat.

“I doubt that.” Cal scrubbed his hand over his face as she zipped and buttoned her jeans, and then refastened her bra before adjusting her sweater and jacket. “Well, thanks for waiting then.” She looked toward the van. “Yes, I’m taking her to her dorm now.”

* * *

Haven stood with her hand on the knob of her dorm room and glanced around the ceiling of the hall. Wherever the camera was, it was certainly well hidden.

And Garrett was watching. She stuck her tongue out before opening her door and going in.

“There she is,” Hope said from somewhere farther in their small suite.

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“It’s about damn time,” Destiny complained as the two walked into the sitting area, with her too-observant friend stopping and narrowing her gaze on her. “What’s wrong?”

Cal had been adamant with her before she’d gotten out of the car that Hope and Destiny weren’t to be told. She understood the need for secrecy. She also understood she would never be able to keep something this huge from them—even if it was only for a couple of more days.

She’d left Cal fuming in his car after telling him as much. With her friends looking at her with so much concern, she questioned if this was the right thing to do or not. Cal had assured her that her friends weren’t in danger, but if by chance something happened to them because of her and their knowing would have made the difference...

“I need to tell you guys something.”

11

Haven had told them. It was clear the moment Cal and his team sitting in the van watched the three leave their dorm room for morning classes. Nothing was too obvious about their curiosity, but their frowning perusal of the walls and ceiling told them they wanted to locate the camera. The friends finally gave up and headed down the hall, throwing looks over their shoulders all the way, with Destiny waving a middle finger over her head as they turned the corner.

“Gotta love her,” Garrett said under his breath with a laugh. Cal decided not to give

him grief about his comment. He left it up to his other teammates. Declan didn't disappoint him.

"Oh, you do?"

"No. Of course not," Garrett said, turning away from the monitors and scowling at the other man. "I don't know her. It was just an observation."

Cal decided Garrett had it just as bad as he did.

"You know this poses another problem," Solace pointed out as the girls left the front entrance side by side. "I know how girls this close can be. They're going to close ranks around Haven." She grimaced. "The three of them will be together now more than ever, and whether we like it or not, it puts Hope and Destiny in the line of fire so to speak should something go down."

Garrett and Declan both tensed.

"Okay," Declan said after a few seconds while his own true feelings showed on his face. Interesting. "So, we close ranks a little tighter until we get through Friday—keep all the girls safe." Declan glanced at him, Solace, and then finally Garrett. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Garrett said, speaking for the rest of them.

"Good." Declan got up to leave the van after Solace opened the door to follow the girls. "I've got the goddess." He glanced over his shoulder at Garrett with a grin before stepping out. "You get the little one."

Garrett stared at the monitor where the camera tracked the girls' progress from the dorm to the sidewalk, then said in a whisper, "The perfect one, you mean," while Declan closed the van door and headed to his vehicle.

* * *

The rest of the day had gone exactly as Solace had predicted. When not in class, the three young women had stuck together like glue.

At the moment, Garrett monitored them from the van while Solace sat several tables over from their Wednesday night study group. According to Garrett, the three were keeping themselves slightly apart from the rest of their group with their heads together, talking in hushed whispers.

“I don’t think they realize we can still hear most of what they’re saying,” Garrett said in his ear.

“Probably not,” Cal answered. They’d be finished in the next fifteen minutes or so, and Cal was about to make his first appearance to Hope and Destiny as Haven’s boyfriend, with plans to walk them back to their dorm. He had a feeling he was in for a grilling. He grinned to himself. Especially from Destiny.

“They’re breaking early,” Solace whispered. “I have to admit they haven’t stared at me, although I have gotten a couple of winks from one of the guys in their group.”

“Like we said,” Declan laughed. “You’re a cougar.”

“Shove it, my friend,” she answered. “I’m following them out.”

“That’s my cue.” Cal left his SUV and got to the bottom of the steps about the same time the girls did. “Hey, babe,” he said to a wide-eyed Haven, her gaze going even wider when he bent down for a quick kiss. “You going to introduce me?”

“Uh, sure.” She glanced at her two friends with a shrug when they gave her a questioning look. “Hope, Destiny, this is...Cal.”

“Nice to meet you, ladies.” He reached out a hand to shake one hand then the other.
“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Hmph.” Destiny was going to be a hard sell. “We’ve heard a lot about you too.”

Beside her, Hope gave Destiny a nudge and shake of her head before saying with a too-broad smile, “A lot.”

What does that mean?

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He glanced at a blushing Haven on the well-lit sidewalk. Had she told them about what they'd done in his car? He eyed the other two. Destiny's slow grin was a dead giveaway. Heat crept up his neck despite the cold. Okay, so, she had.

He cleared his throat. "Why don't I walk you guys back to your dorm?"

"Sure," Destiny told him, stepping five-inch heel to sneaker and looking way up at him. Damn, she was tiny but mighty. Garrett had better be on his toes with this one. "I want to make one thing clear," she whispered. "And I mean to you and anyone else who's listening right now. You all had better make sure our best friend stays safe until this is over."

"Please," Hope said just as low, stepping up beside her. "She's everything to us."

He took in the earnest faces of the two young women and then Haven's when she moved behind the two and put her arms around them, her pleading gaze going to her friends.

Haven wasn't worried about herself.

"I swear on my life," he said, his gaze holding first Hope's then Destiny's before going back to Haven's where her concern reached out to him. "No one is going to let anything happen—to anyone."

Haven nodded at him with a slight, indrawn breath, her tense shoulders relaxing before saying, "Okay, now that we've all met and gotten all that cleared up, let's head back to the room. It's cold out here."

They made small talk during the short walk, going around the perimeter of the parking lot instead of through it, with his arm wrapped around Haven's shoulder. Destiny and Hope were linked arm in arm walking a step or two in front of them. Haven's friends had surprised him by not giving him the third degree.

They stopped at the walkway in front of their building.

"You guys go on up," Haven told them when the other two started toward the entrance.

They paused and stepped back to where he and Haven stood. "Oh?" Destiny said with a mischievous grin like the matching one spreading over Hope's face.

Hope piped up and said, "Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I wonder what she would do," Declan murmured in his ear while Solace and Garrett made no comment. Would wonders never cease?

"We won't," Haven said, grinning and shaking her head.

Hope's speculative look went between him and Haven before she nodded. His brows raised when she stepped close and reached up to give him a quick peck on the cheek. "I approve," she told him. "And just so you know, we've got our big girl panties on over this and we'll make sure Haven stays safe when you're not able to watch over her. You and..." She frowned, glancing around them before shrugging and looking back at him. "Well, whoever else is helping."

"Panties?" Destiny said with a purely devious laugh. "Hell, I'm commando and ready to kick some ass."

Cal had to grin at Garrett's pained groan of, "No panties..." followed by, "Fuck me."

“They can hear you,” Hope said in a fierce whisper before pulling Destiny away while laughter from Declan and Solace filled his ear.

“You’ll have to forgive my friends,” Haven said as they watched them go up the walk.

“Nothing to forgive. I like them.”

They waited while the two used their access card to open the door, since it was after hours, and went inside. “See you later, Cal,” Hope said over her shoulder while Destiny gave him a small wave before the door shut them safely inside.

“They love you.”

I love you.

“Yes, they do.” She stepped away from him and did her own visual once-over of the area. “Are they watching and listening right now?”

He nodded. “They don’t have to be. Garrett?”

“Gotcha,” Garrett answered. “Video and audio going off until you give the all clear.” Then silence.

“We’re alone.” He grinned at her. “Basically.”

“This will only take a second—or twenty.” Haven stepped into him and reached around his neck. “I need a goodnight kiss.”

Cal’s grin faded as he easily lifted her, taking her chilled lips and savoring each small taste they shared. He’d needed this too, even if her puffy coat and his denim jacket

kept him from feeling all of her pressed against him the way he wanted. But this would have to do—this and her little sighs and clenching fingers tugging on the hair at the back of his head holding him close.

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Too soon she pulled her mouth away and rested her cheek on his, her warm breath puffing close to his ear, whispering, “Has anyone ever told you you’re a good kisser?”

He nuzzled into her hair and grinned. “Not lately.”

She didn’t respond right away but finally whispered back, “Good,” before patting his shoulders. “I better get inside. I’m sure they’re waiting for me.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” he said, letting her slide down his body while he mentally cursed the amount of fabric between them. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good,” she said again. He waited while she ran up the walk and opened the door, the warmth in his chest spreading when she turned to wave before going inside.

* * *

“I’ve got something for you,” Garrett said the next morning after Declan and Solace had left the van. He handed Cal a braided blue leather bracelet wrapped with thick silver beads and several charms dangling from it.

“Aw, you shouldn’t have.” Cal took the piece of jewelry and turned it in his hand before grinning at his friend. “I don’t think it’s gonna fit my wrist.”

“Well, as much as I like you, I’m not at the stage of giving you jewelry yet,” he said with a wink. “It’s for Haven.”

Cal's brows snapped together. "And you're making jewelry—I'm assuming you made this—for my girl, why?"

"Yes, I've been working on it for a couple of days," he said taking it from Cal's unresisting fingers. "Hold on."

Cal waited while Garrett flipped on a small monitor, the screen blank. "Now, watch." He fiddled with the clasp and a red dot appeared. "See this blip right here?"

"Yes." The stationary red blip sat on a GPS map with coordinates beside it. "That's us."

"No," Garrett said. "Well, yes," he qualified when Cal frowned at him. "But it's coming from this." He held up the bracelet.

Garrett still surprised him sometimes. "You, my friend, are a genius."

"I know," he answered with a smirk. "Be sure to let Declan and Solace know."

* * *

Cal sat in his vehicle and watched Haven leave her last class of the day and make her way to the quad with Solace not far behind her. The Colonel's meeting was in just over twenty-four hours, meaning he could legitimately be in Haven's life for maybe two more days—counting Saturday when they dismantled everything.

At this point, that wasn't acceptable.

And Haven? Well, she was attracted to him, sure. He wasn't stupid. But maybe, just maybe, there was something more.

He toyed with the bracelet Garrett had made. He was supposed to meet with her in a couple of hours at her dorm room. She wanted him to come up for supper. He grinned. Maybe he could have her for dessert.

He checked the time on his dash—almost four o'clock. That gave him plenty of time to get to his hotel, shower, change, and get back with a few minutes to spare—maybe take some time to calm the fuck down. He didn't expect Hope and Destiny to be there, so he and Haven would be alone—truly alone—for the first time.

“Garrett, I'm heading back to the hotel to take care of some things, so go ahead and disconnect me. I'm leaving the comm in my room and will call you if I need you.”

“Gotcha.”

Almost exactly two hours later, Cal knocked on Haven's door with the jacket he'd taken off slung over his shoulder. He ignored the appreciative looks from some of the ladies in residence, but scowled when he overheard, “Lucky bitch,” coming from the one entering her room across the hall.

Cal relaxed his face and smiled as the door opened but frowned with Haven's harried appearance. “Is everything okay.” He didn't really need to ask. The smell of scorched something was pretty strong.

“No, it's not.” She pushed her hair behind her ears and wiped the sweat from her brow. “Come in. If you dare.”

“The smoke's not that bad,” he said, stepping inside her suite and shutting the door.

“You should've been here twenty minutes ago.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him behind her to the kitchen, and then dropped it to point at something he was sure had been edible at one point. “Cal, meet Stouffer's Lasagna.”

Oh, so that's what it was. "Hmm..." He laid his jacket on the back of a dinette chair.
"Maybe we can salvage something from the middle?"

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“No, it’s ruined.” She picked it up and threw it in the trash. “I read the instructions wrong. I was using the frozen cooking time and not the thawed one.” She let out a disgusted breath. “I guess I stayed in the shower too long.”

Haven, naked and wet, took a jog through his mind but disappeared when she asked, “So, cheese sandwiches or Ramen Noodles?”

He grinned at her. “We can go out if you like.” He really didn’t want to, but as long as he was with her it was good.

“No,” she said, grabbing his hand again and taking him the few steps over to one of their couches and sitting down. She gave him a little tug and he sat down beside her. She was kind of a bossy little thing when she wanted to be. “I’m not really that hungry right now. Plus, I’ll have to take another shower.” She pulled strands of her hair up to her face and wrinkled her nose. “I smell like smoke.”

“Let me smell.” He moved in close and ran his nose from the top of her head down to the strands of hair lying on her shoulder. “You smell good to me.” He took the opportunity to move her hair aside and kiss her neck. “Really good. And I’m not that hungry for food right now anyhow.”

“You’re not?” she said, licking her lips, her hand still holding his tightening its grip. She scooted closer and turned her nose into the sleeve of his pullover shirt. “You smell good too.” She looked up at him through her lashes, a blush spreading over her face. “So, what are you hungry for?”

Heat chased over his skin while his cock stirred. “Do you really want to know?”

She nodded slowly, holding his gaze.

“I’ve only had a craving for one thing the last two days.”

Haven’s heating stare never left his.

“Do you know what that is, my sweet girl?”

She nodded slowly again while standing and pulling him up. He didn’t break the silence as she led him by the hand down the hallway and into her bedroom where she shut and locked the door behind them.

He waited.

But not for long.

His cock pushed painfully against the front of his jeans as Haven lifted her t-shirt over her head, and then swelled more as she undid and pushed her jeans down her slender legs and shoved them aside with her feet.

How many times had he imagined being right here over the past two weeks? But nothing had prepared him for the reality of Haven baring herself to him with her bed right behind her.

“I’ve never done this before,” she said, reaching for the front clasp on her lavender bra as a deep blush spread over her skin.

Cal’s heart raced with desire, but also with something more knowing she’d chosen him to be her first.

Her increasingly wanting gaze continued to hold his as she eased the straps down her

arms and then dropped the bra behind her to display her firm breasts tipped with hard, light brown nipples. They were the perfect handfuls. “So we might have to go a little slow.”

His mouth watered for more when her hands went to the band of her matching panties hiding what he most wanted to touch and taste. Her flavor had haunted him and he needed more.

“I can do slow,” he told her, and then swallowed hard at his first glimpse of neatly trimmed hair as she pulled her panties down over her hips and then lifted one leg and then the other to step out of them. She was gloriously naked, and he soaked her all in as she threw her panties away from her and walked toward him.

She filled his waiting arms, and then melted into his tight embrace. God, she felt good pressed up against him. But it wasn't enough. He lifted her slight weight and cradled her body against his chest while his lips found hers. Within a few steps he had her laid down on the bed and carefully settled on top of her.

“Aren't you going to...” A blush flooded her cheeks as she spread open for him and her restless legs rubbed against his hips and up and down his jean-covered thighs. “Why are you still dressed?” Her hands went to his back and tugged at the bottom of his pullover.

He grinned at her slight gasp when he relaxed his lower body into hers before reaching behind him to loosen her tight grip away from his shirt. While nothing would give him more pleasure than to be naked with her at the moment, he needed to concentrate on her pleasure first.

Besides, he wanted to take his time learning her body without the distraction of skin to skin contact.

He lifted her unresisting hands over her head and then pressed them into the pillow. She made a lovely picture—her silky, dark-golden hair spread out around her head, her eyes bright with need holding his, the way she pulled on her bottom lip with her teeth. It was almost like his first fantasy of Haven lying beneath him just like this.

Cal squeezed her hands, saying, “Keep them here,” and then took her lips in a lingering kiss before releasing her hands and gliding his fingers down her arms to cup the back of her shoulders. His mouth made its own journey over her chin and down her straining neck where he licked and nipped at her—resisting the urge to mark her—before he tongued over the raised goose flesh covering her breast.

“Cal,” Haven murmured while wrapping her legs around his waist and bowing up into him.

He glanced up to where her hands twisted in the pillowcase fabric. “Shhh...”

He closed his eyes and pushed down the need to rip open his jeans and plunge into where he knew she was wet and wanting. But he couldn’t. Not yet. So, it was with an iron will he kept his focus on her distended nipple and the hard ridges teasing his tongue, even though his cock felt ready to burst right through his jeans to seek her heated center rubbing against him

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He loved over the hard flesh as Haven's body grew more restless and shimmied against him. He finally decided to have mercy on her and surrounded a mouthful of her breast with his lips and sucked it deep.

"Mmm..." Her little sighs and moans of pleasure filled his ears and her hips went even more wild with each of his licks and nibbles.

Did she realize how hard she was making this for him?

He grinned around her breast while his fingers played over her other hardened tip in light touches mixed with slight tweaks. What was he thinking? It was literally hard to miss.

His hands coasted down her sides as he kissed and licked further down her squirming body—grinning again when she let out an aggravated grunt.

"Patience," he told her before reaching for her smooth legs and urging them from around his body. He spread her thighs farther apart and slid down between them onto the bed until his mouth hovered over her pussy—the scent of her arousal nearly making him lose his mind.

Haven's body stilled, a slow breath leaving her ending on a whimper. He glanced up over each dip and curve he'd marked as his own and met her languid gaze. What he saw there, let him know she was his as he settled between her parted thighs and then nuzzled into the curly, dark brown strip of hair leading to her pussy.

Cal palmed her ass to keep her steady for his waiting mouth, the rounded globes in

his hands clenching when he leaned up enough to blow over all her exposed, beautiful, pink flesh. He smiled in satisfaction at how responsive she was.

I wonder how she'll like this?

He took a small taste—just a barely there touch of his tongue over her clit—and Haven bowed up, a long “Ahhh...” surrounding him. He liked that, so he tasted her again, but this time with a long, slow lick, starting just above the edge of her dark opening to dart inside her luscious opening, and then up to her clit where he took several laps with the flat of his tongue.

“Remember when I said I wasn’t hungry for food,” he said, running his nose up and down where he’d just tasted.

“Mmm,” was all he got out of her before she wrapped her legs around his back and squeezed.

“Well get ready, because I’m about to gorge myself on you.”

And he did.

He let go of her ass and pushed her thighs as far apart as he could, her legs falling to his sides as he explored every morsel of her slick flesh. He tasted his fill as her hips trembled, ready to leave nothing of her untried when he flicked his tongue over her puckered star.

Her body tensed. “No, you...ohhh.”

He did it again, and then lingered when she tilted her hips up, nothing but moans surrounding him while he did his best to hold her twisting lower body in place. He glanced up again to see her white-knuckled fists gripping the pillow before he gave it

one final lick.

He smiled at what sounded like a sigh of relief when he lapped up along the smooth insides of her lower lips, her body relaxing.

“Cal.”

He loved the sound of his name falling from her lips, especially in that low, breathy tone, but he needed her screaming it. So he doubled his efforts, laving over the plump flesh below her clit while his fingers pulled back the hood covering the bundle of nerves.

“There it is,” he murmured before surrounding her swollen little nub with slow, eating kisses. He relished how it throbbed against his tongue as the sights, sounds, and essence of Haven filled him to overflowing.

He pressed his aching cock into the mattress as her pleas for more and his own need sent his mouth lower to her soaking center. He lapped at her opening, groaning at her flavor, while her hips nearly came off the bed when his tongue speared her deep, her legs trembling harder beside him with each delicious taste he devoured.

“Ohhh...” she moaned when he went back to her clit and replaced his tongue with two fingers. He fucked her in and out in time with his licks while adding another finger, setting a rhythm she followed as he worked to ready her for his cock. He wasn’t huge by any means—although he’d never had any complaints—but she was tight and he wanted her to have only pleasure when he took her.

“Um... Uh... Don’t stop,” she panted. “Just like that.” She grabbed his hair in a stinging grip, guiding him where she wanted while her body moved in time with his mouth and fingers. “Just...like... Oh, God!”

Her hips bucked while her inner walls convulsed over his fingers and her clit pulsed hard against his flattened tongue. He let her take the pleasure she needed as she pulled him closer and rode his face, only taking over with soft kisses and light licks to bring her down as her body sank into the mattress on a shuddering sigh.

He took one final taste and then moved off the bed, licking his lips and letting his gaze caress over her sprawled body from head to toe. She was a sweaty, beautiful mess—because of him.

He grinned at her when she opened her dazed eyes, her gaze widening when he pulled a condom out of his pocket as he toed off his shoes and socks.

“Thank you,” he said while stripping off his shirt.

He could almost feel her confusion when she gave him a frowning half-smile. “After what you just did to me...” She shivered, then shook her head. “Anyhow, why are you thanking me?” Her eyes followed his movements as he undid his jeans and pulled them off along with his boxers, her gaze zeroing in on his cock pointing at her.

“Why?”

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She nodded, watching intently as he opened the condom wrapper and rolled it over his dick.

“For trusting me with this,” he said, climbing back on the bed. “For letting me be your first.”

He moved between her still-splayed thighs and settled on top of her, his cock prodding where it wanted to be the most.

“Oh.”

He couldn’t resist her parted lips, so he kissed them while making short thrusts into her tight heat, testing to make sure she was still soft and ready from a few minutes before. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and she met each of his thrusts with ones of her own, letting him go deeper each time.

She pulled her mouth away from his, panting out, “I’m not going to break.”

He stopped and held her gaze for a few heartbeats and then slid home, not looking away from her while he throbbed inside the haven of her body. She didn’t flinch, but he watched for any sign of distress or discomfort to be sure.

She squirmed beneath him. “You can move, you know,” she whispered with the shy smile he loved so much.

“I will.” He pushed deeper and rolled his hips. God, she felt good—right. “You said slow, remember?”

“I think we’re past that,” she said, lifting into him. “And right now, if you don’t finish making love to me, I might not survive.”

He took her mouth again and started with slow in and out movements, loving the way her tight, wet pussy fit him so well—like she was made just for him.

Hell, she had been and he loved it.

He loved her.

But he wasn’t sure if either one of them was ready to hear the words. So, instead of saying it aloud, he told her with his body—the touch of his hands smoothing over her hair, the slow exploration of her mouth like he was learning her taste for the first time, the way he took his time filling her over and over.

She was right thiswaslovemaking.

He groaned into her mouth when the telltale signs of his impending release swept over him. He wasn’t ready for this to end, but his body had other ideas.

“Haven, I need to come,” he murmured against her lips while his hips thrust harder and faster against her. “I want you to—”

She quieted him by taking his mouth and wrapping her legs around his hips, meeting him thrust for thrust.

It was too much.

He pressed her into the bed and rolled her hips up, letting himself go. He took her hard and fast, making her his while she panted out small grunts and words of pleasure. She grabbed his ass and held on tightly when he stilled, her blunt nails

digging into his cheeks as jet after jet of cum filled the condom until he was empty and sated.

He stayed like that for long seconds, just breathing in their mingled scents.

“Cal?” One of her feet bounced against his butt, bringing him out of his post-orgasmic stupor. “I need to straighten my legs.”

“Hmm?” He opened his eyes and looked down at her bemused face and then behind him to where she still had her legs up over his ass. “Oh, sorry,” he said, pulling himself off her and lying at her side while she stretched herself out. “Are you okay?” He rubbed over her closest leg. Had he been too rough? He met her gaze. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“It was...” She let out a contented sigh then smiled. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a great lover?”

He grinned at her reference from the night before and took her lips in a quick kiss. “Not lately.”

She sighed again and snuggled into him. “Good.”

He wrapped her close and enjoyed the feel of her skin against his. He could definitely get used to this. She—

A slight snuffling snore sounded against his chest. He grinned. He’d worn her out. He could get used to that too.

What he couldn’t get used to was the full condom still attached to him. He eased away from her the best he could, left the bed, and let his gaze wander over the room. She had to have some tissues around here somewhere.

“Are you leaving?”

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He turned back to the bed and Haven half-covered with the end of the comforter she'd pulled over her, her body stiff and face tense.

“Condom,” he said with a grimace.

She looked down at his dick, everything about her relaxing until she grimaced too. “Oh.” She smirked. “Bathroom.”

He made quick work of disposing of the condom and cleaning himself up before going back into her room.

He could get used to this too—Haven, in bed, naked, waiting for him with her arms held out. He picked up his jeans on his way to her and pulled the bracelet out of one of the pockets.

“What’s that?” she asked as he got back into bed and laid down beside her.

“Let me see your wrist.”

She held her left wrist out to him and he fastened the bracelet around it, adjusting the fit so it wasn’t too loose.

“To take it off, press the oblong button on this side for five seconds to release the catch.” He pulled her hand to lie flat against his chest. “But promise me you won’t do that—not when you shower, not if you’re going out with friends, not for anything.”

She searched his gaze with a crinkled brow. “Okay.” She lifted her hand and cupped

his cheek, her expression clearing. “It’s pretty. Thank you.”

“I can’t take credit. Garrett made it for you.”

“Garrett?” She lifted her hand away and inspected some of the bangles and beads, her brow crinkling again.

“Yeah. Garrett.” He took her hand and turned her wrist over again to the clasp. “See this little round button right here?” She nodded. “If anything should happen...” Her gaze flew to his. “Press this three times and it turns on a locator so I can find you.”

“I thought you said this was almost over.”

“It is, sweet girl,” he said, pulling her tightly against him. “It is.”

* * *

“I’m hungry.”

Cal ran his hand up and down Haven’s bare arm. “Mmm... I’m getting a little hungry myself,” he said grabbing her ass and pulling her against his slowly waking cock.

“Uh... Oh...” She rubbed against him. “I feel that. But I mean, I’m really hungry. I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

Cal turned over and looked at the time on her bedside clock, nearly falling out of her double bed. It was going on ten. “Manny’s Pizza closes at eleven.”

“I could go for pizza,” she said, crawling over him and heading toward a set of drawers, and then opened the top one.

“Don’t mind me,” he said with a laugh. “I’ll just lie here and…” She bent over to pull on a fresh pair of panties she’d pulled out, and his mouth went dry with the sight of her naked pussy stuck up in the air at him.

Taking her from behind was next on his list.

She grabbed her bra from the floor, and then turned around while putting it on. “And what?”

“And nothing. Let’s get you fed. It’ll be your appetizer.”

She let out a little chuckle and then raised her brows, “Oh…”

He laughed while they got dressed. He was still smiling when they walked out Haven’s building and made it to the curb.

“No!” Cal turned at Solace’s shout and pushed Haven to the ground as the muffled pfft, pfft, pfft registered with him about the time the shots hit him—the first searing low on his abdomen with the second hitting his arm and sending him stumbling away from where Haven yelled his name and scrambled to her feet. The last one grazed the side of his head and sent him dropping to his knees while Haven attempted to cover him.

“Cal!”

“No,” he choked out, pushing her away from him. “Run.” He collapsed onto the brown, prickly grass. “Run…” he barely got out as he looked up into Haven’s panic-filled eyes.

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“I’m not leaving you,” she screamed, dropping to her knees while his vision wavered and a black van pulled to a stop at the curb. “Please, don’t die,” she begged.

It was too late. He pushed at her one more time. His last image before everything went black was Haven kicking and screaming at the men dragging her into the open side panel door. Her voice crying out his name was cut off when the door slammed shut as they roared off.

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“Unnn...”Duncan closed his eyes and held himself deep inside Devon’s body, the contractions from her orgasm milking his own. He let the sensation wash over him with the last pulses of cum leaving his cock and then looked down at the beautiful woman beneath him. With everything going on and his worry over Haven, this was the last place he’d intended to end up tonight.

But Devon had shown up to say she’d take him to the airport. Then one thing had led to another, and...

He had to admit, being with her had taken his mind off of things for the last forty minutes or so. But he could already feel the weight of everything creeping back up on him again and the heavy knowledge he had decisions to make—perhaps lives to change—perhaps a life to take.

Duncan slid against her and smiled when she bit her lip and shivered. She was so responsive. He liked it. He liked her.

He just didn't love her.

But they'd cleared the air about where their relationship stood months ago. Neither one of them was looking for anything permanent. They were only interested in the here and now and the pleasure they could find in each other.

And, damn, they'd found a lot of pleasure.

The unexpected image of a tall blonde with golden-brown eyes flashed through his mind and he tried to shake it away. It wasn't right for him to have another woman filling his thoughts while he was still physically connected to another. It didn't do justice to either one of them.

Solace refused to leave.

He gave Devon a lingering kiss and then rolled to his side and stared at the ceiling. He'd been thinking about Solace more and more after the last time the squad had gotten together six months ago. It had been one of many times over the last three-plus years since the other four had retired, but something had been different that time.

Now with this whole situation with Haven, he'd found himself not only worrying about his daughter's safety, but Solace's as well—something that made no sense whatsoever. The woman was tough and could handle most anything she set her mind to, including flattening any man stupid enough to try and take her on. It was one of the many things he'd admired about her during her time under his command.

Being a woman in the Marines wasn't easy, but she had excelled in her field. So much so, she'd been recommended to him for consideration for the Elite Squad. It had been a good recommendation. He'd found her to be a dedicated Marine and an exceptional linguist, who had been the missing piece to round out his team.

Come to think of it, he'd never really considered she was a woman during those almost five years. He'd only seen her as a Marine and valuable team member—someone he could trust to have his back and the backs of those on their squad.

But now?

Duncan sighed and glanced beside him. Damn, but he was a son of a bitch for letting his thoughts dwell on Solace with Devon smiling at him and licking her lips in that way she had when she was ready for round two. But if he was thinking of Solace—or any other woman—at a moment like this, it was probably time for him and Devon to say goodbye.

“Where'd you go?” she asked, leaning up on one elbow and stroking a hand down his cheek.

“I'm right here.” He pulled her into his side where she laid her head on his chest. “Where would I have gone?”

She circled a finger over his nipple, and then playfully tugged on some of his chest hair. “No. Your mind was someplace with someone, but it wasn't here with me.” Her words weren't heated or upset—just very matter of fact. It was another thing he liked about her. She was a hell of a smart woman. And, while she was passionate with him in and out of bed, in every other aspect of her life, she let her mind and not her emotions lead her. It's why she was an up-and-comer in The Cooperative.

It's why he knew when tonight was over, she would move on without giving him a second thought—something that should have bothered him, but it didn't.

“I just have a lot on my mind right now,” he told her, rubbing over her bare back.

“Care to share?”

“Classified,” he said with a grin, hoping it came off as a joke.

Devon’s warm breath blew over his nipple before her tongue licked over it. His cock stirred. He had no illusions about having a relationship with Solace—a woman who had never shown him a bit of interest. So, he banished her from his mind to give Devon the attention she deserved. Maybe once more wouldn’t hurt, but it’d be a dick move not to be up front with her beforehand. He’d let her decide if she wanted to stay.

“Duncan Sheppard, you are a silly man.” Devon leaned away from him and smiled.

“What?” He gave her a half-grin.

She let out a short laugh. “Who is she?”

“No one really.” He saw no reason for pretense. Again, she was a smart woman. “I mean, she’s not anyone you would know and no one who would probably give me the time of day.”

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“Oh, I highly doubt that.” She pulled herself up to sit against the headboard and looked down at him. “You’re underestimating your charm,” she said, looking down his body, her brow raising with the evidence he was ready for round two as well. “See what I mean.”

“What can I say,” he said, pulling her head down to his. “It’s the company I’m with.”

Her lips crashed onto his, her open mouth devouring his while she shoved the sheet covering him aside and straddled his hips. She braced her hands against his chest and lifted her upper body while her core still wet with their previous combined release rubbed against his waiting cock. She sank down on him, her heat surrounding his aching flesh.

He pulled her in for another kiss as their bodies thrust against each other, closing his eyes and grinning when she kissed her way to his ear and nibbled on his lobe. His grin turned to a scowl when she whispered on her next downward slide, “So sorry, darling.”

His eyes flew open when a sharp pain pierced his neck, the burning sensation filling his veins accompanying her words of, “You really shouldn’t have called in your team.”

He lifted his arms to push her away—or at least he tried to. They weren’t cooperating with him. Nothing was cooperating. He yelled obscenities in his head when his mouth refused to let him voice them.

She held the syringe in front of him. “New formula,” she said, matter-of-factly. “It

works fast. Doesn't it?" She squirmed on top of him. "Yeah." She grimaced. "It shuts everything down. And I do meaneverything. Oh well." She lifted herself off of him while the room turned hazy. "Too bad, too. I wouldn't have minded finishing one last fuck."

Darkness closed in on her smiling face.

Hav...

* * *

Duncan groaned and rubbed his forehead before slowly opening his eyes to a dimly lit plane cabin. He scrubbed his hands over his face and tried to focus. His vision was still a little blurry from...

"Thatfuckingbitch." He struggled to get up from the reclining leather chair, but found himself belted into it. "What the—"

"We thought we'd keep you secured. It wouldn't do for you to fall out of your seat."

Duncan squinted over at the man sitting in shadows, his pounding head and wavering vision making it hard to identify him, but he thought he recognized his voice.

"Yeah," Duncan said, fumbling with the lap belt. "Thanks for the consideration." The buckle came free and he straightened in his seat, realizing at the same time he was fully dressed in a suit and tie. At least they hadn't dragged him out of his house naked.

He glanced out the window at the sunrise on the horizon in front of them and the expanse of water below. They had to be on their way to the summit.

“You’re quite welcome,” the man said, flipping a switch that flooded the cabin with light. “The headache should be gone in a few minutes.”

Duncan blinked several times. “Whitman?”

Colonel Robert Whitman inclined his head. “Sheppard.”

“What...” Duncan frowned over at the man he’d worked with for almost ten years in the Corps. “You’re behind this?” He made a move to stand but found himself facing a gun. It wouldn’t have been a wise move to rush anyone with a loaded weapon at thirty thousand feet, so he held up his hands while settling back into his seat.

“More or less.” The other man laughed and relaxed when Duncan put his hands down and gripped the arms of his seat, but not so much he didn’t keep his gun trained on him. “But three-plus years too late thanks to your damned squad ruining everything.”

Duncan casually glanced to points in the cabin. No one else was in this section, but Whitman wouldn’t be here alone. But how many people did he have? “Be honest with yourself, Bob, if you wanted to get away with something underhanded, my team were the last Marines you should have requested for assignment under your command.”

Whitman stood and pointed the gun toward Duncan’s head, yelling, “Do you think that was my decision?”

“It wasn’t?” Duncan calmly eyed the gun and then met Whitman’s crazed expression while the other man’s derisive laughter filled the cabin as he sat back down.

“General Younces. He also made sure your fucking team was in on that last interrogation. How the hell he knew about it is still a mystery to me.” The other man narrowed his gaze. “You didn’t know?”

Duncan shook his head, but Younces had obviously had some intel on Whitman. He just wished the General had made him aware of what it was so he could've at least warned his people. But knowing this still didn't explain why Whitman was behind the threat to Haven.

"You're wondering why."

"Of course I am."

"Money." Whitman laid the gun on the table beside him. "Lots of money."

"You'd betray the Corps for money? What happened to you, Bob?"

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“Do you know how expensive it is to keep a wife and a twenty-something-year-old mistress happy?” He snickered. “It takes more money than a Colonel makes, I’ll tell you that. Especially one in forced retirement.” He sat back. “And since said mistress has tastes that run to, let’s just say, the extreme when it comes to the finer things in life, I’ve had to do what I’ve had to do.”

“So, let me get this straight.” This was unbelievable. “You got in bed with the Turks in the province so you could keep getting your dick wet from some young wh—”

“Ah, ah, ah.” Whitman waved a finger at him. “Let’s watch what we say, especially after what your daughter was up to a few hours ago with her bodyguard.”

Duncan flushed with heat. Haven was an adult, but it didn’t mean he wanted to hear about her sex life. He searched his feelings about knowing Cal was with his daughter, but he felt no animosity toward the other man. If anything, it gave him a sense of peace knowing she would have someone after he was gone.

Cal had just better make and keep his daughter happy or he’d find a way to come back and haunt his ass.

“But why bring my daughter into this at all?”

Whitman’s cellphone dinged on the low table beside his seat. He picked it up while skewering Duncan with a hate-filled gaze. “It was the only way to get you to do what needs to be done. Not to mention the fact I’m gaining some amount of pleasure knowing you’ll be branded an assassin and traitor.” Whitman said the last with a slow grin before shaking his head. “Too bad about her lover though.”

They killed Cal...

“We’ll be landing soon, and the summit starts in a little over an hour. We expect you to finish your task.” Whitman checked his phone and swiped the screen before raising his sneering smile at Duncan. “And since you decided to go against our rules,” he said, turning it toward him, “perhaps this will give you some added incentive.”

Duncan tensed, his heart stuttering before glaring back at Whitman. “How am I doing this?”

13

“Ohhh...”

God, my head...my arm...

Haven slowly opened her eyes to a darkened room.

“What?” She peered into the shadows and ignored the pain pounding against her skull, gasping when she attempted to move her arms and legs and couldn’t budge them.

“Where the hell am I?” she whispered while struggling to loosen the hard ties binding her to the solid chair she was sitting in. It was no use. She was only hurting herself. She took another look around. More of the room was coming into focus, but none of the vague shapes looked familiar. She took a deep breath of the stale air with a hint of disinfectant, leading her to believe she was in some kind of utility room.

How had she gotten here? If someone was playing a joke, it wasn’t a funny one. She needed to get—

Her heart stuttered.

Cal.

Scenes flashed through her mind.

The cold night air as they'd walked out the front of her building. Cal's laughter being interrupted by someone's abrupt shout and then turning as he pushed her to the ground. She'd looked up at him, her confusion turning to horror as his body jerked twice and blood bloomed over his belly and arm. His stunned expression met hers as he told her to run, his concern for her palpable even as he went to the ground and another burst of red sprayed from the side of his head. She'd almost believed it wasn't happening—that was until her hands had clutched at his arm when she'd attempted to cover him and his hot blood had flowed over her fingers.

It had happened fast—mere seconds—with Cal's last words telling her to run.

She couldn't.

But it hadn't mattered how overwhelming her need to stay with Cal was because hard hands had grabbed her around the waist and dragged her fighting form away from him. She'd kicked and bitten until a sharp pain had pierced her upper arm.

Hot tears had added to her last hazy vision of Cal lying still on the grass with blood covering his arm and head before the van door had slammed shut.

They'd killed him... To get to her.

Her eyes stung again as she took in a shuddering breath, stifling a whimper in case someone heard her. Cal was gone and she hadn't told him she loved him. She closed her eyes and hung her head. Fear of being the first to say the words had kept her

silent—even when with each cry of pleasure he'd wrung from her body her heart had screamed out for her to tell him.

Cal hadn't said the words either. He hadn't needed to. He had been her first—and now her only—but she'd felt it. Maybe he'd been afraid to say it—afraid he'd scare her. She would never know why. But she did know with every fiber of her being he had loved her. He'd shown it with each touch and the way his clear blue gaze had held hers with such tender passion.

God, she should have told him—at least once.

A spasm of pain shot through her chest. Was this how her dad had felt when her mother died? How much worse it must have been after a lifetime of loving. How had he lived through it?

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She sniffled as hot tears ran down her cheeks and she rocked back and forth in the chair, crying for the man she loved while her heart broke apart piece by piece in the dark until nothing was left.

She sat there for what seemed like hours, grieving until she blinked hard when harsh light flooded the room.

“And there’s the princess.”

She squinted at the man smirking at her, his dirty blond hair a little greasy and his smarmy smile marred by the missing part of a front tooth.

“Just look at you.” He laughed and shut the door, closing them in together. “I just can’t believe that bastard Rothe had the balls to bang the daughter of the high and mighty Duncan Sheppard. But can’t say that I blame him,” he said, walking over to her.

Her stomach roiled in disgust when he ran a finger over her wet cheek and then down where he lingered over her breast. “You must be one juicy piece of ass.” He smiled, watching where his hand circled her nipple. “I might have to get me some when all is said and done.” He grinned back up at her. “Too bad I’ll have to wait. We have to keep you nice and healthy as incentive until dear old daddy is dead.”

She gasped, her eyes flying to meet his sinister stare.

“What? You didn’t know?” He smiled again and crouched in front of her. “Yeah. One way or another daddy knew he was on a suicide mission—whether he took out Sadik

or not.” His smile broadened. “How does it feel knowing two men will be dead today from trying to protect you? Rothe and your dad.”

God, did Cal know about this? She shook her head. No, she didn’t think he would’ve been as confident about Saturday being a good day for her. Besides, knowing her dad, he wouldn’t have said anything.

“Don’t shake your head at me, princess,” he said, grabbing her jaw in a bruising grip. “It’s all true.” He let go of her face and then ran his finger down her arm to the leather bracelet. “Huh. This is nice.” He grinned up at her. “You won’t be needing it much longer and my girlfriend likes blue.” He grabbed her hand and roughly twisted her wrist over, the zip ties scouring her skin. He tried to undo the clasp, but it wouldn’t budge. “How do you take this damn thing off?”

She licked her lips and then cleared her throat, needing to keep the relief from her voice. If she could get him to activate the GPS, Cal’s friends could find her in time and stop her dad from killing this Sadik man. She could at least save her father. “If I tell you, will you promise not to hurt me?” It wouldn’t do to be too easy with telling him how to take it off. She didn’t want to arouse his suspicions.

“Ha. No.” He tugged on the leather to work it over her hand under her binding, but the bracelet was too fitted and the ties too unforgiving.

“N-n-n-no. You’re going to break it.”

“Then quit dickin’ around,” he said, pulling on it again, “and tell me how to get the damned thing off.”

She let her lower lip tremble. “There’s a trick to it.”

“Tell me,” he said, squeezing her fingers hard to the point she gasped.

“See the little round button there on the side?” she said, grimacing when he squeezed harder.

He examined the clasp from his still crouched position. “Yeah.”

“Press it three times.”

He did. She took in a breath and held it.

Dear God, let it work.

“Nothing happened.” His aggravated gaze met hers as he tugged her hand hard enough the tie cut into her and she winced. “You lying to me?”

“I-I-I told you there’s a trick. Hold down the long narrow button for the count of five.”

He did. The clasp released and he yanked it away from her wrist and held it up in front of him. “Rothe give you this?” he asked, eyeing her.

She nodded.

“Good,” he said, grinning and putting it in his pocket. “Now every time I see it, I’ll think of how good it felt to shoot that prick.”

Her heart fell again.

“Well, you look just the right amount of miserable.”

She didn’t have the will for any kind of comeback.

“Perfect,” he said, lifting his phone from his other pocket and pointing it at her.
“Now, smile for your daddy.”

14

“Lay your ass back down!”

“They have her, Garrett.” The pain running through various points of Cal’s body as he tried to get up from the hospital bed was nothing compared to what was going on in his heart. “We have to find her.”

Cal had awoken over an hour ago in a hospital bed with a haggard-faced Declan sitting next to him and his abdomen, bicep, and side of his head aching. Garrett had stood at the foot of his bed staring at him with a drawn, solemn expression, while an investigator waited to ask questions.

But none of that mattered, only the lingering image of Haven’s anguished expression dimming as he’d blacked out.

According to Garrett, it must have been the only thing on his mind, even as he’d started to come out of the anesthesia. It seemed Cal had caused enough of a commotion in recovery, the charge nurse—dubbed Nurse Ratchet by Garrett—had threatened to sedate him again. Garrett had said it had taken all of his charm to get her to let him handle the situation.

Cal didn’t remember any of it.

“Haven?” he’d asked, groaning and trying to sit up, only to have both of his friends shake their heads after glancing at the investigator. They’d waited until the officer had gotten all the answers he could out of him, which wasn’t much with the little intel

he could share, before Cal had feigned exhaustion to get him to leave.

Declan had waited until the three of them were alone, and that's when his worst fears had been confirmed. Haven was gone. To compound matters, Colonel Sheppard was unreachable. They'd had to assume he had been taken as well because no way in hell would he have ghosted on them.

"You gave her the bracelet," Garrett said, pulling his attention to him. "You said she knows how to use it. Give her time to activate it."

"It's been almost four hours." Cal gritted his teeth to keep from screaming out his frustration. "Haven already should have."

He leveled his stinging eyes on his friend. Time had been wasted with the events following the shooting. But even if they had been able to follow up on anything, they had no leads. The longer they'd had to wait, the more he'd let his imagination take him to the unthinkable of what might have happened to her.

"What if she can't." Cal cleared the emotion from his throat. "What if..." He couldn't make himself finish the thought.

"No what ifs," Solace said, walking into the small room they'd moved him to, her face marred by a bruising eye—the white of it blood red—and a bandage covering part of her forehead. "Damned investigator kept me tied up after they finally took care of this in the ER," she said, pointing to her face.

She came to the opposite side of the bed from Garrett and Declan and gently pushed Cal back down before leaning over him. Her pained gaze held his as she lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "We're not going to believe anything has happened to her. Just like nothing's happened to Dun..." She took a shuddering breath. "I mean Colonel Sheppard. You know they have to have both of them alive to do whatever it

is they need him for.”

He held her gaze until she shuttered her expression and stepped away. Was there something more than just concern for the Colonel he’d heard in her voice and seen in her face?

“Dammit,” Declan exclaimed, pounding a fist on the equipment tray and nearly knocking it over. “This is my fault.” He turned his tortured blue eyes to Cal. “Thirty seconds. One fucking half-minute too late. If I’d been closer...” His friend looked at him, then Solace, and winced before pacing the limited confines of the room. Declan’s long-legged stride made it about three steps one way and three back.

It wasn’t Declan’s fault. Cal had learned the man had done all he could, giving chase in his vehicle while Garrett had called for an ambulance for him and Solace. Declan had almost caught up with the kidnappers when the fuckers had thrown out tire spikes. He’d said he’d barely managed to keep his truck from flipping after his tires had blown.

If the fault lay with anyone, it was with Cal. He’d allowed himself to become too complacent thinking they had it all under control—too focused on Haven as the woman he wanted rather than the woman he was supposed to protect. Because of his failure to pay attention to their surroundings, Haven had been taken.

“No,” Cal said, shaking his head. “I should have had my comm in. If I had, I’d have at least had a few seconds to react when they blitzed us.”

“If we’re passing blame,” Garrett interjected. “Don’t leave me out of it. I was closer when Solace came up on the shooter. I rushed to her instead...” He let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, man.”

Cal looked up at the faces almost as familiar to him as his own—each one meaning

more to him than his own life. “You did the right thing. All of you.”

They fell silent until Garrett reached over the bed and touched Solace’s chin, turning the damaged side of her face to him. “Bastard really did a job on you.”

Cal still couldn’t believe someone had taken out Solace. It was almost an impossibility and something he could imagine she was probably still pissed over.

“Well, the butt of a twenty-two to the face does have a tendency to leave a mark.” She grabbed Cal’s hand and furrowed her brow at him. “At least it made Woosley rush and kept him from steadying his aim before taking the shots. I’m sure they were on some kind of timetable once you guys left the dorm.”

A heavy silence filled the room for a heartbeat.

“Wait! Woosley?” Declan said on a growl. “The jackass from Celeski’s team?”

Solace nodded. “Him and another guy.” She shook her head. “I guess I was stunned at seeing him holding the gun and I missed the fact he had backup. I was hit from behind and that’s when Woosley clocked me with the butt of his gun while I was on the ground. Fucker made sure to give me a big smile when he did it too.”

“So, what?” Garrett said, grimacing. “We’ve been looking in the wrong direction all this time? Shit!”

“It looks like it,” Solace said, pulling a chair over and collapsing in it. “So now the question is, who’s actually behind this clusterfuck?”

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That most definitely was the question. That and where was Haven? He knew Garrett was banking on his girl activating the tracking mechanism on the bracelet so they could at least get to her. Then perhaps they'd be able to beat the Colonel's location out of Woosley or whoever was holding her. The idea of the smarmy man anywhere close to Haven had him clenching his fists.

God, let Haven be able to turn it on.

It was Haven's, and possibly the Colonel's, only hope.

Cal glanced up at his opening door. Speaking of hope...

Hope's red-rimmed, worried gaze searched his for several seconds before Destiny pushed past her and barged into the room.

"Where's Haven?"

"We—"

"We don't know," Garrett spoke up before Cal could answer her.

Destiny rounded on Garrett, staring him down while pointing a trembling finger at Cal. "I'm asking him," she nearly shouted. "He was supposed to keep her safe. He was supposed to make sure she...she..." Destiny took in a breath and turned her dark brown eyes swimming with unshed tears on him. "You were supposed to take care of her," she whispered while Hope came up behind her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "You promised."

“It’s going to be alright.” Hope leaned down and said in her ear before looking at Cal, her usually soft features hardening. “Isn’t it.”

“You can’t be here,” Declan growled, moving closer to Hope while glowering down at her. “And how the hell did you get back here anyhow?”

Hope’s eyes widened as she looked from Cal up at his friend while a blush spread up from the collar of her shirt and filled her face. “Well, the...” She cleared her throat. “The security guard is a part-time student in one of my classes. He likes me, so—”

“So...what?” Declan said, leaning into her, his voice going low. “You flirted your way in?”

“Of course not,” Hope answered with some heat and frowning. “He said only family, so I told him we were.”

“Declan...” Cal warned his friend.

“That had better be all,” he muttered as Hope’s brow furrowed at his statement.

Dammit, they didn’t have time for Declan’s jealousy.

Hope stiffened. “I don’t know who—”

“Look, ladies,” Solace said, interrupting a narrow-eyed Hope while pushing her way in front of Declan and jabbing him in the stomach with her elbow. “What my gargantuan friend here should have said is, it’s really not safe for you to be seen with us right now.”

It seemed Destiny was having none of it. “I don’t care about my safety. I’m not the one who’s been taken!” She skewered Cal with her gaze and gripped the end rail of

his bed. “We’re not leaving here until we know Haven can be found.”

“What’s going on in here?” Everyone turned their attention to the doorway and the doctor in a white lab coat Cal had only seen once since coming to. “There are too many of you back here, so at least three of you need to leave.” He frowned at each of them. “Now,” he said, stepping inside and motioning with the chart in his hand for them to file out.

No one moved.

“Are those my discharge papers?” Cal asked, instead, easing out of the bed and trying not to grimace as pain rocketed through him.

“Discharge?” The doctor looked at him like he was crazy. “No, these are your admitting papers. And you’re not ready to get up yet.”

“I’m not only ready to get up,” he said, “but I’m leaving.” He glanced around the room. “Where’re my clothes?”

The doctor moved farther into the room, his face in a dour pinch. “Mr...” He glanced down at the chart. Why didn’t that give Cal a good feeling? “Rothe,” he finished, looking back up, “you’ve been lucky up to this point. If the bullets had hit you at any other angle, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.”

Cal remembered turning just before the shots rang out. More than likely the bullets were supposed to have targeted his back. He grinned over at Solace. She’d probably saved his life.

“But youwereshot and we need to have you in for at least a twenty-four-hour observation.”

“Sorry about that, doc, but the only thing anyone will be observing will be me walking out with my friends here.” Cal glanced around again for something to wear without turning too much. As it was, his ass was hanging out the backside of his gown and he didn’t think he needed to flash Haven’s friends.

“Here ya go,” Garrett said, handing him a white plastic, drawstring bag. “Everything’s a little bloody, but we can get you something when—”

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An alarm sounded on the phone Garrett held in his other hand, his eyes widening as he dropped his gaze to it. He swiped a finger over the screen, a slow grin spreading over his face as he raised his head and met Cal's eyes.

"I've got her."

It didn't take long to process out after that. Processing out being a relative term when what he'd really done was quickly put on his clothes and head for the nearest exit. He was pretty sure everyone had gotten a good look at everything he had, but he didn't care.

The doctor had called in several staff to try and waylay him and explain the dire consequences of not staying, but he'd focused on getting the hell out there.

He'd barreled through them with his small group surrounding him, only stopping when some papers were shoved in his face they insisted he sign—something to the effect that he wouldn't hold the hospital responsible for anything that happened to him since he'd left against medical advice. He'd signed the damned things to keep from punching someone instead.

The next thing was to get Hope and Destiny to keep their concerned selves out of the way. They loved Haven. He got that. But there was no way he was going to take two civilians along for the ride into a situation where one of them could get hurt. He didn't need to have to worry about them—nor did Garrett and Declan.

"Your pretty ass is going back to the campus where you will lock yourself in your suite until further notice," Declan informed a slack-jawed Hope when they got outside.

“You got me?”

Destiny fisted her hands on her hips. “You can’t tal—”

“Yes. He can,” Garrett said, cutting her complaint short. He gently took her shoulders and crouched low to meet her eye to eye. “You and Hopewilldo what Declan has said.” Cal couldn’t remember a time when he’d seen his friend so serious—and he’d seen him in a lot of tense situations. She opened her mouth but Garrett headed her off again, quietly saying, “Haven would want you out of harm’s way.”

Destiny glowered at Garrett for several seconds before letting out a huffing sigh and throwing hard looks where he held her until he let go and backed away.

“All right, but you had just better bring her back.” Destiny met and momentarily held Cal’s gaze before turning her attention to the other members of his squad. “And that means all of you.” She gave Garrett one more tight-mouthed look with her chin raised, and then grabbed Hope’s hand. “Let’s go,” she said, pivoting around in her unbelievably high heels and then stalking off across the brightly-lit parking lot. She didn’t spare them a backward glance, although Hope did look over her shoulder a couple of times before they got to their vehicle.

Cal and his team took the few moments needed to make sure the two young women got safely inside and drove off before going to Garrett’s truck.

“Okay,” Cal said, once they were all seated and buckled in, his pulse racing. “Where are we going?”

* * *

“You havegotto be kidding me,” Solace said close to Cal’s ear as she peered over his shoulder a little more than an hour after they’d left the hospital.

“Well, it’s definitely not the cliché abandoned warehouse I was expecting,” Garrett said, sitting in the driver’s seat.

“A church,” Declan said on a short laugh from his place next to Solace. “I hope they’re prayed up.”

The four of them sat in Garrett’s truck in the copse surrounding the abandoned church, where the signal continued to beep from its original location, and put in their comm links.

They were dressed and loaded for bear after stopping at their hotel to gather weapons and suit up in black tactical gear. Cal had had a hell of a time putting on everything and had needed Declan to help him pull up his pants and strap him into his ballistic plate carrier. And if that didn’t humble a man, nothing did.

Afterward, they’d followed the GPS coordinates to the outskirts of Middleburg and this isolated but unlikely site.

Cal carefully moved his body around in the seat so he could look at his team while Garrett clicked the overhead light to keep it from coming on when they got out. “I’m not going to be any help.” And didn’t that just piss him the hell off. “But I need you three to take the building fast and hard while it’s still dark.” He checked his watch. “We’ve got maybe an hour before sunrise.”

He glanced at Solace, her bandaged head covered in a black knit cap and her face concealed by black grease paint, matching the rest of them. “Reconnoiter the area for guards. If you can get close enough to look inside any windows, do it.”

Solace nodded, slipped out of the truck, and left the door slightly ajar before disappearing.

“Declan, take up a position close by where you can get a good look at that steeple and the front door. Once I give the signal, take out anyone you see up top or coming out the front.”

“You’ve got it.” Declan grabbed his night-scoped sniper rifle from the rack behind him and left from his side of the vehicle.

“That leaves us, Garrett.”

“Where do you want me?”

“Have you turned those on yet?” Cal indicated the comm link control.

“No.”

“Good.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not staying back. I can’t. I also know I’m a liability.”

“N—”

“Yes, I am,” he told his friend with a grim smile. “I’m also a good distraction.”

Garrett slapped his hands on his steering wheel before gripping it tightly and staring out the windshield. “You think I’m letting you be a fucking decoy?” Garrett turned his burning gaze at him. “Like hell!”

“They’re not going to expect to see me walk through the front door. It’ll give us an added element of surprise.”

“It’ll also more than likely get you killed.” Garrett shook his head. “I won’t let you do it.”

“You can’t stop me.” He understood where his friend was coming from, but he wasn’t going to argue about it. “Our priority is securing Haven and then getting the Colonel’s location to hopefully stop whatever it is he’s being forced to do.” He grabbed his friend’s shoulder and squeezed. “In that order.”

Garrett held his stare and then nodded on a sigh. “I don’t like it.”

“I know you don’t.” He glanced out the windshield at the church. “Now, turn on the comms.” He faced the other man when he hesitated. “Garrett, turn them on.”

Cal watched while Garrett did what he asked and took measured breaths. He had to settle himself for what was about to come before checking in with everyone. “Solace, report.”

“It’s basically one big, open area with a few side rooms. No upstairs. One guard walking the perimeter—a damned lazy one who’s more interested in his smokes than doing his job—so an easy target. Then I’ve got two I could see inside.” He didn’t like when she hesitated. “I didn’t see Woosley.”

Cal knocked his head back on the headrest. What if he was with Haven? He couldn’t think of that. “What else?”

“The back door was locked but it gave way pretty easy.”

“Declan?”

“I found as high a position as I could where I could cover the front. One target sighted in the bell tower.”

So, five total, counting Woosley.

Cal held Garrett’s hard gaze and shook his head when it looked like he was about to say something. “Solace, Garrett will meet you at the back. You’ll both slip inside and Garrett will cover you while you locate Haven. I need her secured before anything goes down. Declan, take out the bell tower guy once the signal is raised. If you see the lazy one, take him out too.” He grinned at his unsmiling friend. “I’ll stay back and monitor from here.”

Garrett grimaced but nodded.

“Solace, everyone’s striking on your signal.” He might not survive, but before he went, he’d know Haven was safe. “Find my girl.”

ThankGod this guy went to sleep.

Haven had spent the last several hours with Donald Woosely off and on. He'd said he'd liked looking at her—and touching her. She could still almost feel his hands where he'd groped her through her clothes. She'd stopped cringing at one point because she'd figured out he got off on it just as much as he did feeling her up. But it was difficult not to feel dirty. If she ever got out of here, she was going to have to shower nonstop for a week.

At least this last time when he'd come in, he'd been more interested in sleeping than anything else because he'd just yawned and sat back in a chair close by with a smile on his face as he'd drifted off. She could only imagine what he was thinking about. If she had to guess, it was probably him doing any one of the unspeakable things he'd promised to do to her once her father completed his mission.

The first part of the mission was already underway, and had been for hours. According to Woosley, her father was in the middle of negotiations with several high-ranking Turkish officials and the leader of a band of rebels from one of the provinces, Mazhar Sadik.

The mission would be finished when her father killed Sadik.

If she could cry, she would. But she had no tears left in her after hours sitting with nothing to do but mourn Cal's loss and dread what was about to happen halfway around the world. She glanced over at her snoring tormenter. And when it was over, she was going to be used by him in the vilest ways possible before he handed her over to the others.

After they were done with her...

Haven kept her eyes fixed on the door and tried to think of something else.

Destiny and Hope.

What she wouldn't give to have a few last minutes with her best friends. She squeezed her eyes shut. God, they were probably worrying themselves to death over her. Why hadn't she hugged them when the two had left their dorm room? Sure, she'd been excited about Cal coming over, but she shouldn't have rushed them out the door. Her last image of them was Hope's smiling face winking at her over her shoulder and Destiny's back as she'd laughingly dragged Hope away.

Haven opened her burning eyes and stared once more at the door. She couldn't believe she'd never—

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Did the doorknob just move?

She held her breath as, little by little, the door cracked open. Woosley had been the only one to watch over her, but she knew more were in the building. She'd heard him talking to them. Was the meeting over? A sense of doom filled her. Her father was probably dead and she was about to wish she was too.

She found herself breathing harder the more the door opened, until a blackened face peeked inside and smiled. Whoever it was put a finger to their lips and indicated the still-sleeping Donald.

Haven nodded and peered closer, her eyes widening and heart racing when she realized it was Solace.

They found me!

Solace held up a finger and then stepped back from the almost-open door. Her yell of, "Now!" was accompanied by the door being kicked all the way open with shouts and gunfire filling her ears.

"What the fuck!" Woosley fell out of his chair, with his gun skittering across the floor a couple of feet away from him while Solace held hers steady on him.

"Don't move," she said, her face tense and eyes narrowed. "But then again...move. Give me an excuse."

Woosley lay sprawled on the floor, his feet tangled up in the legs of his chair and his

hands out to his sides. One of them was close to his gun. A slow grin spread over his face while whatever was going on behind Solace seemed to have died out quickly.

“Well, well, well, if it ain’t the barracks where again. What? Hiding your face from the little love tap I gave you?”

Looking closer, Haven could see one of Solace’s eyes seemed swollen, and the sclera red and angry looking.

“I’ve had worse.” Solace just grinned at him. “And from better men than you.” She motioned with her gun. “Get up and turn around.”

“Do you really think you’re getting out of here with her?”

“Oh,” Solace said with a full-on smile. “I know I am. Your men are contained...or dead...or both.”

Donald’s face hardened, his cheeks turning red. Haven watched as he glanced at his gun and then at her, resolve showing in his gaze as he kicked the chair away from him toward Solace and reached for his weapon.

The chair flew into Solace while Woosley grabbed his gun and bounded to his feet. Haven closed her eyes tight, and then jerked when the loud retort of a single gunshot filled the room, her heart nearly stopping as a body hit the floor.

She slowly opened her eyes, expecting to see Donald’s gun pointing at her and Solace’s body crumpled in the doorway.

Instead, Donald lay a few feet from her, his blank stare facing her—his forehead marred by a single bullet hole. She whipped her head over to Solace holstering her gun, her expression grim. “Let’s get you out of here,” she said, pulling out a knife and

kneeling in front of her.

“My father?”

Solace’s shoulders tensed before she looked up at her from where she was cutting away the bindings around her ankles. “We don’t know yet.”

“He’s in Turkey.”

“We know.”

“You do?” Haven’s brows furrowed as she waited while Solace started at the ties on her wrists. “Do you know they’re having him kill a Mazhar Sadik.”

Relief filled her when Solace cut the last tie and she could rub over her raw wrists.

“We do now,” Solace said, standing up. “He’s—” She paused and cocked her head to the side, her smiling eyes going to Haven’s. “Yes, I have her.”

Haven figured she must have her ear comm in, so Garrett and Declan had to be with her. Reality set in again.

Cal wasn’t with them and never would be again.

But maybe they could still save her father—stop him. They just had to find a way to contact him. “We need—”

“Haven!”

Haven’s gaze flew to Solace who was turning toward the empty doorway. She slowly stood from the chair on unsteady legs. “Cal?”

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Then there he was, filling the space while his beautiful blue eyes went passed Solace and zeroed in on her, his smile taking her breath—even through all the black greasepaint. Within seconds she was caught up against his chest with hard Kevlar digging into her breasts and her legs dangling off the floor.

“God, Haven.” His big body trembled as he held her close.

“They killed you.” She’d thought her eyes would be permanently dry after the last few hours, but she found tears tracking down her cheeks as she hugged him the best she could. “You were shot.” She ran her hands up and down his back before leaning back and carefully touching the bandages covering the side of his head by his temple. “Your head...”

She gently kissed his lips while carefully wrapping her legs around his muscular thighs and holding him as tight as she dared. He was alive and she wasn’t letting him go. Then he was kissing her back with an abandon she couldn’t help but match, and she relished in it—savoring the taste she’d thought lost to her forever.

God, how would she gave gone on without this man—this man who was holding her and kissing her as if she was everything to him too. She stroked his stubbled cheeks and pulled her lips enough from his to whisper, “I love you.” She searched his red-rimmed gaze holding hers and breathed him in. “I love you so much.”

Cal’s massive arms tightened around her as he buried his face in her hair. “I love you too,” he whispered, his voice choked with emotion. “And I don’t ever want to be without you again.”

“I don’t either. When I thought you were...were...” Haven shivered and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Promise you won’t do that to me again. Okay?”

“I promise,” he said, running his mouth over her cheek to her lips before whispering again, “I promise.” His kiss ate at her mouth, taking her to thoughts of how soon she would be able to get him alone and tend to his wounds.

From the doorway a loud cough interrupted them. Cal slowly released her mouth and turned with her still attached to him. Garrett stood there grinning with a young man standing beside him she vaguely recognized but couldn’t quite place. And then the young man smiled.

She took in a quick breath. It was the lost student from the previous week who’d been looking for Lawrence Hall. What was he doing here?

“It’s done,” Garrett said while Declan came up behind him.

Haven looked at each of them, fairly certain her confusion was evident on her face. She leaned back to get a good look at Cal’s pleased expression.

“What don’t I know?”

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The twelve-inch tactical Bowie knife weighed heavily on Duncan’s back in its leather holster. Two strikes—maybe three. But with the right placement between the other man’s ribs into his lung and then another into his liver, it would more than do the job.

At first he’d been concerned about making it through security with the thing, but the few knowing looks he’d received as he’d been passed through had quickly squelched any worry on his part.

He glanced over at a laughing Mazhar Sadik. The rebel leader had to have known he had a price on his head, but he'd arrived in good faith anyhow with his younger sister, Aylin, and a few of his generals. Duncan doubted he would be expecting the strike to come from him. That was probably why he'd been chosen.

Regret filled Duncan as he let his gaze rest on Aylin's smiling right profile. The young woman was quite impressive. She'd not only accompanied her brother, but had acted as his second and voice during most of the five-hour negotiations. He held back a chuckle. The officials in attendance hadn't been ready for her, only seeing a lovely young woman with piercing sea green eyes and a pleasing figure.

It had been fascinating to watch as their initial indulgence of having her at the table had morphed into smug complacency when they'd realized Aylin and not Mazhar would be handling the negotiations. That hadn't lasted long, with their confidence in controlling the talks gradually turning into outright hostility when the intense, no nonsense young woman had managed to pry concessions the rebels sought from most of the Turkish leaders.

Duncan hadn't been able to keep from grinning when he'd caught the mischievous twinkle in her eyes each time they'd groused at something they'd had to concede. She hadn't cared, and it was clear she was thoroughly enjoying their discomfort, especially from the most obnoxious of the officials who had taken every opportunity to disparage her. Aylin had ended up outright laughing in his face at one point, the scar marring the skin under her left eye pulling tight, before turning to someone else and effectively dismissing him.

It had been the only time during the negotiations tension had gotten to the point Duncan thought he might have to intervene. As it was, the governor over the province had managed to keep the man in check.

Now that it was over, Duncan had to admit, much of the success of the summit was

due to Aylin, with Mazhar stepping in only when necessary. The two of them made a good team.

He held in a groan. What was he doing? It did him no good to dwell on the young rebels and how much he genuinely liked and admired them. So he brought his focus back to the talkative official who had yet to notice Duncan wasn't paying attention to much of what he was saying.

Politicians.

The man was also one of the last holdouts in agreeing to any of the negotiated terms, but he had finally relented to some of them at the Minister's prompting—not as many as Duncan or Sadik would have liked, but enough the rebel leader could go back to his people and let them know relief was on its way.

But, of course, that wasn't going to happen. Mazhar was going to be dead in less than fifteen minutes. Aylin was a strong woman, but he couldn't see her being accepted in her brother's stead by his people. Perhaps if she were older—

"Colonel Sheppard," the governor of the province said, interrupting the lesser official who quickly made himself scarce. "I want to thank you for making this a priority." Duncan shook his proffered hand. "It's good to work with a man who is so thorough in all his dealings and can be counted on to do what needs to be done."

Duncan raised his brow at the other man who glanced at Sadik and then back.

"I had a lot of incentive," Duncan said, slightly squeezing the other man's hand. The governor clenched his jaw and pulled his hand away. "But then, a man in your position would know all about what an incentive it is to protect your people and do what's right for them... To keep them safe." He gave the other man a hard stare, when what he really wanted to do was knock his smiling teeth down his throat.

“I certainly do.” The governor inclined his head. “It was good meeting you. Iyi ol,” he said, walking away.

Be well, my ass.

Duncan moved through the room, took note of where most of the armed security forces were located, and calculated the route through the crowd to approach a smiling Sadik. The room still had a number of dignitaries and their guests present at the celebratory reception, with all the attendees enjoying champagne and hors d'oeuvres. So, with enough of them between him and security, he should be able to get the job done before anyone could stop him.

He brushed past two of Sadik's people toasting each other and hardened his heart to what he had to do. He'd planned on getting both sides to come to a lasting agreement—had worked hard on the preliminaries for more than a year—and he'd ended up pulling it off. Now he was about to tank the whole thing when he took out Sadik.

His target stood ten feet away, laughing at something his sister was saying. For someone not quite thirty, the rebel had taken on a lot to fight the corruption running rampant in his province. From his research, Duncan had found him to be an honorable man. Some might think he had gone to extremes with some of his actions, but no one could doubt the man's heart was for his people.

Killing him wasn't something Duncan wanted to do.

"Colonel Sheppard." Sadik greeted him with a genuine smile when Duncan got within striking distance. "I am grateful for the work you have done to bring us all together. And this one here," he said, putting his arm around his sister and drawing her close, "she made me proud today."

Aylin smiled up at her brother. “I’ll remind you of that the next time you are being particularly obstinate.”

Duncan moved in closer, making sure his back was to most of the room. He had to do this fast, without empathy. “Üzgünüm.”

Sadik’s face tensed as he looked around while Aylin pulled away from her brother and moved closer to Duncan’s side. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” Sadik said.

Duncan reached his right arm back around his waist, unsnapped the holster, and then grabbed the handle of the knife while eyeing his striking points. His stabs needed to be clean and efficient—fatal. They had to be. Because as soon as he did it, his own body would be filled with bullets. And if he was to die—and he would be dying—he wanted to know he’d done what he must to ensure Haven’s safety.

“If there were any other way...” An image of a bound and crying Haven filled his mind. “Bunu yapmak zorundayım.”

“No, you don’t, Colonel Sheppard.”

He glared down at Aylin’s murmured words. He didn’t want to hurt this young woman, but he would if he had to.

“You don’t have to do anything.”

Mazhar stepped away from him but didn’t raise any kind of alert.

He moved closer to Sadik with the knife ready to slash out. If he failed, Haven was as good as dead.

“She’s safe,” Aylin said on a hoarse whisper as she moved between him and her

brother, her clear gaze holding his. “Haven’s safe.”

“What?” he said, the knife more than halfway out of its sheath.

“Your people have her.”

His heart pounded while he squeezed the metal handle still in his grip. “What did you say?” He couldn’t breathe. “How do you know?”

“Your team has her. She is with them now.” She peered around and then back at him, saying in a low tone. “She is with Captain Rothe.”

Cal was alive!

His fingers trembled as he pushed the knife back in place and found the snap to secure it. He slowly lowered his arm while Aylin tensed as if ready to spring into action if she saw a weapon, her body visibly relaxing when Duncan revealed his empty hand.

“See,” Aylin said, pulling out her phone. “She is also with our younger brother, Reza.” She moved to where only the three of them would see the screen. Duncan held back a groan when he saw Haven’s smiling face and that of Cal’s—at least what he could see of him behind the blackout paint. Haven had quite a bit of it on her face too. He grinned imagining how it had gotten there. He glanced beside his daughter to a smiling young man with eyes the same color as Aylin’s and Mazhar’s—his features much like the man he’d been ready to kill.

She’s really safe.

Duncan hadn’t cried since the day he’d buried Patsy, but the sting of tears threatened as he scrubbed his unsteady hands down his face. “How did you know?” he

whispered, his gaze going between the brother and sister when he found his voice.

Mazhar grabbed Duncan's shoulder. "Let's just say we have people in place, watching and listening. People like my brother who are unknown to our enemies," he said, his features darkening. "We've known an attempt would be made. It was unfortunate you and your daughter had to be caught up in this." He looked down at his sister, his face solemn. "And know that I understand how you would do anything for those you love." He looked back up at Duncan. "So while you needed to save your daughter, I needed to save my people. You were essential for this summit to be a success and we couldn't let it be called off—even once we learned of your dilemma."

Duncan understood, whether he liked it or not. "But what if I'd had to go through with it?" And he would have.

"I was ready for you," Aylin said with a raised brow. He didn't see any hint of a weapon, but he had a feeling he would have had about a second before she'd used one. It would have been an interesting scenario to see played out. Thankfully, they'd never know. He held Aylin's gaze. There was definitely more to this young woman than met the eye.

"Thank you." Duncan couldn't think of anything else to say. He nodded toward Sadik. "Thank you both. Now if you'll excuse me." He turned away from the two and swept the room for the one person he needed to bid his farewell to. He focused on his target and made a line to the man who was giving a slight bow to the Minister of Interior as the leader turned to leave.

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“Governor,” Duncan said, coming up behind him when the Minister was out of earshot. “I wanted to say my goodbyes.”

The governor met his eyes before glancing over Duncan’s shoulder toward where he’d left Sadik and his sister, and then back, hatred in his dark, gleaming gaze. “Yes. I understand you have a daughter at home waiting for you.”

“Yes, I do.” No thanks to you. “And I’m ready to be home.”

“I’m sure you are.” A slight grin played along the other man’s lips before he schooled his features. “I’m certain you’ve heard the sad news about Colonel Whitman by now.”

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“Poor man was stabbed to death not twenty minutes ago as he left his hotel for the airport.” He narrowed his gaze. “One should always be cognizant of their surroundings. You never know when some random act of violence might strike.”

“I’m seldom caught unaware, but thank you for the warning.”

The other man downed the rest of his champagne before setting the empty flute on the tray of a passing waiter. “I’m sure you are. But I feel certain you won’t fall prey to the same fate.” He tilted his head. “After all, you’re a different kind of man than the late Colonel Whitman. And you always manage to land on your feet.”

“Yes, I do.” Duncan fisted his hands while every imaginable way he could kill the

other man ran through his mind. He was this close to still causing an international incident. “Then we can agree this is a done matter.”

The governor nodded and sauntered away from him without a backward glance.

“Bastard,” Duncan muttered under his breath and then turned on his heel to make his way through the crowd of people. He had to get out of there, but he didn’t trust he was out of the woods yet. It wouldn’t surprise him to find himself being the victim of another random mugging at any moment, so he kept his senses open to any sudden movement as he walked to the elevator and rode it to the ground floor of the luxury hotel. He made it outside and squinted in the sunlight while taking note of any elevated locations.

No scope reflections.

It had been too easy for him to leave, so he remained diligent until his car pulled up in front of him. He opened the door but faltered getting in when the scent of Devon’s perfume hit him. He peered inside to where her svelte body lounged in a relaxed pose against the other door—the gun in her hand pointing at him.

“Please get in, darling.”

He stepped inside and sat down beside her, his eyes never leaving hers as they rode in silence to a small landing strip several miles from the summit. The limo came to a stop near what looked like the same private jet he’d flown in on.

“Bizi birak,” Devon told the driver who exited on her command. “Duncan, Duncan, Duncan.” She shook her head and let out a slight laugh. “You should have done what we asked.”

“Why? Haven’s safe.”

“For now,” she said with a grin.

“Whitman’s gone. There’s no reason to play this out.”

“Oh, but there is.” Devon’s face pinched as her hands squeezed the handle of her gun. “Whitman was a fool. And you, darling, are a loose end I need to be rid of before I return to the States and take care of a few other loose ends.”

The loose ends he had to assume included Haven and his team—perhaps others in their sphere. Duncan kept his expression mild. Devon was no fool and he’d have to play this smart. He relaxed into his seat and laughed. “Tell me something.”

Devon raised a brow and motioned with the gun for him to continue.

“Does The Cooperative know how good you actually are? Because I have to tell you, not many people can fool me.” He shook his head. “I can honestly say I didn’t see it coming, so you should congratulate yourself.”

“Well,” she said, moving in close and sticking the gun in his side. “It helps The Cooperative is run by a bunch of men who have a heightened sense of their own self-worth and level of intelligence. They never considered I’m the smartest among them. Their egos couldn’t take it. And, of course, you were such a good fuck, it wasn’t a hardship.”

Devon didn’t flinch as he ran his arm behind her head. “You know you don’t have to do this.” The gun at his ribs pressed harder. “We have a connection, you and me, and it’s something we should continue to explore.”

“We both know you were finished with me last night.” She side-eyed his arm blanketing her before her cool gaze met his. “So, you’re not going to seduce your way out of this.”

“Okay.” He gripped her hair and she gasped. “But for the sake of all those great fucks, at least give me one last kiss.”

Devon licked her parted lips while her heating gaze held his. “I’m not falling for it, darling.”

But she was. He could see it in her eyes before she lifted herself into him, her mouth meeting his in a frenzy of heat and lust—her kiss growing wilder when he twisted her hair in his fist and pulled it tight just the way she liked it.

Duncan moaned into her mouth as their tongues tangled, while the fingers of his free hand dug into her breast. Devon enjoyed the bite of pain when it came to foreplay, so he made sure she got it—twisting and pinching her hardening nipples through the fabric of her blouse and bra until she strained against him

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Of course, the professional that she was, the gun remained pressed into him the whole time, even as he yanked her head back and nibbled down her arched throat.

“Ah...” Her panting breaths filled the confines of the back seat. “More.” She whimpered when he moved his hand from her hair and cupped her other breast. He tightened his fingers around each nipple—squeezing while he sucked on her neck until she writhed against him. “Oh, God!”

“Devon,” he groaned before ripping one side of her blouse open and pulling the cup of her bra down, replacing his pinching fingers with his mouth and teeth.

“Yes!”

He played over her breast while one hand moved down her trembling body, bypassing the gun still in her grasp, to undo her designer slacks and slip inside. He tore away the bit of lace covering her to find her bare pussy soaking wet. He petted her slick flesh and teased over her slit before parting the plump lips and finding her clit, working the throbbing nub in time with pulls and nibbles over her breast.

“Mmm... Oh... Fuck me, Duncan! Fuck me!”

His other smoothed down her side, then slid over her pants leg before going behind his back under this suit jacket to undo the snap holding the blade in place.

“I’ll fuck you,” he murmured against her flesh as his fingers delved deeper and speared her opening with three fingers. The blade slipped silently from its holster as Devon bucked under his hand where he finger-fucked her.

She was close.

“And you’ll never forget it,” he whispered around her breast before sucking it deep. He bit down hard at the same time his fingers furiously played over clit until she came all over his hand, her cries of pleasure filling the enclosed interior of the limo.

The gun went lax against him as he swept the blade from the holster in one fluid motion while grabbing the gun with his hand covered in her release. He thrust the tip unerringly between Devon’s fourth and fifth ribs, smiling into her widening brown eyes as the blade went in smooth to the hilt—angled to the right to ensure he hit the left ventricle of her cold heart. He held it there while her hot blood flowed over his hand and she gasped incoherent words.

His eyes never left hers filling with tears. “Fucking me was one thing, darling. But you should never have fucked with my daughter.”

Her lips parted on a final whimper before going slack—her last breath brushing against his face in a long exhale. He held her unblinking stare as her eyes turned dark and the tears pooling in their depths spilled over her lower lashes and streaked down her cheeks.

She was gone.

Devon’s body slumped against the seat as Duncan let go of the knife and moved off of her, the handle of the blade still buried deep. He laid her gun within reach on the bench seat before taking off his blood-soaked suit jacket.

“Now, how to get the hell out of here,” he muttered, wiping his hands on the clean inside of his jacket while his eyes scanned beyond the darkened windows for any sign of the driver’s return.

At that moment, the limo door swung open. Duncan reached for Devon's gun and pushed himself as far away from the opening as he could—his aim dead center of a petite, feminine body.

Aylin ducked her head down to peer in at him.

He let out a pent-up breath and lowered the weapon. "What are you doing here?"

"I forgot to tell you something," she said with a slight grin before eyeing Devon. "Hmm..." She grimaced and then leveled her gaze at him. "I'll take care of this."

Duncan let out a short laugh and shook his head while climbing out onto the tarmac. He frowned down at her. "Who are you, really?"

"I'm a friend who has a plane ready to fly you home."

It seemed Mazhar and his sister had many friends. The driver stood several feet away laughing with another man.

Was he one of their people too?

"Come this way."

He followed her from beyond the plane they'd been parked in front of to a hangar housing a similar private jet with the passenger stairs down.

She turned to him with a smile. "The pilot's name is Ahmet and you'll find a change of clothes inside."

"Thanks." He glanced up at the entrance and then back at Aylin. "So, did you really have something you needed to say to me?"

She tilted her head, her eyes taking on a faraway look as she ran a finger down her scar. She visibly shook herself and met his gaze.

“Yes. Tell Captain Rothe, I thank him for saving my life.”

Cal smiled at the gooseflesh and little shivers running over Haven's skin with each brush of his fingers down her spine. He hadn't been able to stop touching her since he'd gotten her to his hotel room hours before and immediately stripped them both down to nothing. He'd inspected every inch of her thoroughly with his hands, mouth, and tongue, paying special attention to each bruise and scrape.

If Solace hadn't already killed Woosley, he'd have hunted the bastard down and taken care of the job himself. They'd left his, plus three other bodies behind. The young man, Reza, had said he would make sure the scene was taken care of without explaining how. A text had come through on Cal's phone from Declan several hours before with the news of a fire at an abandoned church on the outskirts of town. No bodies were mentioned.

He had no idea who this Reza actually was, but he was certainly glad he had been on their side and taken out one of Woosley's men who had come at him from behind.

"That tickles, you know," Haven said on a slight laugh while turning onto her side and facing him on her pillow. He reached out and pushed some of the strands of her hair behind her ear. Would he ever not want to have his eyes on her or touch her? He couldn't see that day coming—ever.

God, how could he be thinking of forever when they had only been together a handful of days?

Then she smiled at him, her eyes filling with a warmth that took his breath away, and

he knew. No one was ever going to touch his heart the way this woman did.

“Are you okay,” she said, crinkling her brow while her gentle touch went to his injured abdomen and the bandage probably needing to be changed. “I’m afraid you may have overd—”

He effectively silenced her with a swift kiss and then pulled her against his body. “I’m fine. So you don’t need to keep worrying about me.” He lifted one of her hands and kissed the still-raw part of the inside of her wrist, then laid her palm against his thundering heart. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t be worrying about you. How’re you feeling?”

“Better,” she said on a smile and snuggled into him. “Much better, I’d say.”

He breathed her in while his abdomen clenched the further her hand on his chest moved down his body to his hardening cock. They should both be exhausted, even though they’d napped on and off between bouts of lovemaking throughout the day—first on the floor of the room when he hadn’t been able to wait to get inside her, then the bed, then the shower, then finally against the hotel room door when he’d woken to find her pulling her clothes on to go in search of food.

He’d stripped her down again and eaten his fill of her as she’d squirmed and screamed out her release against the door. Afterward, she’d given as good as she’d gotten, dropping to her knees and taking him in her mouth, her talented tongue and lips forcing him to brace his hands against the door to keep upright.

They’d eventually ordered room service, but much later.

Cal closed his eyes at her firm grip working him up and down. “God, my sweet girl...” He surged into her fist a handful of times before turning and reaching for one of the loose condoms beside the open box on the bedside table. “You’re killing me.”

“Let me,” she said, taking the square foil and tearing it open. He tensed as her soft fingers rolled the condom down his dick while her tongue stuck out over her top lip. He wanted to grin at her obvious concentration, but he just couldn’t quite bring himself to do more than groan when she gave his balls a little tug when she’d finished.

“There.” She smiled at his dick and nodded in satisfaction. “Perfect.”

“Yeah. Good job,” he said on a pained laugh while rolling her beneath him. He resented having anything between them, but maybe one day...

He settled on top of her while her eyes searched his face and her arms wrapped around his neck.

“I thought so.” She grinned at him and rubbed her core over his cock and then frowned. “Everything okay?” She ran her hand over his bandaged temple and then his arm. “If you’re hurting, we—”

“No, nothing hurts.” He held her gaze. “Not really.” He kissed her forehead...her nose...and then finally her lips in a gentle press of his mouth. “I’m just... I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I think I know.” Her widening legs wrapped around his calves. “It’s like you can’t quite believe you’re here. Right?”

He nodded.

“When I was sitting in that chair—”

“Don’t—”

“No, let me finish.”

He let out a breath and gave her a silent go-ahead, his heart aching as her eyes pooled with tears.

“When I was sitting in that chair for hours thinking you were dead, I only regretted two things.” The glide of her fingers stroked over his cheek. “One, that I’d never told you I loved you—as crazy as that sounds—but I do.”

She blinked and a few tears escaped down her cheek.

“The second was I wished I’d memorized every piece of who you are and how we were together so I’d never forget—how your blue eyes grow a little brighter when you look at me, the way your face tenses in that expectant way—just like it is right now—when you have me in your arms, to never forget how the scruff on your chest teases my skin as it brushes against me...”

Another tear fell.

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“How I felt whole for the first time the moment your body joined with mine. All of it.”

Cal took in a shuddering breath after watching the emotions running over her expressive face with each piece of herself she’d just given him, leaning his head into her touch while her fingers wiped away the tears from his cheek he hadn’t realized he’d shed.

“Then there’s this,” she said, pulling his head down to hers. “How I see your heart with everything you are and know it’s just for me.” She gently kissed him. “Knowing you loved me. Even though you never spoke the words. Even though I mourned your loss. It gave me strength.”

“I do love you.” He kissed her again, but this time with all of his heart. Heat and passion could wait.

But it didn’t wait long.

“Make love to me,” Haven whispered over his lips, her wet heat calling to him.

He slipped inside her—watching her face the whole time. Haven was right. This was another memory to keep—how your eyes roll back just a little when I enter you, the flush on your cheeks, the way your hands grip my ass to pull me closer, the little pants and grunts you make, the way you bite your bottom lip and tilt your head back when I get in just the right rhythm. He wrapped his arms behind her back and buried his nose in her neck, her scent something else to remember. He tasted his way up to her ear, whispering as she fell apart beneath him, “We’ll never have anything to

regret again.”

* * *

Cal came awake to a loud, incessant banging at his door.

“What the...” He reached for his gun on the nightstand and winced at the pain from his various wounds while Haven sat up and pushed her sleep-tousled hair from her eyes.

“Open the door!” Destiny banged on the door again. “You’ve had enough time to... to... You’ve had enough time.”

Cal groaned and relaxed back onto his pillow.

“We’re sorry,” Hope called out.

“No we’re not,” Destiny’s muffled grumble came through the door.

“Hold on,” Haven hollered and then laughed while slipping from the bed. “I’m surprised they waited this long.”

Actually, he was too.

He carefully sat up and enjoyed the sight of Haven padding around the room naked, especially when she bent over and picked up another item of her clothing scattered around the floor. He had kind of thrown them all over the place in his hurry to get her naked—twice.

“I can’t put these back on.” She grimaced, holding up her panties.

“If you need panties, we’ve brought you some clothes,” Hope said.

Cal frowned at the door. “I hope the whole floor’s enjoying knowing our business.” What time was it anyhow? He checked the bedside clock. “Damn, it’s almost ten o’clock. Your dad’ll be landing in a couple of hours.”

He grimaced, leaving the bed. Haven may have been right earlier. Having a marathon sex session might have been overdoing it after getting shot, having surgery, and then leading an armed rescue where he ended up getting tackled by a paid goon. He grinned while holding his side and checking through the dresser for some clothes.

It had been worth it.

“All the more reason for you two to hurry your asses up!” What? Did Destiny have her ear pressed to the door? One thing was certain, she sure was an impatient little thing.

“Okay, okay,” Haven said while she pulled on her jeans—sans panties—and Cal went into the bathroom to get dressed. Sure, Haven’s friends had basically seen it all the previous night...early morning...hell, whenever it was...when he’d flashed them before leaving the hospital. It didn’t mean they needed to see anything more.

Laughter filled the room beyond the closed door as he took the time to relieve himself while one side of his mouth kicked up in a grin at the several disposed of condoms in the trash bin. Wait. He’d left the open box on the nightstand by his gun in full view of anyone coming in.

Ah, hell, who cared. It wasn’t like none of their friends hadn’t known what they’d been doing on and off for the last ten hours or so.

He flushed the toilet then washed his hands before carefully peeling back the field

dressings Declan had put on his various wounds when they'd returned to the hotel. He'd done a good job, but now that he'd started moving around, they were starting to hurt like a son of a bitch—especially his abdomen—and had probably bled. He inspected each wound before pulling out the medical supplies Declan had left and spent the next several minutes cleansing each one and applying new dressings before pulling his clothes on.

He took his time brushing his teeth before sitting on the edge of the tub to wait. He wanted to give the three friends time alone. He understood Destiny and Hope's need to be with their best friend, and he would respect it. They were her family after all.

He snickered. Those two were going to make some hellacious in-laws—especially Destiny.

The handle turned and the door slowly pushed open with Haven's head peeking around the edge and frowning at him. "What're you doing? I was getting worried your wounds were bothering you."

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“Just giving you guys time together,” he said, standing up.

“That’s sweet, but totally unnecessary.” She walked in and grabbed his hand. She’d managed to put on fresh clothes. “Everyone else is here anyhow.” She grinned. “Garrett wanted me to check to see if you’d fallen in, and if not, I was to pull your wounded ass out there.” She gave him a quick kiss before leading him to the now-overflowing room.

“About time,” Garrett said with a smirk where he sat on the bed and held up the box of condoms. “For a man who considered himself a liability last night, you certainly made a quick recovery.”

“Leave him alone,” Solace said, grabbing the box out of Garrett’s hand and putting it in the nightstand drawer while managing to get off a head pop. “What are you, twelve?”

“Hey,” Garrett complained, rubbing his head. His gaze bounced over to Destiny and then back. “Watch it. I’m delicate.”

“Hah!” Destiny huffed out before standing up from the couch and coming up to Cal. Hope followed behind her. Cal tensed as Destiny looked him up and down with a critical eye, then shocked the hell out of him when she threw herself into his arms with Hope wrapping him and Destiny up and holding them tight.

“Thank you,” Destiny whispered.

“We knew you’d bring her back,” Hope said, her voice quavering. “Even if we were a

little mean about it last night.”

“You were mean to him?” Cal caught Haven’s scowl over her friends’ heads.

“Just a little,” he told her with a grin. “But they were right.” He held Haven’s gaze. “You were mine to protect.”

She gave him and her friends a soft smile.

“Okay, folks,” Declan said, clapping his hands and straightening from where he leaned against a wall. “We’ve got an hour’s drive to the field where the Colonel’s plane is landing. So, let’s load up.” He glanced at Garrett and then Hope. “Why don’t you ladies ride with us since it’s so late.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Garrett chimed in.

Cal waited for what was to come and then held in a laugh when Destiny asked Garrett, “Afraid you can’t make it on your own?” Especially since she said it so sweetly.

“We’re perfectly capable of finding the field by ourselves,” Hope added, giving Declan a scowl. “Besides, you’re rude and I’m not sure if I like you very much.”

“Good going, man,” Garrett smirked at Declan.

“I don’t think you’re faring much better,” Declan muttered, grimacing.

“Faring better about what?” Destiny’s confused stare went between Declan and Garrett before her eyes widened. “Do you two think... Uh, no.”

“Guys,” Haven said, moving in the middle of the four. “It might not be a bad idea

since they do know exactly where we're going and we don't."

"But that one really is not very nice," Hope said motioning her head at Declan. "He yelled at me in the hospital."

Declan stepped toward her. "I d—"

"Declan's right. We need to go," Solace broke in, grabbing Declan's arm and shaking her head up at him, her brow furrowed.

He gave her a quick tight-lipped nod and stepped back.

"So, for right now," she said, addressing each one, "Garrett, you're driving. Hope and Destiny you'll ride with the guys but in the back seat. Declan, that puts you up front too." Garrett and Declan mirrored each other's scowls. "And you two aren't to talk to them—at all."

"Yes, Mom," Garrett said, pulling his keys from his pocket while Haven tugged her two friends who clearly wanted to argue with the setup into a quiet huddle, with Destiny shaking her head and Hope glancing over her shoulder at Declan.

"Okay," Hope said, turning and giving a frowning once-over to Declan when they broke apart. "But we're only doing this because Haven wants us to." Cal half expected her to stick her tongue out at him.

Destiny had her irritated gaze on Garrett. "And don't you go getting any funny ideas."

Cal's brows rose at Garrett's slow, heated perusal of Destiny as he stood up from the bed and crouched enough to meet her on eye level, her lips parting as he leaned in close. "We need to get one thing straight, sweetheart," he murmured low and intense. "None of my ideas concerning you are funny." He held Destiny's gaze as her face

flushed and mouth worked to say something, but nothing came out. “None of them.” They stared at each other for several seconds while the rest of the room seemed to hold their breath. “So, are you ready to go?”

The expected explosion didn’t come in the ensuing silence.

Destiny hesitated on a deep breath and then gave him a stilted nod before grabbing Hope’s hand and scurrying from the room with Garrett and Declan following close behind.

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“I’m not mean,” Declan grouched as he stomped through the door.

“Wow,” Haven said on a laugh. “That’s a first. Destiny’s never speechless.” She turned her mirth-filled gaze to Cal. “And she never runs away from anything.”

“I think things are about to get really interesting between all of them,” Cal told her with a shake of his head. “I just hope Declan and Garrett don’t screw it up.”

“Oh, they probably will—at least for a while,” Solace said, her lips twitching before wrinkling her nose when she checked the time. “Now we really have to go.” She smiled at where Cal held Haven’s hand and then met his gaze and gave him a satisfied nod. “So, I guess that puts me with you two.”

The three of them rode in Cal’s SUV as the front car with Garrett’s truck behind them. Cal had to grin at how Haven fidgeted in her seat the whole way and talked excitedly about getting to see her father. She’d also expressed how grateful she was to Solace for what she’d done for her.

Solace was unusually quiet as they traveled, only answering questions and smiling at Haven’s thanks, saying, “You’re important to Cal and Du...your father. That makes you important to me.” He’d watched in the review mirror as she’d given Haven a genuine smile. “Besides, I like you.”

Cal didn’t comment. He’d already expressed all the gratitude he could to his teammate. She had been there when he couldn’t be. But that was the second time he’d taken note of Solace making the same slip of the tongue with regards to the Colonel. He glanced at her again to find her gazing out the window into the darkness. He’d

never noticed any kind of attraction on her part toward their former commander in all the time they'd worked together, but if he wasn't mistaken, things had changed.

He had no idea about the Colonel's love life. He just hoped Solace didn't get her heart broken if the feeling never ended up being mutual. Solace was a good woman and deserved to be happy. If the right man for her ended up being the Colonel, well, that might make Solace his mother-in-law one day.

I wonder how long I should wait to propose?

His heart stuttered and then set up a rapid beat at the path his mind was taking. He glanced at Haven's profile before focusing back on the road. Marriage wasn't something he'd ever considered. He grinned and relaxed back into his seat—a sense of happiness coming over him at one day making Haven his until death do them part.

A little over thirty minutes after arriving at the airfield, Colonel Sheppard's plane began its descent. Beside him, Haven grabbed his hand and squeezed as it touched down and came to a stop. The door opened and the stairs were lowered.

"There he is." Haven let go of his hand before running to meet her dad coming down the steps. She jumped into his arms just as his feet hit the tarmac.

"We did good," Declan said, coming up beside him and laying a hand on his shoulder.

Cal grinned, his eyes never leaving the pair holding each other so close. "We did. Didn't we?"

Colonel Sheppard kissed his daughter's head and then raised his gaze to Cal, mouthing, "Thank you," before pulling her in tight again and burying his face in her hair.

After several minutes of them holding each other and signs of Haven's animated talking and more hugs, the two turned and made their way back to the rest of his small welcoming party arm in arm as Haven's adoring gaze never left her father. Hope and Destiny rushed forward to greet the man Cal was sure was just as much family to them as Haven was.

Cal smiled at what had to be a wonderful homecoming for the man he admired so much and who he'd since learned had been willing to die to keep his daughter safe.

Cal knew how he felt.

The Colonel had entrusted Haven's life to him only weeks before—with an outcome neither one of them could have foreseen—and Cal had to admit it had caused him some concern. But if the other man's smile at him was anything to go by as he approached, it wasn't anything Cal needed to worry about. So maybe—just maybe—the Colonel would now entrust her heart and future to him as well.

Whatever else, Haven had his heart. Forever.

Cal met the happy gaze of the woman he loved, who by some miracle loved him back, and opened his arms to the one who would always be his Haven.

Epilogue

Thanksgiving evening.

"All right everyone," Duncan said, raising his glass. "A toast. First to Mrs. Pruitt, Haven..." He shook his head. "And Declan, of all people," he said with a laugh everyone joined in on, "for making this delicious meal. I also have to express my thanks to each and every one of you who made this night possible in your own way." He glanced at the faces gathered around his table—the Pruitt's, Haven, Cal, Destiny,

Hope, Declan, Garrett, and finally Solace, who his gaze lingered on probably longer than it should have.

“To family. That’s what all of you are to me.” He lifted his glass higher. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” everyone repeated and then went back to eating and talking among themselves. He hid a smile behind his glass, watching the undercurrents of emotion flowing back and forth across the table from where Destiny and Hope sat opposite Garrett and Declan. There definitely was something going on there and he couldn’t wait to see how it all turned out.

Solace sat at the other end of the table, not intentionally, but she certainly looked right there. She glanced up and caught him staring, so he just smiled and looked away while taking another sip of wine. If he wasn’t mistaken, a slight blush had tinged her cheeks. The woman had been on his mind more often since seeing her relieved face when he’d landed a couple of weeks ago. But with the plans he was ready to set in motion, she wasn’t someone he needed to continue to dwell on—no matter how much he wanted to.

Cal and Haven sat close together, sharing another intimate look like the ones they’d given each other throughout the meal. The two were basically inseparable since everything had gone down. He’d even moved into Haven’s dorm room, which Duncan still hadn’t quite wrapped his mind around. He also wasn’t sure how Cal had gotten away with it so far either. He had a feeling bribery was involved.

But it was only temporary. Cal had found a place to rent off campus while Haven finished out her senior year and they planned to move during the winter break—much to what he’d found out was initially Hope and Destiny’s irritation. Haven had told him her friends had assured her they were happy for her. They’d just prefer to be happy for her and still live in the same place.

According to Cal, that sentiment hadn't lasted long. It seemed Cal had suddenly developed a tendency to leave the toilet seat up and sinks full of shaving cream and stubble.

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The girls were readying to help them move.

Haven getting her own place meant he wasn't going to be seeing as much of her as he usually did during the holidays. He'd expected it at some point, but just not so soon.

She definitely wasn't his little girl anymore, but that was how it should be.

It wasn't long before most of the food was gone and dessert devoured. Duncan had been holding off, but now was as good a time as any to talk to his team and see if what he had planned had any takers.

"Elite Squad," Duncan said, standing and gaining some curious looks from everyone except for Cal and his people. "Can I see you all in my study?"

The four stood and followed Duncan down the hall to his home office, with Solace taking up the rear. He shut the door, and then waited until they'd settled in the seating area before joining them and sitting down in one of the leather wingback chairs facing the group.

"You all did something not many people could pull off in such a short time."

"We were honored you wanted us to help you, sir," Cal said, looking around at his teammates. "And I have to admit, it was good working together again. I'm gonna miss you guys when you leave."

"Of course you are," Garrett said with a smirk. "I'm a delight to be around."

“Delightfully irritating,” Solace said, laughing and settling back in her seat.

“This is what I’m gonna miss,” Declan said, laughing and pointing between Solace and Garrett. “You two bicker like an old married couple.”

A shiver of irritation ran up Duncan’s spine at that, but he shook it off as the group started to rib each other. He knew good and well Solace and Garrett weren’t interested in each other romantically, but he still didn’t like the idea of it.

“Would you like to keep working together?”

Everyone turned their attention to him with varying degrees of surprise in the sudden silence.

“What do you mean?” Cal asked, sitting forward.

“It’s an idea I’ve been toying with for a while,” Duncan answered, meeting each of their curious stares. “Each one of us has a particular skill set that people need—sometimes individually and sometimes in a joint effort. I’d like to see what we could do with that.”

Duncan sat back and watched while they eyed each other. He could swear these four communicated telepathically at times. They were that in tune with each other. He might have been in on the link himself because he knew exactly when the decision had been made among them.

“So what will we be called?” Solace said, her gaze holding his.

Duncan smiled.

“I was thinking, The Elite Protection Agency.”

THE END