



# Cyclone

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**Category:** Romance, Mc

**Description:** He's an Army Special Forces. She's the CIA agent he never saw coming. Together, they're a storm no one can contain.

Cyclone doesn't get distracted. As an Army Special Forces, his focus is razor-sharp—until he's sent to rescue a woman who doesn't want saving. Jude Avery is a former CIA operative with a haunted past and more secrets than scars. She's been off the grid for years, and she's not about to let anyone—especially a too-handsome somebody—drag her back into the light.

But when a ruthless enemy resurfaces and Jude becomes the hunted, Cyclone makes one thing clear: she's his responsibility now. No matter how stubborn, no matter how dangerous.

Forced into hiding, with every move bringing them closer to the truth—and to each other—Jude begins to realize Cyclone isn't just another soldier. He's steady in her chaos. Fierce in her fight. And everything she never thought she deserved.

As bullets fly and trust is tested, passion ignites. But to survive, they'll have to stop running from their pasts... and run straight into each other's arms.

**Total Pages (Source):** 106

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## Cyclone

We weren't supposed to be here this long. What was supposed to be a grab-and-go op had turned into five days of ducking machete-wielding men in the jungle, dodging trackers with too many dogs and not enough conscience, and rationing protein bars until Faron threatened to eat his boot.

And now? We were in a damn pit.

A literal, dark-as-hell, smells-like-sweaty-death kind of pit.

"You okay?" I whispered.

"Define okay," Faron grunted beside me. "If okay means I'm covered in what I hope is mud and thinking about faking my own death to avoid having to tell the guys what we landed in, then yeah. Peachy."

"Shh," I said, tilting my head toward the top. Voices. Close. Angry.

We held still. Waited. Let the bastards pass.

When it went quiet, I boosted Faron up. He scrambled, grunted, and disappeared over the edge. A second later, he reached down and yanked me up like we were pulling each other out of hell.

We hit the jungle floor running, branches slapping our faces, thorns catching our sleeves, every muscle in my body screaming from exhaustion.

And then—we saw them.

Four nuns. Dirty, exhausted, terrified.

Except one?

One wasn't terrified at all.

She stood with one hand on her hip, the other holding what looked like a homemade spear. Her habit was half torn, her eyes sharp and full of fire.

“Well,” she drawled, “it’s about damn time you showed up. I was starting to think we’d have to rescue you.”

I blinked. “Who the hell are you? We heard there were three nuns.”

She grinned, teeth white against her sun-kissed skin. “Sister Jude. Emphasis on sister. And if you try to tell me to be quiet, I’ll stab you with this stick.”

Faron muttered behind me, “Oh hell. Cyclone’s in trouble.”

And yeah. I was.

Because I’d just risked my life to rescue a nun with a mouth like a sailor... and a face that might actually make me consider going to church.

Jude

Six days of hiding in this godforsaken jungle, living off rainwater and attitude. My knees ached, my feet were blistered, and I was fairly certain something had taken up residence in my habit.

So when the tall, muscle-sculpted man with camouflage war paint and a rifle showed up? Yeah, I was ready with the sarcasm.

What I wasn't ready for... was him.

"You're sister Jude?" he asked, blinking like I'd just told him I moonlighted as an assassin.

"That's what the name tag says." I jabbed the stick in his direction. "Now, unless you've got food or an airlift hidden in your cargo pants, move it. I'm not dying in a jungle because the special ops guy can't keep up."

He stared at me like I'd sprouted wings.

The one with the beard—Faron, apparently—snorted. "Cyclone, she talks more than you do."

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“I don’t talk that much,” Cyclone muttered, clearly already regretting every life decision that led him here.

We moved fast. Or at least, they did. The other sisters stayed quiet, frightened, clinging together. I kept a close eye on them, but I didn’t hover. Hovering didn’t keep people alive. Moving did.

“You always this mouthy?” Cyclone asked after about an hour of slogging through the vines.

I glanced at him. “You always this sweaty?”

His jaw ticked. Oh, this was gonna be fun.

We pushed forward, ducking under low branches. Cyclone took point, clearing the way with precise movements. The guy was a machine—tactical, efficient, and zero-nonsense.

Except when he looked at me.

Then there was something... different.

“We’ll need to make camp soon,” he said quietly, pulling me aside. “The others are fading.”

“You think I can’t see that?” I snapped.

He held up a hand. “I’m not criticizing. I’m looping you in.”

That threw me off just enough to pause.

“You looped in the nun with the stick?”

His eyes flicked to the spear I was still clutching. “You seem like the one most likely to stab me in my sleep. I figured I’d stay on your good side.”

Despite myself, I chuckled—just a little.

He looked pleased with himself.

And for a split second, I forgot where we were. Forgot the danger, the exhaustion, the stench of fear that had clung to me for weeks.

I just saw him.

Cyclone, the name suited him.

And the way he was looking back?

Yeah. I had a bad feeling about this.

Not about the mission.

About him.

2

Cyclone

The jungle felt wrong.

Still. Heavy. Like something holding its breath.

We'd made camp in a small clearing surrounded by thick brush, with Faron taking first watch. I was prepping the perimeter when I heard it—leaves shifting. Not the soft kind from a breeze. This was heavier. Measured.

Movement.

“Faron,” I said low, already moving toward the treeline.

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“Got it,” he replied, weapon raised.

I signaled sister Jude to keep the women down. “Stay put.” I whispered. She crouched low beside them, her expression serious for once. No sarcasm. Just focus like she'd done this before.

Another mark in the who the hell is this woman column. What is wrong with me? She's a nun.

I stepped into the foliage, rifle up, heart steady. I wasn't worried for me. I was worried for them.

Then I saw it.

A tripwire.

I froze.

“Bomb?” Faron asked behind me.

“No. Flare.” I carefully disabled the trigger. “They're tracking. Close.”

Jude appeared behind us—because of course she did—ignoring my whispered “Stay put.”

“Didn't you hear me?” I hissed.



“I heard you. But I also heard boots about thirty yards out. Multiple pairs. Heading this way.”

Faron and I exchanged a look.

“How the hell do you know that?” I asked.

She just smiled. “You’re not the only one with ears, soldier.”

We moved fast—broke camp in under one minute. The nuns were quiet and obedient, except the one with the handmade spear. Sister Jude helped one of them strap on a backpack like she’d done it a thousand times.

She looked at me across the flickering shadows. “They’re gonna catch us if we keep this pace.”

“Any bright ideas, Sister?”

She smirked. “Ever jumped off a cliff into a river before?”

Faron groaned. “Why do I feel like that’s not a metaphor?”

Ten minutes later, “That’s this plan,” I growled.

“You hate all plans that aren’t yours,” Sister Jude said, already tying a vine around a branch to use as a swing rope.

She didn’t wait.

She just jumped.

A flash of dark hair, the shout of “WOOOOO!” as she disappeared over the edge, and then—splash.

I stared at the spot where she’d vanished.

“She’s not a nun,” I muttered. “She can’t be.”

Faron patted my shoulder. “Of course she is?”

I jumped in after her. Then the other nuns jumped behind me, and then Faron jumped last.

The second my body hit the water, the world exploded into chaos.

## Page 4

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I plunged deep into the river, boots kicking, the current tearing at me like it had a personal grudge. When I surfaced, gasping, all I saw was jungle on both sides and foam crashing against rocks.

And her.

Sister Jude was already swimming hard, one hand pulling Sister Margaret along with her. She turned just long enough to shout, “Help the others!”

No hesitation. Just mission-first instincts. Just like us.

We got all four nuns into the water, Faron keeping pace behind me, the current dragging us fast and far. I reached Sister Jude just in time to see her foot slip on a submerged rock.

“Got you,” I grunted, grabbing her arm.

“I had me,” she shot back, breathing heavily.

“You’re welcome,” I said, pulling her to the riverbank with the others. We scrambled up the muddy slope, soaking wet, scratched up a little from the rocks, and the nuns looked like they were barely holding it together.

But they were alive.

Once we were clear and the others had caught their breath, I pulled Sister Jude aside.

“You okay?” I asked.

She nodded, chest heaving, eyes sharp. “Yes, I’m fine. I need to check on the others.”

I should’ve walked away. Should’ve stayed focused. But something about her—this woman in a torn habit with a wicked grin and too many secrets—had crawled under my skin.

“You ever think about what you’d say if it all ended tomorrow?” I asked suddenly, not sure why those words were coming out of my mouth now.

She blinked. “Wow. Dark turn.”

“Just answer.”

Her smirk faltered. She looked at me—really looked. “I’d say I regret not kissing someone when I had the chance.”

My throat went dry.

“Yeah?” I said roughly. “Me too.”

And then—we leaned in.

Close. Closer.

I saw it all in that second: the fire in her eyes and her lips parted like she was daring me to close the gap. My hand found her waist. Her breath hitched.

And just before our mouths met—

“HEY!” Faron’s voice cut through the trees. “Not to interrupt the whole jungle love story, but we’ve got company! Movement!”

The moment shattered.

We sprang apart.

“I’m sorry, sister.”

Jude’s face flushed, but she gave me a quick wink. “Saved by Faron.”

I groaned.

“Right now? We run.”

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And we did.

Side by side, through mud and vines and adrenaline. Our almost-kiss hanging in the air like a live wire, sparking every time our eyes met. Damn Beau Allen you can't kiss a nun. Right? Yes right!

I ran up next to the nuns. "left your habit up, you can run faster," they looked at me like I told them to strip naked.

"He means like this," sister Jude explained, showing them how to hold up their habit so they wouldn't be carrying all that weight.

3

Cyclone

It started with a stumble.

One minute, Sister Jude was ahead of me, clearing a path with that stubborn, fearless energy of hers. The next, she tripped and caught herself on a mossy tree trunk, swatting at her arm.

"Ow," she muttered, shaking her sleeve. "Damn twig just bit me."

"You alright?" I asked, stepping closer.

"Yeah, just—" She paused, frowning. "Huh. That's weird."

She rolled up her sleeve.

Two puncture marks. Swollen. Already red.

“Sister Jude...” I grabbed her wrist, gently but firmly. “That’s not a twig.”

Her eyes met mine, and I saw the flicker of fear she tried to hide. “Spider?”

“Venomous,” I said grimly. “And we’re still two hours from the pick-up spot.”

“I’m fine,” she said, brushing me off. “Just a little sting—”

And then her knees buckled.

I caught her before she hit the ground.

“Nope. Not doing this today,” I growled. “You are not dying on me in the middle of the damn jungle.”

She blinked up at me, dazed. “Aw. That almost sounded sweet.”

“Shut up,” I said, heart pounding as I checked her pulse. “Faron! We need to move. Now.”

He didn’t ask questions—just jumped into action. He’d seen enough to know. We were in trouble.

I hoisted her onto my back. She didn’t even fight me this time. That alone told me how bad it was.

As we ran, her voice was low in my ear.

“Don’t let them see. The others. Don’t let them worry.”

“You really think I care about what they see right now?”

“I think...” she trailed off. “You’re kinda bossy when you panic.”

“I’m not panicking.”

“You’re definitely panicking.”



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I tightened my grip. “You’re going to be fine.”

She sighed, resting her cheek against my shoulder. “You always this charming when you’re scared?”

I didn’t answer.

Because yeah—I was scared.

And I hadn’t been scared like this since my last deployment, when I thought we lost Faron in a cave-in and I couldn’t breathe until I saw him alive.

That’s what this felt like.

Like I couldn’t breathe unless the nun was okay.

An Hour Later

Her breathing slowed. I had to throw her over my shoulder because she could no longer hold her arms around my neck.

She was sweating. Delirious. Slurring her words.

Faron was ahead, hacking through vines like a man possessed. The other nuns said nothing except to mumble a prayer for Sister Jude.

“Where’s the damn team?” I muttered into my radio. “We need the med team now.”

“We’re ten clicks out,” came the reply.

Not fast enough.

I dropped to my knees, laying her down gently. “Hey,” I whispered, tapping her cheek. “Stay with me. Come on, smart mouth. Say something annoying.”

She blinked up at me, unfocused. “You... have really weird eyebrows.”

I let out a rough laugh, blinking fast. “There she is.”

Then her eyes rolled back.

“Jude.”

No response.

I looked at Faron. “We can’t wait. We move now.”

“I’ll carry her,” he said.

“No,” I growled. “I’ve got her.”

And I did.

Because somehow, between the teasing, the jungle, and the almost kiss, she’d become something more, maybe a friend, I didn’t want to lose.

Someone I wasn’t ready to lose. Even if she was a nun, I couldn’t help how I felt.

Not now.

Not ever.

Cyclone

I'd carried a hundred wounded men out of combat zones. Some had made it. Some hadn't.

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But this?

This felt personal. I picked her up and let her body relax against mine as I carried her through the stinking jungle.

Jude's skin was clammy. Her breath ghosted my neck in uneven bursts. Every few minutes she stirred—sometimes mumbling, sometimes squeezing her hand around my shoulder strap like she was trying to ground herself.

“Almost there,” I whispered. “You just hang on, alright?”

She didn't answer.

Until—

“I lied,” she murmured.

I slowed. “What?”

She shifted against me, barely conscious. “I lied. I'm not a nun.”

My boots stopped cold in the mud.

“What did you say?” I asked, but her head had already lolled to the side, out cold again.

I glanced at Faron, who raised his eyebrows. “Well. That explains the mouth,” He

said.

We kept moving. But I couldn't stop hearing her voice.

I'm not a nun.

Of course, she wasn't.

She moved too well. Thought too fast. Reacted like someone trained—not sheltered in a convent. But still... hearing her say it, even in a haze of venom and fever, sent a jolt straight to my chest.

Why the hell had she lied?

Why had she been with the other nuns in the first place?

And why did it bother me so damn much?

The chopper came in hot—blades slicing the air like salvation.

Medics jumped out before the skids touched ground. I held Jude tightly as I rushed toward them, yelling above the roar.

“Spider bite. She's fading fast. No antivenom. She's dehydrated, fevered, but strong.”

They took her from my arms, already hooking her up to fluids. I watched, frozen, as they worked over her. Oxygen. IVs. Cooling compresses. Voices barked orders I could barely hear.

Then—her hand reached blindly.

“Cyclone,” she rasped.

I was at her side in a heartbeat.

“I’m here.”

She turned her head slowly, eyes barely open. “Don’t let them take me back. Please.”

“Take you where?”

Her fingers gripped mine. “Not... back to them.”

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My gut twisted. “Who’s ‘them,’ Sister Jude?” I knew she wasn’t a nun, but I didn’t think she wanted anyone else to know.

But she was already gone again—eyes closed, breathing shallow, hand slipping from mine.

The medic touched my shoulder. “She’ll live. She’s lucky you got her here in time.”

Lucky.

Damn right she was lucky. If it had been her and the nuns, she would have died.

I felt like I’d just opened a door to something bigger than either of us. I glanced at Faron. We won’t say anything about her not being a nun, I think this is a hell of a lot bigger than we even know.”

“I agree,” Faron said.

And I had no idea what the hell I’d just stepped into.

I should’ve been resting.

Instead, I was pacing the floor of a dimly lit safe house, arms crossed, brain on fire. Faron had already crashed on a cot in the corner, snoring like a lumberjack.

But me?

I couldn't stop replaying her voice in my head.

Don't let them take me back.

I'm not a nun.

What the hell was Jude mixed up in?

I looked at the medic's tablet they'd left behind. Her vitals were stabilizing. The antivenom had worked. She'd pulled through.

But her file? Practically blank.

No ID. No medical history. Nothing but the name Sister Jude Avery—which I was now 99.9% sure was as fake as Faron's "I don't snore" claim.

I tapped into the radio and connected with base ops.

"Cyclone. Clearance level eight. I need a background check."

"Name?"

"Jude Avery. Possibly fake. Claimed to be with a traveling mission group out of Johannesburg."

A pause. Then, "Stand by."

Two minutes later: "You're right. No Sister Jude Avery with that mission team. But... there is a Jude Avery. CIA asset. Last flagged location: northern Mozambique. Then she disappeared."



My stomach dropped.

“Disappeared?”

“Presumed compromised. But not confirmed dead. Last ping was eighteen months ago.”

I leaned back, dragging a hand through my hair.

A CIA asset.

Undercover. Missing. Embedded in anunnery.

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Ofcourse,she wasn't a nun. I already knew that.

But that also meant—whoever she was running from wasn't just a jungle militia or some crooked traffickers.

This was bigger.

Which meant she'd lied to protect herself. Maybe even lied to stay alive.

And I'd fallen for her anyway. What am I saying? I didn't fall for her. She has a smart ass mouth, and she was rude, most of the time.

I didn't know what pissed me off more—the fact that she'd lied...

Or the fact that now I wanted to protect her even more.

,

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Jude

Waking up felt like swimming through fog.

Pain throbbed in my arm. My head was heavy. Something beeped softly nearby.

I peeled my eyes open and found myself in a white-walled room—clean, sterile.

Medical equipment buzzed gently around me. A steady drip of IV fluid ticked into my veins.

And sitting across from me, arms folded, legs braced like he was preparing for battle—was Cyclone.

Oh. Crap.

His jaw was tight. His shirt was wrinkled. His eyes?

Pissed. Off.

“Hey,” I croaked.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me.”

There it was.

I tried to sit up, but my muscles screamed in protest. He was at my side instantly, adjusting the bed without looking at me.

“I’m fine,” I muttered.

“No, you’re not,” he snapped. “You got bit by a damn spider, almost died, and in the middle of all that, you decided to casually mention that you’re not actually a nun.”

I winced. “So... you heard that?”

He leaned down until we were nose to nose. “You lied to me.”

I held his gaze. “You think I had a choice?”

“I think you could’ve told me before I dragged your unconscious body through a jungle while dodging tripwires and praying to every god I’ve never believed in.”

His voice was raw. Angry. But underneath it, there was something else.

Worried. Hurt.

I sighed, staring at the ceiling. “I didn’t lie to hurt you. I was embedded. Deep. And I couldn’t risk exposure. Not even to you.”

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“CIA?” he asked.

I hesitated.

He gave me a look.

“Yes,” I said finally. “I was tracking something bigger. The nuns gave me cover. I didn’t expect the mission to collapse. Or you.”

He laughed bitterly. “Right. I was the curveball.”

“No,” I said, quietly this time. “You were the first person in years to make me feel human again. And that scared the hell out of me.”

Silence.

Then he stepped closer. His hands landed on either side of the bed, caging me in. His face was unreadable.

“You should’ve told me,” he said, voice low. “But I get it. I do. Still doesn’t change the fact that I nearly kissed you in the middle of a damn jungle thinking you were a nun.”

I blinked. “I didn’t stop you.”

“You didn’t exactly correct me either.”

“You gonna complain about it?” I asked, breath catching.

He studied me, his eyes flicking to my lips. “No. I’m gonna fix it.”

And then—he kissed me.

It was hard, deep, like the jungle, where the lies and the danger had all built up into this one moment offinally.

My hand fisted in the front of his shirt. He pulled away just enough to whisper, “You’re still impossible.”

“You still smell like the jungle,” I whispered back.

He kissed me again anyway.

And that’s when I knew.

We were both already in too deep.

And neither one of us wanted out. I needed to get the hell away from here before they took me back. I have to stay hidden!

The stars overhead were beginning to fade into a dull gray when I pulled on my boots and carefully swung my bag over my shoulder. The world was silent at this hour, even the campfires were reduced to low embers. Cyclone was asleep just a few feet away, his face softened in a way she hadn’t seen before. Her heart clenched. She couldn’t believe that she had only known him for two weeks. It felt like a lifetime.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, though I knew he wouldn’t hear me.

She tucked the note under his hand, where he would be sure to find it. A simple, hastily scribbled message:

Cyclone, Thank you for everything. I have to do this on my own. Maybe I'll see you again. Stay safe.

I hesitated longer than I should have, drinking in the sight of him one last time. Then, steeling myself, I turned and disappeared into the night.

I woke with the sun warming my face, a small smile playing on my lips as I remembered the night before. But when I reached out, expecting to find Jude nearby, there was nothing but an empty space.

Confused, I sat up, and the note fluttered to the ground.

My hands shook slightly as I picked it up and read her words. The smile faded. Anger, raw and sudden, flashed through me. I crushed the note in my fist. "Damn it Jude are you trying to get yourself killed?" I muttered.

I stood abruptly, scanning the horizon as if I might catch a glimpse of her silhouette. Nothing. Just endless miles of wilderness.

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A part of me wanted to be furious—to let her go, to move on. She'd made her choice. She was used to running.

But I wasn't the kind of man to walk away from someone who needed me.

"You won't do this alone," I said under my breath, a vow to the empty air.

I looked at Faron. "I have to find her before she gets herself killed. I'll see you at home in a few days."

"You be careful. Don't take unnecessary risks with your life."

"I won't," I said.

I strapped on my gear, tightened my boots, and set off, determination in every step.

I would find her. I would help her.

Even if she didn't know she needed me yet. Then I would go home.

5

Cyclone

The morning fog clung low to the ground, masking the faint disturbances Jude had left behind. I moved quickly, every muscle tense, my eyes sweeping the ground for any sign. A broken branch here, a scuffed patch of earth there—subtle hints that she



had passed through.

I cursed under my breath as the trail led me to a swollen river. The current was vicious from last night's rain, and it had swallowed any clear tracks. Still, I paced the bank until I found a place where the mud bore the ghost of a footprint.

"You're stubborn," I muttered, a flicker of something like pride flashing through my anger.

Hours later, after pushing through thorny undergrowth and navigating treacherous ravines, I stumbled upon a man leading a tired packhorse along the road—a grizzled merchant with a wary eye.

"Have you seen anyone?" I asked without preamble.

The merchant squinted at him, assessing. "Maybe. You got money?"

I gave him money

"I see girl, moving fast. Looked like she was heading for the old rail tunnels."

My stomach twisted. I've heard about those tunnels they were dangerous—dark, crumbling, crawling with the desperate and the damned. Most people stayed away from them.

I nodded once, a curt thank you, I gave him some granola bars and tightened my grip on my pack. If I could find her I would keep her safe, hopefully she wasn't far ahead.

I pulled my coat tighter around myself as I picked my way through the shattered remains of the old rail yard. Rusted tracks twisted like broken bones underfoot, and the skeletal remains of cargo cars loomed in the mist.

The entrance to the tunnels yawned ahead—a mouth of blackness that seemed to swallow the morning light. I hesitated, a shiver running down my spine. I knew it was dangerous, going through the tunnels, but it took miles off my trip.

“You’ve made it this far,” I muttered to myself. “No turning back now.”

Inside, the air was damp and cold. My footsteps echoed against the cracked stone walls. Shadows clung to every surface, shifting with the flicker of my flashlight.

I kept moving, my heart hammering in my chest. Every sound—a drip of water, the distant scrape of stone—made my fingers tighten around the knife hidden in my belt. I kept my guns in my pack where I could easily reach them.

I heard a noise behind me—soft but—I whirled around, my blade drawn. Nothing.

Still, I didn’t relax. I wasn’t alone in the tunnels. I could feel it.

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Pushing forward, I stumbled upon a collapsed section of the passage. Twisted metal and rubble barred my path. A low growl echoed from the darkness as I searched for a way around.

My breath hitched.

Three figures emerged from the shadows—ragged, feral, and grinning.

“Well, well,” one of them sneered. “What do we have here?”

I didn’t know what nationality he was but I barely understood him. I didn’t have to, I knew what he wanted. backed away slowly, weighing my options. Fight. Run. Survive.

I tightened my grip on the knife. I might be alone, but I wasn’t helpless.

“Come any closer,” I warned, voice low and steady, “and you’ll regret it.”

The men laughed.

I braced myself.

I wasn’t going down without a fight.

Cyclone

In the distance, I heard the echoes—a faint, distorted laugh carried through the

crumbling tunnels.

I froze, every sense sharpened.

That was Jude. I know it was.

Breaking into a run, I plunged into the darkness, following the sounds. The tunnels twisted and forked, but I trusted my gut, weaving through the shadows with reckless urgency.

A scream—short, sharp—split the air.

I tore around a corner and saw her: Jude, standing her ground, knife flashing as she faced down three attackers.

Without hesitation, I charged.

The first man never saw me coming. I slammed into him, sending him sprawling. The second barely got a blade up before I disarmed him with brutal efficiency.

The third turned to flee, but I grabbed him by the collar and threw him against the wall, the impact echoing through the tunnel.

Panting, I turned to Jude.

She was breathing hard, wild-eyed but unbroken.

“I told you,” she said between breaths, “I can handle myself.”

I gave a half-smile, something fierce and proud sparking in my eyes.

“Never said you couldn’t,” I said. “Just thought you might like some backup.”

For a moment, we simply stared at each other, the space between us crackling with unspoken things.

Then Jude sheathed her knife and squared her shoulders.

“Come on,” she said. “We need to move.”

I fell into step beside her, my presence a silent promise.

This time, she didn’t walk alone.

7

Jude

We moved quickly through the broken tunnels, our footsteps muffled by the damp ground. The adrenaline still hummed in my veins but faded slowly, leaving a hollow ache behind.

“You shouldn’t have followed me,” I said finally, not looking at him as soon as I leave this country. I’m going home to my ranch in Arizona.

“You shouldn’t have left without me,” Cyclone replied, voice even but edged with something sharp. “We would have taken you home.”

“I can’t go home until I clear my name. You don’t understand. I was deep in it. I know who they are and what they have done. That is why they are after me. The more people around, the more danger they are in.

I clenched my fists. “I had to leave alone. You should never have followed me.”

“You think running alone will fix everything? If you have me with you, at least there will be two of us.”

I stopped, spinning to face him. “You don’t understand. You can’t fix what’s wrong with me, Cyclone. No one can. I have to have a meeting with the top brass.”

He stared at her, his jaw working like he was holding back a thousand words.

“I’m not trying to fix you,” he said after a long moment. “I’m trying to stand with you.”

The honesty in his voice was almost worse than anger. I swallowed hard, forcing the burn in my throat down.

“I don’t know if I can let anyone stand with me,” I whispered. “It’s so dangerous. I’ve always done this alone.”

Cyclone stepped closer, not touching me, but close enough that I could feel his heat.

“Then we’ll figure it out,” he said. “One step at a time.”

For a moment, I thought about pushing him away again.

But I was tired. And, deep down, I was tired of being alone.

“One step,” I agreed quietly.

Cyclone nodded once. Then he turned and scanned the tunnel ahead.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

And for the first time in a long while, I followed someone else’s lead—not because I had to, but because I chose to.

Cyclone

The tunnel groaned above us, dust raining from the cracks in the stone. Jude stiffened.

“Move!” I yelled, grabbing her arm and pulling her just as a section of the ceiling

caved in behind us.

We ran, stumbling over broken tracks and debris, coughing as the air filled with grit. The light from Jude's flashlight swung around, casting monstrous shadows along the walls.

Ahead, the tunnel forked—one path descending into deeper blackness, the other sloping upward toward the promise of open air.

“This way!” I shouted, steering us toward the upward path.

Another rumble shook the ground, louder this time. I saw Jude stop and glance back—the tunnel we'd come from was collapsing in on itself, sealing off our way back. “Run!” I shouted.

We pushed harder, lungs burning, feet sliding on loose gravel. The air grew fresher, cooler.

A sliver of daylight appeared ahead—tiny, but real.



“Almost there,” I gasped.

We burst out of the tunnel just as the final collapse roared behind us, a wave of dust and debris billowing into the open.

Jude staggered to a stop, bending over with her hands on her knees, gulping in deep breaths.

I stood beside her, scanning the landscape with sharp, wary eyes.

We emerged onto the edge of a valley—wild, windswept, and treacherous. In the distance, movement caught my eye: a line of riders, kicking up dust as they patrolled the far ridge.

“We’ve got company,” I said grimly.

Jude followed my gaze and swore under her breath. “Soldiers. Or worse,” she said.

“Come on,” I said, touching her shoulder lightly. “We need to keep moving.”

We headed for the cover of the rocky hills, sticking to the shadows, every step pulling us further from the ruins and deeper into whatever came next.

As we moved, Jude cast a quick glance at me.

I caught her looking, but said nothing—just offered the faintest smile.

And for the first time, since I met her, Jude let herself smile back.

Just a little.

We didn't stop moving until the riders were distant shadows against the setting sun. Only then did I lead Jude into a narrow cleft between two cliffs, hidden from sight.

"We can rest here," I said, setting my pack down. "Just for a little while."

Jude dropped heavily onto a flat rock. I knew she had to be hurting, and her throat must be dry. I offered her a canteen without a word. She hesitated, then accepted it, taking a long drink.

We sat silently for a few minutes, the exhaustion and adrenaline weighing down every breath.

"Why did you come after me?" Jude asked finally, her voice low.

I leaned back against the stone, arms loosely crossed over my chest. "Because you didn't deserve to be out here alone."

Jude stared at the ground. "I made my choice."

"That doesn't mean it was the right one," I said.

She looked up sharply, ready to argue, but my gaze was calm, steady.

"You don't have to carry everything by yourself, Jude," I said. "Not anymore."

I knew my words hit something deep inside her, raw and aching. I saw it in her eyes. She didn't answer. Couldn't.

The sun dipped lower, casting long shadows across the valley. In the growing twilight, I shifted closer, not quite touching her but close enough that she could feel my presence like a shield.

“We’ll move again when it’s dark,” I said quietly. “We’ll find a place to camp.”

Jude nodded, the simple plan anchoring her.

I could tell for now, she allowed herself a rare moment of peace.

And beside her, I kept silent, a promise that she could trust me. She wasn’t ready to trust—but maybe, just maybe, she wanted to try.

We walked for hours before finding shelter—an old, abandoned shack wedged into the side of a cliff, half-hidden by creeping vines and broken stone. It wasn’t much, but it was dry, and it was ours for now.

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I pushed the door open with a creak and scanned the interior: a battered cot, big enough for two, a crumbling hearth, and dust thick enough to choke on.

“It’ll do,” I said gruffly.

Jude dropped her pack and sank down onto the cot, the last reserves of her strength bleeding away. I started a small fire in the hearth, just enough to cut the chill.

Jude

The silence between us thickened, heavy with everything unspoken. I watched him from under lowered lashes, my heart hammering. Cyclone caught me staring and didn’t look away.

Something cracked inside me—adam that had been straining for far too long.

I rose slowly to my feet, crossing the tiny space between us. Cyclone didn’t move, just waited, tension radiating from him.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” I said, voice low, rough.

“I know,” Cyclone said, his voice just as strained. “I just... can’t stop. Once we start, there is no stopping.”

The distance vanished.

Our mouths crashed together, all the fear and adrenaline and need igniting between

us. Cyclone's hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer. I pressed myself against him, desperate for the heat of him, the reality. I wanted him to take me, fast and hard. I didn't want him to stop the entire night.

Clothes were stripped away in frantic, clumsy movements. There was nothing gentle about it—only hunger, raw and consuming.

We found each other in the dark, in the flickering firelight, one broken soul and her protector colliding because we couldn't do anything else.

Later, tangled in the thin blankets, I lay on Cyclone's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

"This doesn't change anything," I said again, softer now.

Cyclone's hand traced lazy circles along my spine. "No," he agreed. "It just is."

For now, it was enough.

8

Jude

We burst from the shack, sprinting into the gray light of morning. My muscles screamed in protest, but I pushed harder, Cyclone beside me. Neither of us mentioned last night, but if I were truthful, I could have made love all day today.

If he had asked, I would have said yes. He makes me feel special when his hands explore my body, and his lips follow his hands.

Then we heard them. The noise grew louder, closer—a frenzy of sound. We didn't dare look back.

Down the ravine, across jagged rocks slick with dew, through the twisting scrub. Every heartbeat was a countdown.

“There!” Cyclone pointed to a narrow crevice between two boulders up ahead. “We can lose them!”

I didn’t hesitate. He put me in front of him, slipping into the narrow space just as the first of the pursuers crested the ridge behind us.

Gunshots rang out, bullets sparking against stone.

“Keep moving!” he yelled.

We squeezed through the crevice, emerging onto a hidden game trail that wound deeper into the cliffs. Above them, the searchers’ shouts echoed in frustration.

For now, we’d slipped the noose.

We didn’t slow down until the sounds of pursuit faded behind us. Even then, we kept moving, deeper into the wilderness. I wasn’t taking any chances.

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Hours later, when our legs could no longer carry us, we found another hollow—a shallow cave hidden by brush. Cyclone scanned the area carefully before motioning me inside.

We collapsed onto the dirt floor, breathing hard, covered in dust and sweat.

I leaned back against the stone wall, momentarily closing my eyes. When I opened them, he was watching me.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice rough.

I nodded. “Yeah. You?”

“Still breathing,” Cyclone said with a faint, exhausted smile.

Silence fell again, heavy but not uncomfortable.

For now, we were safe.

But both of us knew it wouldn’t last long.

Not in my world. The world I created with my government pushing me to find more information, constantly more and more. Until I was hunted like an animal, and my government disappeared when I needed them the most. Not with what chased me, the men hunting me were pure evil, and one of our senators called the shots.

Cyclone

As night settled in, the fire between us was a mere flicker. Jude sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, her eyes distant. I leaned back against the stone wall, my gaze fixed on the flames.

“Do you ever think about the past?” Jude asked quietly, her voice so soft it almost got lost in the crackle of the fire.

I was silent for a moment. “Sure. Don’t you?”

“I used to,” she said. “But it got too painful.”

I turned my head to look at her, the firelight casting shadows across her face. “What do you think about now?”

Jude hesitated, then shook her head. “Tomorrow. Only tomorrow.”

I nodded slowly. “That’s enough.” I hoped one day she might tell me about all the pain she carried in her heart.

For a long while, neither of us spoke. The quiet wrapped around us like a fragile blanket. At that moment, there was no chase, no blood on our hands, and no scars we couldn’t outrun.

Just two people who shared something for one night.

Jude laid her head against the wall and closed her eyes, exhaustion pulling at her. I could see she was thinking about things that upset her. I walked over and put my arm around her.

Jude didn’t resist it.



Not tonight.

Tomorrow, they'd run again.

But tonight, we could simply be friends.

The night deepened, and the fire dwindled to glowing embers. The air turned colder, creeping into her bones. Jude shifted closer without thinking, drawn to my steady warmth.

I noticed but said nothing, only shifted slightly to make room.

Minutes passed—maybe hours.

I knew when she woke up, she jerked, like she was scared to breathe.

Jude finally spoke, her voice barely a breath. "I'm scared."

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I looked at her, my expression open, raw in the dim light. “Me too.”

It was the simplest, truest thing I could have said.

Jude leaned her forehead against my shoulder. For the first time since I met her, she let the fear show. Not hidden behind anger and not buried under survival.

“We’ll get through it,” I murmured, my hand moving to the back of her head, steady and sure. “One way or another, we’ll get out of here.”

She closed her eyes, and let herself believe me, just for tonight.

In the deep quiet of the wilderness, one broken soul and a protector leaned on each other, not as warriors, not as fugitives—but as something far rarer.

Humans.

And for the first time in a long, brutal journey, Jude let herself fall back to sleep not alone, but safe.

9

Cyclone

We ran until our legs screamed, the sounds of dogs and boots pounding through the jungle behind us. There was no time to think, only move.

“We won’t outrun them forever,” Jude gasped beside me.

“No,” I agreed, ripping my pack open and yanking out the compact radio unit I’d hidden there. It was old-school—less traceable that way.

I keyed it on. “Cyclone to Golden Team Base. Emergency pickup. Code Red. Two of us.”

Static.

“Golden Base copies. Give coordinates.” I was so glad to hear Oliver’s voice. Thank God they hadn’t left yet.

I rattled them off, glancing at Jude, who scanned the treeline like she expected death to step out of it.

“Estimated time of arrival is fifteen minutes,” his voice crackled. “Hold your ground.”

“We’ll be there,” I promised, killing the signal and jamming the radio back into my pack.

I turned to Jude. “Help’s coming. We just have to survive till then.”

Her eyes were determined. “Surviving’s what I do.”

We kept moving.

The cargo plane rattled and groaned as it climbed higher, cutting through thick cloud cover. Jude sat across from me on a bench, arms crossed, gaze distant. I kept my head tilted back against the wall, catching my breath, but my eyes never left her.

Golden Team members moved around us, quickly checking gear and weapons and giving us casual glances. River tossed us a bottle of water.

“Damn, Cyclone,” Tag said shaking his head. You scared the hell out of us. We would have been gone if you had called an hour later.”

I caught the bottle one-handed and gave him a look that shut him up fast, but not before a few of the others agreed we were indeed lucky.

“You two put on one hell of a show back there,” River said. “Whole squad on your heels, and you still made it look easy.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Jude said, her voice flat. “I’m glad Cyclone was with me, or I would be dead right now.”

Everyone quieted a little at that. Good. Let them feel it.

I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a long drink, keeping my focus on Jude. There was a tightness around her mouth, a haunted look she couldn’t quite hide.

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She was running from something bigger than just the Syndicate. I could feel it in my bones.

The Blackdawn Syndicate—they were just the surface. Whatever Jude carried inside her, it ran deeper. Older.

And she hadn't trusted me with it yet.

Maybe she never would.

The plane banked sharply, and Jude braced herself against the wall without a word. When the turbulence settled, I pushed off the bench and crossed the few steps to sit next to her.

"We'll get you somewhere safe," I said quietly, keeping my voice low enough that the others wouldn't overhear.

Jude gave me a tired smile, small and broken at the edges. "Safe doesn't exist anymore."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to promise her otherwise. But I'd seen too much of her world to lie to her.

Instead, I said, "Maybe not. But we buy time. We keep moving."

For a long moment, she just stared at me like she wanted to believe me, but didn't dare.

“You don’t have to do this,” she whispered.

I leaned back against the wall, arms folded loosely. “Yeah. I do.”

She looked away first, her fingers tightening around the strap of her pack. There were walls around her—thick, scarred walls built from grief and rage and loss.

I knew because I’d built some of the same ones.

But there was still a crack in hers. I could see it every time she looked at me, like she might drown and hated herself for it.

The pilot’s voice crackled over the intercom. “Fifteen minutes to drop point.”

I straightened, pulling my gear into my lap. Jude did the same, her movements quick, efficient. Professional.

We were soldiers again. Survivors.

But somewhere under the blood and bruises and lies, something had shifted between us.

I didn’t know where this road led.

But I knew I wasn’t letting her walk it alone.

Not this time.

Not ever again, if I could help it.

Jude

The engines roared beneath us, a constant, familiar hum that should have been comforting. It wasn't. Because I knew I was finished, I couldn't leave.

I sat rigid in the cargo bay of the Golden Team's plane, my fingers locked around the strap of my pack like it was a lifeline. Cyclone sat beside me, quiet, steady—his presence a wall against everything trying to crush me from the inside.

I should have been grateful.

Instead, I felt like I was unraveling.

I fixed my gaze on a spot on the far wall, willing my breathing to stay even. Fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes until we landed somewhere safer. If there was such a thing.

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My chest tightened painfully. I hadn't felt safe in a decade.

Cyclone hadn't asked any questions yet, but I could feel them piling up behind his silence, the weight of his gaze even when I wasn't looking at him. He knew I was hiding something. Part of me wanted to tell him, to confess everything and let someone else carry it for a while.

But the words stayed locked inside, buried under six years of grief and guilt.

Six years since the bomb.

Six years since I'd lost everything that mattered.

I closed my eyes and saw it all again—the black smoke curling into the sky, the flashing lights, the screams that never really stopped echoing in my head. My husband, gone. My little girl, gone.

Collateral damage. And I knew that the Senator was behind it. That's why he wants me dead he thinks I have proof. I do, but I need more. If I had more, I would have killed him. I'm going to kill him, the first chance I get.

Only later did I find out it wasn't random. Only later had I learned the truth—the twisted rot that ran through the halls of power. And now the man who had destroyed my life was hunting me, determined to bury his sins along with me.

Senator Marcus Vance. The shining star of Washington.



And underneath the smile and the speeches? Blackdawn's puppet. Their willing accomplice.

I dug my nails into the strap harder, grounding myself. Not here. Not now. I couldn't fall apart. I wouldn't.

"You ready?" Cyclone asked, his voice low, careful.

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, concern carved into every line of his face.

"Yeah," I lied.

He studied me for a moment longer, then nodded. He didn't push. Another thing I was grateful for and hated at the same time.

The plane dipped slightly, beginning its descent. I caught a glimpse out the window—a stretch of rugged land, thick forest bleeding into open fields. Nowhere. Good.

"Stay close to me," Cyclone said.

Like I could do anything else.

The wheels hit dirt with a jarring thud. Before the engines even finished whining, the ramp dropped, and the team moved out, fast and professionally.

Cyclone reached for me, a steady hand on my back, guiding without forcing.

We ran into the wild, into the unknown.

And somewhere deep inside, for the first time in six long years, a fragile, reckless

hope stirred.

Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't alone anymore.

The sun beat down through the thick canopy as we moved quickly across uneven ground. My lungs burned, my legs screamed, but I didn't slow. Neither did Cyclone.

"Half a mile north," he said, checking the handheld GPS. "There's a safe house. Small. Hidden. We regroup there."

I nodded, wiping sweat from my brow. Every shadow felt like a threat. Every snap of a branch, every whisper of leaves.

Two Golden Team members fanned out around us, eyes sharp, weapons ready. Even in the middle of nowhere, I knew better than to believe we were safe.

A low rumble of thunder echoed overhead. I tilted my head back, feeling the first fat drops of rain. Good. Rain meant fewer drones, and poorer visibility for our pursuers.

We reached the safe house—an old weather-beaten cabin tucked against a rocky hillside—in less than fifteen minutes. Cyclone approached first, sweeping the perimeter before waving us in.

Inside, the air was musty, thick with the scent of old wood and damp earth. There was a radio, some emergency supplies, and not much else.

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“Good enough,” I muttered, sliding down onto the floor against one wall.

Cyclone crouched beside me, pulling a canteen from his gear and handing it over.

“Drink,” he said simply.

I obeyed. Water had never tasted so good. It always seemed better when he handed me his canteen.

The others set about securing the cabin, posting lookouts, setting traps in case we had unwanted visitors.

Cyclone stayed near me.

“You did good back there,” he said after a while.

I shook my head. “I almost got us killed.”

“We made it. That’s what matters.”

I looked at him then, really looked—the set of his jaw, the steadiness in his eyes. I hadn’t asked for him to come after me. Hadn’t asked for anyone.

But he had.

And right now, it was the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

“Thank you,” I whispered, the words scraping out of me like broken glass.

He just nodded, like he understood how much it cost me to say it.

Thunder rolled again, closer this time. The rain picked up, hammering against the roof. Cyclone leaned back against the wall beside me, close enough that our shoulders almost touched.

Neither of us said anything for a long time.

Outside, the storm raged.

Inside, for just a little while, there was peace.

11

Jude

It didn't last.

I must have dozed, lulled by the relentless drumming of the rain against the roof. When I snapped awake, the fire was dying low, casting the room in long, flickering shadows. My muscles tensed before I was even fully conscious.

Something was wrong.

I pushed myself up slowly, scanning the cabin. Cyclone was awake, crouched near the window, his entire body still but coiled tight, like a spring ready to snap.

He glanced at me and put a finger to his lips.

Movement outside.

I didn't need to see it to feel it. The air had shifted—a pressure at the back of my skull, that old survival instinct roaring to life.

Cyclone tapped his earpiece, murmuring something too low for me to catch. Across the room, two members of the Golden Team—Tag and River—began silently packing up what little gear we'd unpacked.

“We can't stay,” Cyclone mouthed to me.

I nodded once.

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Another crack of thunder rattled the walls. In the brief flash of lightning, I caught a glimpse out the grimy window—shadows slipping between trees, far too methodical to be casual hikers.

Blackdawn, those bastards never stop.

I grabbed my pack and checked my weapon with quick, practiced motions. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, but my hands were steady.

Cyclone moved back to me, his voice low and sure. “Out the rear. There’s a ravine. If we make it across, we can lose them in the forest.”

“How many?” I asked.

“Enough.”

I didn’t ask for more. I trusted him. Funny how fast that had happened.

Tag cracked the door open just enough to peer out. “Clear for now,” he muttered.

River adjusted the strap of his rifle. “They’ll hit the front first. Standard sweep.”

Cyclone looked at me. “You ready?”

I met his eyes, felt the old steel slide back into place inside me.

“Let’s go.”

The door creaked open wider, and we slipped into the storm, swallowed whole by the night.

The rain hit like needles, soaking me to the bone in seconds. Mud sucked at my boots, and every step was a battle not to go sprawling.

Cyclone led, sure-footed even on the treacherous ground. I kept pace, adrenaline sharpening my senses.

Behind us, faint shouts cut through the roar of the storm. They'd found the cabin. It wouldn't take long for them to track our trail.

"The Ravine is close," Cyclone called over his shoulder.

Lightning split the sky, illuminating a gaping chasm ahead, the narrow footbridge barely more than a few rotting planks and fraying rope.

"That's the plan?" I shouted.

"You got a better one?"

I gritted my teeth and followed.

The bridge swayed wildly in the wind. One wrong step and I'd be swallowed by darkness. But behind us came the sharp crack of gunfire—close.

No choice.

Cyclone went first, moving fast but carefully. I gripped the rope rails, forcing myself onto the bridge.

Halfway across, a shot rang out—too close—and splinters of wood exploded near my hand.

“Move!” Cyclone shouted.

I ran, the bridge swinging violently beneath me. Another shot. Another. The far side loomed closer.

Cyclone grabbed my arm the second I lunged off the bridge, hauling me onto solid ground. Tag and River weren’t far behind.

“Cut it!” Cyclone shouted.

River didn’t hesitate. He slashed the rope with a wicked-looking blade. The bridge ripped free with a groan and crashed into the ravine below, taking our pursuers’ easy path with it.



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Breathing hard, soaked and freezing, I looked back one last time.

Shadows gathered at the ravine's edge, weapons raised, but they wouldn't cross.

For now, we'd bought ourselves a little more time.

I turned to Cyclone, and for a moment—just a moment—the world narrowed down to him and the fierce, unspoken promise in his eyes.

We weren't done running.

But we were still alive.

And we were still together.

We didn't stop to celebrate.

Cyclone took point again, leading us deeper into the trees, into the belly of the storm. The air smelled of wet earth and fear. Every step felt heavier now, but I pushed forward, driven by something beyond survival.

We moved fast and silent, cutting a jagged path along the rocky ridgeline. Somewhere behind us, Blackdawn would regroup. They wouldn't stop. They never stopped. I can never go home until the Senator is dead. He would kill my entire family if he had a chance.

Cyclone dropped back beside me briefly, his voice barely audible above the wind.

“You holding up?”

“Ask me later,” I said, too breathless for anything clever.

He gave a tight smile—grim but real—before pushing ahead.

Another mile. Maybe two.

Finally, Cyclone raised a fist, and we halted at the mouth of a shallow cave, half-hidden behind a curtain of vines. Tag and River peeled off, circling the perimeter, rifles raised.

I stumbled inside, sagging against the wall. My body screamed in protest. Every muscle, every bruise, every old scar that never fully healed.

Cyclone crouched beside me, pulling a small emergency kit from his pack.

“Let me check you over,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I muttered.

He shot me a look that made it clear he wasn’t asking. I relented, letting him wipe blood from a shallow cut on my arm.

The rain pounded just outside the cave mouth, and a wall of sound muffled the world.

Safe—for now.

As Cyclone worked, I watched his hands. Strong. Steady. The kind of hands you could trust.

And for the first time in years, I realized how badly I wanted to trust someone again.

“When this is over,” he said, his voice low and rough. I want to know everything.”

I froze.

He met my eyes, no judgment there—just a simple, quiet demand for the truth.

“When you’re ready,” he added.

I swallowed hard, feeling the words rise in my throat—the truth about Senator Vance, about the bombing, about the family I had buried in ashes and silence.

“Okay,” I whispered.

And for the first time, I meant it.

12

Cyclone

The storm outside battered the jungle, but in here, it was a different kind of storm—one that had been building between us for days, maybe longer. Maybe since the last time.

Jude looked at me like she was trying to hold herself together and failing. And I was tired of pretending.

I reached out and touched her cheek, just a brush of my fingers against damp, heated skin.

“This doesn’t change anything,” she said, her voice low and trembling.

“No strings,” I promised.

“Just for tonight,” she said.

Her hands curled into my shirt, and I leaned in, pressing my forehead to hers for one long, shuddering breath. Then her mouth found mine, and it was like falling off the edge of a cliff—no control, no second-guessing.

We tore at each other, desperate, frantic. Rain and sweat slicked our skin. Clothes hit

the cave floor one piece at a time, forgotten.

I pushed her back onto the makeshift bedding we'd thrown down, and she pulled me with her, legs wrapping around my waist, dragging me closer, deeper.

There was nothing slow or soft about it. It was hunger, fury, survival.

When I slid inside her, she arched against me with a broken sound that ripped right through my chest.

For a while, there was no past, no Blackdawn, no death chasing us.

There was only this.

Only her.

Only now.

After, we lay tangled together, breathless, the storm still raging beyond the thin shelter of the cave.

I stared up at the jagged rock ceiling, trying to slow my heart.

Cyclone's hand traced lazy patterns along my hip. He didn't speak, and neither did I.

We'd said everything that needed saying with our bodies.

I rolled to my side, resting my head against his chest, listening to the steady thud of his heartbeat.

"This is just for tonight," I said, my voice rough.

He tightened his arm around me slightly. "I know."

Liar.

I closed my eyes, pretending that tomorrow wouldn't come.

Pretending that for one stolen night, I wasn't a broken person running from a world that wanted me dead.

We were just... together.

And it was enough.

13

Jude

The rain had eased to a soft drizzle when I finally stirred, blinking in the dim gray light filtering through the cave entrance. My body ached in ways both good and bad. Cyclone slept beside me, one arm thrown protectively across my waist even in sleep.

For a moment, I let myself watch him. Let myself pretend.

But reality always came back.

I slid out from under his arm carefully, reaching for my clothes. We needed to move. The Syndicate wouldn't give up just because of a little storm. They were paid ten billion dollars for my death. They wouldn't stop until I was dead.

I had just pulled on my pants when Cyclone woke. His eyes found me immediately, still heavy with sleep but sharpening fast.

"Time to go?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Yeah."

He sat up, dragging a hand through his hair. "You good?"

I nodded—another lie.

We packed quickly, silently. The heat between us from the night before was still there, humming under the surface, but neither of us spoke about it.

We couldn't afford to.

Cyclone slung his pack over his shoulder and held out a hand. I hesitated for a heartbeat, then took it, letting him pull me to him for a moment.

He pulled his radio out and called River. "Where are you?"

"We are at the checkpoint," River said.

We moved back into the jungle, side by side.

No promises.

No strings.

Just survival.

But deep inside, where I couldn't lie to myself, I knew something between us had shifted.

And no matter how fast we ran, there was no outrunning it now.

The checkpoint was hidden deep in the jungle—a crumbling old radio tower the Golden Team had secured and rigged as a fallback position. The last time they were here on a rescue. It was barely more than rusting metal, a few makeshift shelters, and a battered supply cache, but it might as well have been a fortress after everything we'd been through.



Cyclone led the way, guiding me through the final stretch. We stayed low, cautious, the instinct to hide still sharp in both of us.

A low whistle sounded through the trees—one of Golden Team's signals.

Cyclone answered with a sharp, two-note reply. Seconds later, Tag and River, weapons ready, appeared.

I nodded, too tired for words.

We pushed through the dense brush and stumbled into the clearing around the tower. More Golden Team members waited there, rifles slung, faces wary but relieved.

"How is it?" Cyclone asked.

"Clear for now," River said. "The plane will be here in two hours. Just hang on until then."

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Relief washed through me so fast it made me dizzy. Two hours. We just had to hold on a little longer.

Cyclone caught my eye and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

We'd made it.

For now.

The next hour passed in a strange, fragile peace. The rain softened to a mist, cloaking the jungle in a silvery haze. Cyclone and I found a spot beneath a tattered canopy rigged between trees, and I sat cross-legged on the ground, grateful for the small measure of shelter.

He sat nearby, methodically cleaning his weapon. His movements were steady, practiced, but I could see the exhaustion in the lines of his body.

Tag handed me a granola bar and a bottle of water. "Not five-star dining, but it'll keep you upright," he said with a wink. "Gage makes them for us."

I managed a smile and took it. It was good with lots of flavor, I thought it was delicious, and it filled the gnawing emptiness in my stomach.

Every so often, a radio crackled quietly—Golden Team, confirming all clear. No signs of Blackdawn yet.

Cyclone finally looked up at me, his dark eyes softening a fraction. "You should

rest.”

I shook my head. “I won’t sleep.”

He didn’t argue. He just leaned back against the tree behind me, stretching his legs out, as if grounding himself into the earth.

“I used to think,” I said quietly, surprising even myself, “that if I kept moving, I could outrun the past.”

Cyclone didn’t interrupt. He just listened.

“Turns out,” I continued, my voice barely above a whisper, “the past has longer legs.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah. It does.”

The silence between us wasn’t heavy this time. It was... easy. Understanding. Like two broken things recognizing each other.

The plane would come soon. We’d leave this place behind and land somewhere else that they hopefully couldn’t find us.

But some thingst—he important things—would follow us wherever we went.

14

Jude

The warning came seconds too late.

The radio crackled—a frantic voice: “Movement! East quadrant! Repeat, multiple

targets inbound!”

Cyclone was already on his feet, weapon raised, scanning the tree line.

“Positions!” Tag shouted.

I grabbed my rifle and scrambled to cover behind a fallen log. Heart hammering. Sweat slicked my palms. Sometimes I thought it would be easier if I let them kill me, but then I couldn’t kill the Senator who killed my family.

Through the mist, figures appeared—Blackdawn Syndicate operatives, moving fast, rifles up.

Gunfire erupted, sharp and brutal.

I squeezed the trigger, the recoil jolting through me as I dropped one of them. Cyclone moved like a force of nature, calm and deadly, covering Tag and River as they laid down with their guns hitting targets.

It felt endless—shouts, gunfire, the wet slap of boots on mud. I spotted a figure trying to flank our position and shifted, aiming carefully. One shot. Down.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

A sharp pain lanced across my arm—a graze—but I ignored it, firing again.

“Hold the line!” Tag shouted.

Then—the low thrum of rotors.

The helicopter, cutting through the mist like salvation itself.

“Fall back to the bird!” Cyclone yelled. “Jude, run now.”

We moved as one, retreating under heavy fire. Tag and River covered us, picking off anyone reckless enough to chase.

The helicopter hovered just above the clearing, a rope ladder dropping down.

Cyclone boosted me up first. My hands burned as I climbed, muscles screaming, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t.

At the top, hands grabbed me, pulling me in.

Cyclone was right behind me, hauling himself up like he weighed nothing.

Tag and River followed, River cursing under his breath as a bullet nicked the edge of the helicopter’s skid.

The rest of the Golden Team jumped inside, the hatch slamming shut.

The helicopter banked hard, engines screaming, and the jungle fell away beneath us.

Safe.

For now.

The helicopter shuddered through the dense clouds, every jolt and dip making my nerves scream. I sat hunched in my seat, clutching the straps across my chest like they might anchor me to something real.

Cyclone sat across from me, his rifle cradled in his lap, eyes never leaving the battered jungle shrinking beneath us. We were all quiet. No one spoke.

We were all running on adrenaline and fumes.

My body ached, my arm throbbed where the bullet had grazed me, but it was the tight coil of fear in my chest that hurt the most.

I had nowhere to go.

No home. No plan.

Except—

I closed my eyes briefly, forcing my breathing to slow.

There was a place.

An old ranch in Arizona, out in the middle of the desert. We bought it under a fake name a month before my family died. I went there when it happened, a broken version of myself hiding in the dust and silence. No one knew about it—not the

Agency, not my old contacts, not even my friends—the few who were still alive.

I hadn't set foot there in six years.

But it was mine. And it was far away from all of this.

Cyclone's voice cut into my spiraling thoughts. "We need a plan."

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, his gaze steady but unreadable.

"I have somewhere," I said quietly. "It's old and run down, but it's mine."

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

He didn't question it. Just nodded once.

"Arizona," I added. "Desert. Nothing for miles."

Tag leaned forward slightly. "You sure it's still there?"

"No," I admitted. "But it's better than nowhere."

The helicopter jolted again, and I gripped the straps harder.

Cyclone leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes for a brief moment.

"We'll get there," he said.

His voice was so certain, so grounded, that for the first time since this whole nightmare started, I almost believed him.

The pilot's voice crackled through the radio. "Touchdown in fifteen. We'll refuel, swap birds if needed, then move out."

Fifteen minutes.

I pressed my head back against the vibrating wall of the helicopter and let the storm inside me settle.

For now, we had a destination.



For now, we had each other.

The helicopter touched down at a secluded airstrip cut into the jungle. It was little more than a patch of cleared earth and a hastily assembled fuel station, but it was enough.

We moved fast, the Golden Team securing the perimeter while the pilot and ground crew refueled the helicopter.

I stayed close to Cyclone, my instincts too raw, too battered to let me drift far from him.

He noticed. Of course he did.

“Almost there,” he said quietly, adjusting the strap of his gear.

I nodded, swallowing against the knot in my throat.

Once the fueling was complete, we climbed back aboard a fresh helicopter, one better suited for long-distance flight. The rotors roared to life, and soon we were airborne again, cutting across the endless stretch of jungle toward a safer airspace where we could transfer to a long-haul transport.

Cyclone shifted in his seat beside me, closer than before. His hand brushed against mine, a barely-there touch, and I found myself curling my fingers into a fist to keep from reaching back.

As we flew, he leaned in, his voice pitched low just for me.

“I’m not leaving you,” he said.

I turned to look at him, startled.

His jaw was set hard, his eyes fierce. “I don’t care if you like it or not, Jude. I’m not walking away until I know you’re safe.”

Emotion slammed into me, fierce and unrelenting. Do not shed a tear!

“Cyclone—”

He shook his head once. Final.

“You don’t have to say anything. Just know it’s not negotiable.”

I pressed my lips together, the words trapped behind everything I couldn’t let myself feel.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

He had feelings for me. I could see it in his eyes, hear it in the rough edges of his voice.

But he wouldn't say it.

And I wasn't ready to hear it.

Not yet.

Instead, I leaned my shoulder lightly against his and closed my eyes, letting the steady thrum of the helicopter and the solid presence of Cyclone anchor me.

Arizona.

The ranch.

A new beginning?

Maybe.

But first, we had to survive the end.

The long-haul transport was quieter, steadier than the jungle helicopters, but the tension inside me never loosened. We were finally airborne, headed north, leaving behind the damp green chaos and flying into something else entirely.

Something mine.

Cyclone sat beside me, not touching, but close enough that I could feel his heat. I knew he was still on high alert, every muscle ready, every instinct sharp. It was a comfort I hadn't realized I needed so badly. I've been taking care of myself for so long.

We were flying in a jet they rented. It was fast, and we rented another helicopter when we landed in California.

The Golden Team kept to themselves toward the rear of the cabin, giving us space. Maybe they sensed something brewing between Cyclone and me. Maybe they were just smart enough not to poke wounded wolves. Did they see my pain?

I pulled a crumpled map from my pack, the one I'd kept all these years, a relic of another life. Cyclone leaned in slightly to glance at it.

"How remote is it?" he asked.

"Remote enough. No paved roads. A few wells. One broken windmill."

His mouth quirked up slightly at the corner. "Sounds charming."

"It's isolated," I said. "That's the point."

For a while, we flew in silence, the hours stretching out, each mile putting distance between us and the nightmare behind.

At some point, Cyclone shifted, his voice low but firm.

"I'm going with you," he said.

I stared out the small window, watching endless stretches of earth roll past beneath

us.

“I’m not good at letting people in,” I admitted.

“I’m not good at walking away,” he said.

I turned to look at him, my throat tight.

“You don’t have to stay,” I said quietly.

Cyclone held my gaze, something fierce and unmovable behind his eyes.

“I told you. I’m not leaving until you’re safe.”

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My heart twisted painfully, but I forced a small, wry smile.

“Stubborn.”

“Always.”

The pilot’s voice came over the speakers. “Approaching drop zone. Ten minutes.”

Cyclone reached over and squeezed my hand, just once, quick and firm, before pulling back.

“We’ll make it,” he said.

I held onto those words like a lifeline as the desert stretched out ahead of us, vast and wild and waiting.

For the first time in a long, long time, I dared to believe it.

15

Jude

The helicopter banked low, the roar of the blades scattering dust and grit across the cracked desert floor. My heart lodged somewhere in my throat as the familiar outline of the ranch came into view—the small, weather-beaten house, the leaning barn, the broken fence lines stretching out into forever.

It hadn't changed.

And yet, everything had.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, overwhelmed by a sudden flood of memory—tiny feet pounding across the porch, laughter floating through the air as my husband laughed at what our daughter was doing. A flash of my Tyler's smile, my daughter's gleeful squeal as she chased after the dog.

It was gone—all of it, burned away like a mirage. My husband knew what was going on with the Senator. He accidentally came across the information, but he needed more. He had some papers and files that he hid. We bought this place in case Marcus Vance sent his monsters on us; little did we know that he was already coming for us.

The helicopter touched down with a jolt that rattled my bones. I unbuckled mechanically, my hands numb.

Cyclone was already moving, helping Tag and River secure the area. But when I hesitated at the open hatch, he was there, offering his hand.

"Jude," he said, his voice low but sure. "You're not alone. Not anymore."

I stared at him, that damn lump thickening in my throat again. Slowly, I placed my hand in his.

He helped me down, his grip strong and grounding. I just wanted to be normal again. I haven't had a normal life since I started working for the CIA.

The dry and brutal desert heat hit me like a hammer, but I welcomed it. It felt real and honest. It brought back sweet memories that I would cherish forever.

We walked toward the house together, my boots kicking up little dust clouds. Cyclone stayed half a step behind me, letting me lead but never straying far.

I climbed the sagging porch steps, the wood groaning under my weight. The key—still hidden under the third step—was exactly where I'd left it.

When the front door swung open with a creak, the smell of old wood and dust wrapped around me, oddly comforting.

Home.

Broken. Scarred.

But still standing.

Like me.

Cyclone stepped inside behind me, silent, respectful. He set his gear down carefully, his eyes sweeping the interior with a soldier's instinct.

"It's not much," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.



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He met my gaze, and for a long, weighted moment, said nothing.

Then he smiled—small, fierce, and real.

“It’s perfect.”

The dam inside me cracked, but didn’t break. Not yet.

I turned away, busying myself with unstrapping my pack, hiding the sudden sting of tears.

Cyclone didn’t push. He just moved through the house, checking windows, securing doors, anchoring me in the present with every steady, careful action.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I let myself hope.

Not just for survival.

But for something more.

We spotted the rental where the man said it would be. Before we did anything, we needed to go to the grocery store and get food and cleaning supplies.

The small ranch sprawled out as a faded silhouette against the desert's burning orange horizon.

We didn't speak as we drove up the dirt road, as the rental truck's tires kicked up dust clouds. It wasn't until we reached the house that the real work began.

We unloaded our minimal gear and the groceries we bought. We set everything on the porch as we got busy and started cleaning,

The scent hit first—dust, earth, and something else. I loved the smell of sage, so I inhaled it.

We entered a mess, cobwebs draped from the ceiling like heavy curtains. Dust coated the floors and the few pieces of furniture like a thick gray sheet. Something, I didn't want to know what, had taken up residence in the far corner of the living room.

Cyclone let out a low whistle. "Looks like you have been gone a while."

I chuckled under my breath, tossing my backpack back out on the porch. "Yeah. We bought it right before everything happened. This was going to be our hideout. We knew we were in trouble as soon as we learned how deep in corruption the government is. I don't want to talk about that," I said.

"We won't talk about it then. I need to tackle that thing in the corner."

He peeled off his jacket, tossing it over a chair, and rolled up his sleeves. "Well, reckon we start by kicking out your... tenants." He nodded toward the furry, beady-eyed creature blinking back at us from the corner.

We spent the next few hours deep in the trenches—sweeping, scrubbing, throwing open windows to let in the dry Arizona air. Jude scrubbed countertops while Cyclone

tackled the nest in the corner, carefully coaxing the terrified critter—a desert packrat—into an old shoebox before releasing it out by the fence line.

Sweat slicked my hair to my forehead. I paused in the kitchen, bracing my palms on the counter.

“You ever think you’d end up cleaning out someone else’s abandoned dreams?” I asked, half-joking.

Cyclone, wiping grime from his arms with a rag, grinned. “Story of my life.”

We took a break on the front porch as the sun dipped low, cooling bottles of cold water from the ice chest pressing against our necks. The world felt bigger out here—wide open and strangely silent.

“So,” I said, twisting the bottle cap in my fingers. “Cyclone, huh? What’s the story?”

He leaned back against the railing, his face shadowed but relaxed. “Beau Reed, is my name,” he said first, his real name settling between them. “Cyclone was my Navy SEAL name. Special Forces picked it because...” He gave a crooked smile. “Let’s just say I had a reputation for stirring up trouble and moving fast.”

I laughed, the sound genuine and bright. It sounded strange coming from me.

“I can see that.”

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He nudged her foot lightly with his. “What about you?”

I hesitated. My throat tightened, memories trying to claw their way free. I stared out at the desert instead.

“I grew up in a small town,” she said finally. “I’ve worked with the CIA for a long time. I married my college sweetheart right out of college. We had a beautiful daughter. He also worked for the CIA.” I swallowed hard. “We were after the senator because we knew how evil he was. Then everything changed.”

Cyclone nodded, his gaze steady but gentle.

“No pressure,” he said. “We all got chapters we ain’t ready to read out loud yet.”

I looked at him then, really looked, and saw the man beneath the soldier. He had quiet strength, maybe a little battered but not broken.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

We sat in companionable silence, the desert night creeping in around us, cool and vast and full of unspoken things.

Somewhere in the distance, a coyote howled.

And for the first time in a long time, I didn’t feel so alone.

Jude

The last light drained from the sky, leaving the ranch bathed in silver shadows. I yawned behind my hand and stretched, feeling the soreness of the day's work settle deep into my bones.

"Why don't you get some rest?" Cyclone said, tossing his empty water bottle into a nearby trash can.

I smiled tiredly. "I could sleep for a week."

We wandered back inside, our footsteps echoing on the dusty floors. I paused in the hallway, glancing toward the two small bedrooms. I knew only one of them had a bed in it—and barely at that. The mattress was old, probably lumpy, and I didn't have extra sheets.

Cyclone noticed her hesitation.

"I can take the couch," he said easily. "I've slept in worse places."

I opened my mouth to argue, but the truth was, I wanted the bed. The ache in my back demanded it.

"You sure?" I asked quietly.

He grinned. "Positive. Besides, it'll give me time to bond with my new pet spiders."

I laughed, the tension between them easing. I pulled an old blanket from the hall closet and tossed it to him. "You're braver than I am."

We set about making our separate spaces for the night. Cyclone stretched out on the

worn leather couch, his long legs hanging slightly off the edge. I disappeared into the bedroom, dragging the mattress closer to the window where at least a breeze could slip through the screen.

Minutes later, the house fell into a thick, heavy silence.

I lay staring at the cracked ceiling, sleep stubbornly refusing to come. My mind kept slipping back to Cyclone—to his easy smile, his quiet patience, the way he hadn't pushed her when the memories threatened to drown her.

In the darkness, I whispered into the quiet, "Cyclone?"

A beat of silence. Then: "Yeah?"

"You okay out there?"

His chuckle floated through the cracked door. "I'm good, Jude. Go to sleep."

I smiled to myself, a small, private thing.

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“Goodnight,” I murmured.

“Goodnight, sunshine,” he replied, the nickname slipping out so naturally it made her chest ache.

Eventually, exhaustion pulled her under.

The smell of coffee woke her.

Groggy, Jude stumbled into the kitchen to find Cyclone—shirtless, wearing old jeans, and covered in a fine layer of dust—trying to get the ancient coffee maker to work.

He glanced over his shoulder and grinned.

“Mornin', Hope you don't mind—figured caffeine would soften the blow of today's to-do list.”

I blinked, momentarily forgetting how to speak.

“You're a saint,” I managed finally.

We ate a quick egg sandwich. Then we pulled on work gloves and headed outside.

The ranch was in rough shape, which kept us busy fixing things around the place—only the things we would need while we were here, like the well and the water lines, which were cracked. Cyclone showed me how to fix the water line, getting soaked by water spraying him.

I shook my head but couldn't help the laugh bubbling up inside me. It's been so long since I have laughed. I used to think I had no right to laugh, because I was alive and they were dead.

Somewhere between the sweat, the swearing, and the quiet teamwork, we stopped being two strangers thrown together by circumstance.

We started becoming something more.

Something we weren't quite ready to name yet.

18

Cyclone

The night was warm, with a soft desert breeze stirring the dry earth and the faint hum of insects filling the air.

I sat on the porch, staring out at the endless black, a beer bottle resting against my knee. The stars overhead were sharp and clear, but I couldn't see them.

All I could see was her.

Jude.

Every laugh, every touch, every time she looked at me like I was something worth believing in—it was driving me out of my mind.

I heard the creak of the screen door, the soft pad of her bare feet against the wood. She came and sat beside me without a word, close enough that our arms brushed.



Neither of us spoke for a long moment. The air between us was heavy, pulsing with everything unsaid.

Finally, Jude broke the silence.

“I’m tired of pretending,” she whispered.

I turned my head slowly, afraid to move too fast and break whatever fragile thing had cracked open between us.

Her eyes shimmered in the moonlight, wide and vulnerable.

“I know what I said,” she continued, her voice trembling. “I know I told you no more. But...”

She leaned into me, her hands sliding up my chest, her touch hesitant but hungry.

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“But I don’t care anymore,” she whispered against my jaw. “I want you. One more time, and maybe one more.”

My breath hitched hard. I closed my eyes, gripping the edge of the seat so tightly my knuckles went white. My cock hurt, straining against my pants.

“Jude...” I rasped, every muscle in my body straining with the need to touch her.

“Please,” she breathed, her lips brushing the corner of my mouth.

That was all it took.

With a rough, broken sound, I surged to my feet, grabbing her by the waist and lifting her into my arms. Jude gasped, wrapping her legs around my hips instinctively, her hands tangling in my hair.

I kissed her like a starving man—deep, wild, desperate.

She kissed me back with the same ferocity, moaning into my mouth as I stumbled inside the house, carrying her as she clung to me, kicking the door shut behind us.

Our clothes fell off in a frantic trail across the floor—shirts yanked over heads, jeans shoved down legs, boots and socks discarded without a second thought. I leaned down and tasted her breast, she moaned, and her hands grabbed my hair, as she arched against me.

I laid her down on the old couch first, but Jude wasn’t having it—she tugged me

down with her, our bodies colliding with a force that left us both gasping. My hand lowered as it explored her body. When my finger rubbed her clit she cried out for more.

I kissed her everywhere, her throat, her collarbone, the soft swell of her breasts. When I went lower, she cried out and begged me never to stop. With each kiss, I vowed this wouldn't be the last time. But I didn't dare say it out loud. My tongue drove her wild as she orgasmed time after time.

She pulled me closer, whispering my name like a prayer, a plea, a demand.

And when I finally sank into her, it wasn't careful or slow—it was wild, reckless, and real.

We moved together in a furious rhythm, clinging to each other like the world outside didn't exist.

I buried my face against her neck, groaning her name like it hurt, like it healed me all at once. Jude arched against me, every nerve ending burning with need. When we shattered together, it was messy and fierce and perfect.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, sweaty and shaking, hearts still racing. Then she climbed on me, smiling, as she directed me inside her.

When she bent to kiss me, she whispered. "I'm going to make you feel hot and crying for more." And that was exactly what she did, before collapsing on me.

I brushed a kiss against her temple, my hand splaying protectively across her stomach.

"You're killing me, sunshine," I whispered against her hair, voice wrecked. I picked

her up and walked to the bed, where we made love again and again.

Jude smiled through the tears burning the back of her throat.

And for the first time in forever, she wasn't afraid of feeling everything.

The pale dawnlight crept through the cracked blinds.

I woke in Cyclone's arms, our bodies still tangled, his hand resting over my heart like he was afraid to let go even in sleep.

For a long moment, I just lay there, listening to the steady thud of his heartbeat.

But the weight inside me, the secret I buried for so long, pressed harder against my chest.

I couldn't keep hiding.

Not from him.

I carefully slipped from his embrace, pulling on a wrinkled shirt from the night before. Cyclone stirred, blinking blearily at her.

"Hey," he rumbled, voice thick with sleep. "Where are you going?"

I sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from him. My hands trembled slightly in my lap.

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“I have to tell you something,” I said quietly.

He sat up, instantly alert.

“Jude?”

I closed my eyes, gathering every ounce of courage I had.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” I whispered, my voice shaking. “Not my family. Not my friends. Not even the therapists they forced me to see after it happened.”

Cyclone moved closer, his hand brushing my back gently.

“You can tell me,” he said, low and steady. “Whatever it is, sunshine, you’re safe with me.”

I drew a shuddering breath.

“I lost them... my husband, my daughter... because of me,” she choked out. “It was my fault. I forgot my phone. I went back inside to get it. If I hadn’t—”

My voice broke completely, sobs wracking my body.

Cyclone pulled me into his arms without hesitation, holding me so tightly I could feel every beat of his heart against my ribs.

“No,” he said fiercely, stroking her hair. “No, Jude. That wasn’t your fault. It was

never your fault. If you hadn't gone in for your phone, you would be dead now."

I clung to him, weeping into his chest, the dam inside me finally breaking.

Cyclone rocked me gently, murmuring against my hair, letting me pour out years of pain and guilt and silence.

When the storm inside me finally calmed, and I could finally breathe again, I realized something I hadn't let myself believe before.

I wasn't alone anymore.

I wasn't broken beyond repair.

And maybe—just maybe—I didn't have to be afraid to love again.

"It was him. He knew I was onto him. he wanted me dead. He killed my family. I've been after him for six years," I said, wiping my eyes.

19

Jude

The morning air was crisp, still carrying the faint scent of rain from the night before.

I sat on the porch steps, knees tucked against my chest, staring at the endless desert.

Cyclone moved around quietly inside the house, giving me space but never straying far. He was trying to be patient, trying not to push.

But I felt him.

Always there.

Always steady.

And that was the problem.

I needed him too much. And if I weren't careful, he'd pay the price for standing too close to my fire.

When Cyclone finally stepped outside, wiping his hands on a rag, I braced myself.

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“Morning,” he said, his voice low and rough from sleep.

“Morning,” I echoed, not looking at him.

He sat beside me, our shoulders brushing, waiting, letting me come to him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, steeling myself. Then I said the words that were tearing me apart.

“I have to do this alone, Cyclone.”

He went still.

“I have to finish it,” she pressed on, feeling the words scrape her throat raw. “The senator... what he did to my family... it’s my burden. It’s my fight. I can’t drag you into it.”

Finally, I dared a glance at him.

Cyclone’s jaw was tight, his eyes dark and unreadable. He set the rag aside slowly, like a man reining in something dangerous.

When he spoke, his voice was low and sure, cutting straight through the walls I was trying to build.

“You don’t get to shut me out, sunshine,” he said, looking me in the eye. “Not after everything. Not after last night. Not ever.”



My throat burned.

“I don’t want you getting hurt because of me,” I whispered. “I can’t lose someone else. I won’t survive it.”

Cyclone leaned closer, his voice rough velvet now.

“You won’t lose me. You won’t. You hear me?”

I blinked fast, fighting the sting of tears.

“I have a plan,” I said shakily. “I’m going to draw him out. Bait him. Force him to make a move. But it’s risky. It’s dangerous. And I have to be the one to do it.”

Cyclone searched my face for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

“Fine,” he said, surprising me. “You want to run into the fire, Jude? You do it.”

My chest tightened painfully.

“But you’re not running into it alone,” he said, voice hardening. “You can be stubborn. You can be reckless. Hell, you can even hate me for it if you need to. But you’re not facing this without me watching your back.”

He stood, towering over me, fierce, beautiful, and immovable.

“You’re not alone anymore,” he said. “You never will be again.”

And then—because he knew I needed space to breathe—he stood, turned, and walked back inside, giving me the choice.

Leaving the door wide open behind him.

I sat there for a long time, shaking, tears slipping silently down my cheeks.

I had come to the desert to hide.

I had come here to die with my secrets. I was so stupid.

Instead, I had found a man who refused to let me drown.

A man who would fight for me even if I tried to fight alone.

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For the first time in years, I realized I didn't have to be a one-woman army anymore.

I still had a plan.

I still had to catch the senator.

But I wouldn't be facing him alone anymore.

I'd be facing him as someone who had something worth fighting for.

Someone worth living for.

20

Cyclone

The sun was high overhead when Jude rolled out the old blueprint map of the ranch onto the kitchen table. Dust motes floated in the air, sparkling like tiny stars as she leaned over it, her brow furrowed in concentration.

I stood in the doorway, arms crossed, watching her.

Not interfering.

Not stopping her.

But there.

Always there.

“This place,” Jude said, tapping the map, “was never just a getaway. It was a fallback.”

My eyes narrowed slightly.

“A fallback for what?”

“For this,” she said. “For taking him down. This was my husband's plan.”

She glanced up at me, her eyes hard, determined.

“I have files hidden here—documents, coded messages, bank accounts tied back to him. Enough to make him burn if it gets out.”

Cyclone’s respect for her deepened even further. She wasn’t just a survivor.

She was a fighter.

A damn warrior.

“I’m going to leak just enough,” Jude said, tracing a line from the house to an old storage shed marked on the map. “Make it look like I’ve got everything ready to hand over to the authorities.”

“And he’ll come for you,” I finished, my voice like gravel.

She nodded grimly.

“He’ll come himself. He’s too dirty to let it be handled by someone else. He’ll want

to shut me up permanently. I hope he comes himself.”

A muscle ticked in my jaw, but I kept my voice even.

“And what’s your plan when he does?”

“I’ll record everything,” she said. “I’ll get him confessing to the bombing. To everything. Then I’ll send it to every news outlet, every government agency, every watchdog group in the country. We have to make sure we get this news out there to everyone before the government tries to cover it up.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

She leaned on the table, breathing hard, her hands shaking slightly.

“I have to end this,” she whispered. “I have to finish it for my daughter. For my husband. For everyone, he’s hurt. I want to be free again. Free to walk where I want to walk. Free to go where I want to go. Without worrying about someone showing up and killing me and whoever is near me.”

I crossed the room silently and rested my hand over hers, steady, grounding.

“We’ll finish it,” I said.

Jude bit her lip, forcing herself not to lean into me, not to crumble.

“I need you to stay clear when it happens,” she said, hating herself for it. “If something goes wrong... I don’t want you getting hurt because of me.”

I smiled, slow and grim.

“You keep forgetting, sunshine.”

I squeezed her hand gently.

“You don’t get to shut me out.”

I stepped back, giving her a nod of respect that twisted something sharp and tender inside her chest.

“You plan your sting,” he said. “Do it your way.”

What Jude didn’t see—what she didn’t know—was that as soon as she turned back to the map, I slipped my phone from my pocket.

I stepped outside onto the porch, keeping my voice low as I made the call.

“Yeah,” he said into the phone.

“It’s Cyclone. I’m cashing in a favor.”

A beat of silence.

“You remember that senator we talked about back in Afghanistan?”

Another pause. A low curse from the man on the other end.

“Yeah,” I said, staring out at the horizon where the sky burned gold. “It’s him.”

Another question crackled through the line.

My mouth twisted into a hard, humorless smile.

“No. I’m not asking you to take him down for me.”

I glanced over my shoulder, toward the woman still bent over the map inside.

“I’m asking you to make damn sure she survives when she does it herself. Talk to the Golden Team, it’s about time you joined us anyway. I’ll talk to you soon, Lieutenant.”

## Cyclone

The desert held its breath.

Days passed in a strange, suspended haze—too quiet, too still.

Jude felt it like a pressure behind her ribs, a constant, vibrating warning that the noose was tightening.



## Page 38

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

She spent the mornings finalizing the bait—anonymous emails sent to carefully selected media outlets and encrypted messages left in places she knew the senator's men monitored.

I have proof.

I'm ready to talk.

Come and get me.

Simple. Blunt. Unmistakable.

By the third day, the signs started showing.

A black SUV was parked two miles down the dirt road.

Drones buzzing faintly overhead.

Cell service flickering on and off like a dying lightbulb.

I noticed all of it.

Every muscle in my body was coiled tight, my instincts screaming at me to grab Jude and get the hell out of there.

But I stayed patient.

Silent.

Invisible.

Because this was her fight.

And because backup was already in place.

They weren't wearing uniforms.

They didn't flash badges.

But the former Special Forces team he called in moved through the desert like ghosts, hidden eyes on every ridge, silent rifles trained on every approach. I brought in other Special Forces, not just the Golden Team.

I trusted them.

Trusted that when the hammer dropped, they'd be there. Still, it was killing him not to take over the planning.

Watching Jude walk around the ranch like she was already preparing to die.

Watching the determination in her eyes war with the fear she thought she was hiding.

Watching the woman I was falling in love with stand alone against a monster.

At night, when the house fell silent and the stars burned overhead, Jude would sit on the porch with her knees pulled to her chest, staring into the darkness.

And I would sit next to her, pretending I wasn't memorizing every line of her face.

Pretending I wasn't praying for just one more day.

One more hour.

Five nights later, Jude found him by the fence, inspecting one of the motion sensor alarms he'd rigged with fishing line and old cans.

"You're not sleeping," she said quietly.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

He shrugged, not looking at her.

“Neither are you.”

Jude wrapped her arms around herself, staring out at the dark expanse.

“It’s getting close,” she whispered. “I can feel it.”

I finally turned, stepping close enough that she had to tilt her head back to meet my eyes.

“Whatever happens,” he said low, “you’re not alone. Remember that, sunshine.”

She opened her mouth to argue. Closed it again when she saw the look in his eyes.

He wasn’t asking for permission. He was telling her a fact.

Jude’s throat burned. She nodded stiffly.

And I, because I knew if I touched her now, I wouldn’t be able to stop, I turned and walked back toward the house without another word.

Jude stood there for a long time, heart pounding like a drum in her ears.

The clock was ticking.

The enemy was coming.

And for the first time in a long time... she wasn't running away.

She was running toward it. She worked six years trying to take him down, now was the time.

And she wasn't doing it alone.

22

Jude

The sky burned copper and crimson as the sun sank below the desert horizon.

I stood alone at the edge of the old corral, staring out over the cracked earth.

I held a small, worn photograph in my hand—the only one I had in my bag after the bombing. I used to think I had no right to laugh, because I was alive and they were dead. I took it with me everywhere.

My husband's easy grin. My daughter's wild, carefree laugh frozen forever in the frame.

Two lives stolen.

A future erased.

She traced their faces with her thumb, her chest tightening so hard it hurt to breathe.

"I'm going to end this," she whispered to the photo.

"I swear to you, I'm going to make him pay."

The wind stirred my hair, carrying the scent of dry sage and dust.

It almost felt like they were answering her—like they were still here somehow, watching.

Tears blurred my vision, but I didn't wipe them away.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

Not this time.

I let them fall.

Let myself feel it.

All the grief.

All the rage.

All the love that never died.

When I finally tucked the photograph safely back into my pocket, I felt lighter somehow—not whole, but stronger.

I turned back toward the house, my heart pounding harder with every step.

The time for mourning was over.

The time for fighting had come.

I watched her through the cracked screen door, my hands fisted tight at my sides.

I saw the way she moved now, not like a woman broken, but like a woman forged in fire.

I had never loved anything more in my life.

And I knew—no matter what happened tonight—I would never let her walk away again.

My team checked in silently over the encrypted line. Faron, Lieutenant Carter Robinson, Lyon, Tag, and Oliver were with them.

Positions ready.

Guns loaded.

Eyes on every approach.

I acknowledged them with a single nod.

Then I turned and opened the door for her.

Jude stepped inside, the sunset painting her hair gold, her face set with fierce determination. She was beautiful, and she's mine. I would kill anyone who tried to take her from me.

Our eyes locked.

No words needed.

They were ready.

Together.

It was midnight.

The first sign was the shimmer of headlights far off across the desert, masked by the



low ridges and dust.

I watched from the darkened living room, crouched behind the window, heart hammering.

Cyclone crouched beside me, his body a wall of heat and silent strength.

In the distance, I saw dark figures slipping from vehicles—too many for a simple “message.”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

No negotiation tonight.

They were coming to kill me.

My hand clenched around the small recorder in my pocket. Would I get close enough for him to spill his guts? I doubted it, but I had the recorder anyway.

This was it.

Everything I'd lived for the last six years.

Everything I was willing to die for. I glanced at Cyclone; I was no longer ready to die for anything except him. I would die for him.

And out there in the darkness... the storm I had been waiting for finally broke.

23

Jude

The first shot shattered the night like a gunshot from God.

I ducked instinctively, adrenaline surging like lightning through my veins.

Cyclone was already moving—grabbing me by the waist, hauling me behind the heavy oak table they'd dragged into place earlier for cover.

More gunfire lit up the darkness outside.

Crack—crack—crack—

Short, controlled bursts.

Not amateurs.

Killers.

Just like she expected.

I pulled the recorder from my pocket, my hands trembling only slightly now. I shoved it deep into the hidden panel Cyclone had cut into the floorboards, snapping it shut just as more bullets punched through the walls.

“We stick to the plan!” she shouted over the chaos.

“Stick to the plan!”

Cyclone just nodded once, fierce and calm. His pistol was already in his hand, his eyes scanning the windows, the doors, and the shadows beyond.

Outside, I could hear the sharp, deadly return fire of Cyclone’s backup team.

Short bursts. Silent movements.

Ghosts in the desert.

She didn’t know some of their names. She hoped they didn’t get shot.

All she needed to know was that they were here because Cyclone had made damn sure she wouldn't fight this battle alone.

Another window shattered.

Boots pounded against the porch.

"They're coming!" she whispered.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

Cyclone grabbed her face, forcing her to look at him. His thumb brushed across her cheekbone in a flash of tenderness that burned hotter than the gunfire.

“Stay low. Stay smart. Stay alive,” he said roughly. “I’ll be right back.”

Then he was gone, vanishing into the shadows like a storm himself.

I was tucked in behind the broken table, heart hammering as the door burst inward.

Three men in tactical black stormed inside, rifles raised.

For one heartbeat, I froze.

Then instincts born from grief and fire kicked in.

I yanked the spare revolver from my waistband and squeezed off two quick shots.

One man dropped—the other two dove for cover.

Gunfire exploded through the room, splinters of wood and drywall raining down around me.

A shadow moved to my right—too fast—too close—

I twisted, firing blind.

The man grunted and fell hard at my feet.

I was moving before I could think, crawling low, weaving through the wreckage of the living room.

Another figure rose in the doorway, rifle trained on her.

I braced for the shot—

And then Cyclone was there.

He crashed into the man with the full brutal force of a battering ram, slamming him against the wall. The rifle clattered to the floor.

Cyclone didn't hesitate.

One punch.

Two.

The man sagged to the ground, unconscious. Cyclone pushed on his neck, and he stopped breathing.

Cyclone whirled, grabbed Jude's hand, and yanked her to her feet.

"You good?" he barked.

"Yeah," I gasped, adrenaline burning through my bloodstream. "You?"

He flashed a quick, savage grin.

"Better now."

Gunfire outside thickened—closer.

“They’re pushing up!” one of Cyclone’s team shouted over the radio. “Heavy weapons incoming!”

“Basement!” Cyclone snapped to Jude. “Go!”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

She hesitated, just for a second.

“I’m not leaving you,” she said, voice shaking with everything she couldn’t say.

“I’m right behind you,” he promised. “Go!”

I ran down the hall, through the kitchen, and into the hidden trapdoor leading to the old storm shelter.

I barely made it down the steps when the house shuddered under an explosion—one of the SUVs blowing apart in a fireball of heat and smoke.

The walls trembled. Dust rained from the rafters.

Gunfire, shouts, and the low, heavy rumble of the weapons firing down on us.

I crouched at the base of the stairs, breathing hard, listening.

Another explosion.

Closer.

Then—Footsteps.

Light.

And Cyclone’s face—bloody, bruised, alive—appeared at the top of the stairs.



He stumbled down to me, grabbed my face again, and kissed me hard, which nearly knocked me backward.

“We’re clear,” he rasped against her skin. “We’ve got ‘em.”

She stared up at him, dizzy with relief, fear, and something too big to name.

“You’re sure?” she whispered.

He smiled. Soft. Fierce. Certain.

“They’re not getting near you again. Not while I’m breathing.”

And somewhere outside, as the gunfire faded and the backup team moved in to clean up, the senator’s empire—the lies, the blood, the power—began to crumble.

Because of her. Because of them. Because no matter how broken the world had made them, they were stronger. Together.

24

Jude

The cleanup took less than a day.

We have so much proof. Cyclone set up cameras to catch everything.

The government's men were efficient, erasing every trace of the gunfight like ghosts.

The senator’s hired killers—what was left of them—were handed over to federal agents who arrived in the dead of night, silent and grim. CIA agents and the FBI all

knew me.

I stood outside the ranch house as the sun rose, the sky a soft, aching pink.

My hands were shoved into the pockets of my jeans, my heart hollow and full all at once.

It was over.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

The man who had destroyed my life was behind bars. I had my doubts he would last a week in prison. The nightmare I had carried for so long was finally ending.

And now... There were things I needed to do.

Things I needed to bury. Things I needed to face alone.

Cyclone came up beside me, close enough to touch but not pushing, never pushing.

She turned to him, her chest tight. "I have to go home," she said quietly. "I have to... close the chapter. Visit their graves. Tell them it's over."

Cyclone's jaw tensed. He didn't say anything for a long moment.

"You don't have to do it alone," he said finally, voice rough with everything he wasn't saying.

I smiled and made a soft, broken sound. "I do."

I saw it—the war inside him. The part of him that wanted to fight me. The part that wanted to protect me. The part that just wanted me.

But Cyclone wasn't the kind of man who loved halfway. He loved her enough to let her go if she needed it.

He nodded, the motion sharp and painful. "I'll head back to California with my buddies," he said, his voice gruff.

My chest ached. I hadn't realized how much I had started counting on him being there—his steady presence, his quiet strength.

"I just need some time," she whispered. "I need to figure out who I am now... without the anger. Without the ghosts."

Cyclone stepped closer then, brushing a knuckle lightly down her cheek.

Not a kiss.

Not a demand.

Just a touch, like a promise.

"I'll give you time, sunshine," he said, voice low and sure. "But don't wait forever."

A tear slipped down my cheek before she could stop it.

He caught it with his thumb, his touch achingly tender.

"I'm not good at sitting still," he added, a faint, crooked smile teasing the corner of his mouth. "You know where to find me."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"I'll find you," I promised, my voice breaking.

And somehow, we both knew—It wasn't goodbye. Not really.

It was just goodbye for now.

Cyclone pressed a kiss to my lips, lingering there for a heartbeat that felt like forever.

Then he turned and walked away, his broad shoulders stiff, his hands fisted at his sides like a man walking into battle.

I watched until he climbed into the helicopter that came and picked them up.

Then I turned toward the horizon, my heart shattering and rebuilding all at once.

I had a promise to keep. A grave to visit. A life to reclaim.

And when I was ready...

I would find my way back to him.

25

Jude

The road home felt like a thousand miles long, even though the drive only took a couple of days.

Every curve, every worn-down sign, every mile marker whispered pieces of a life I hadn't touched in years. I tightened my hands on the steering wheel, the old pain sitting so heavy in my chest, it hurt to breathe.

I had to do this.

Not just for me — for them.

The town hadn't changed much. Same faded diner sign blinking "Open" in the window. The same brick fire station where parades started and ended. Same tired old oaks lining the streets, their heavy branches casting long, familiar shadows.

I parked a few houses down from where I lived, heart hammering so loud it drowned out the world.

For a moment, I couldn't move. I just sat there, staring at the house I lived in— the

home where I had been a wife, mother, and woman who believed she had forever.

It looked smaller now.

Emptier.

A heavy breath shook out of me as I grabbed the keys from my bag and stepped out into the crisp air.

As I walked to the front door, my boots crunched over the gravel driveway. My hand trembled when I slid the key into the lock, half-expecting it not to work for me — to push me away, like I'd done to everyone else.

But the door swung open on the first try.

And there it was.

Frozen in time.

The scent of old wood and a faint musky scent hung in the air, memories punching me so hard I staggered.

Her shoes.

Still lined up by the door.

His jacket.

Still hanging on the back of the chair.

Laughter. Life.

All of it buried under a thick layer of dust and silence.

I pressed my hand to the doorframe, needing the support.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into the empty house.

“I’m so damn sorry.”

Room by room, I moved through the wreckage of my old life, touching, remembering, aching.

The photo on the mantel of the three of us at the lake.



## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

The crayon drawings were still stuck to the fridge.

Remembering the smell of her shampoo, I thought I smelled it faintly upstairs, where I couldn't bring myself to go. Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

It's been a week, and I've spent hours packing things into boxes. Not everything — just the pieces I couldn't leave behind, the ones that mattered too much to surrender to time and dust.

Her favorite stuffed bear.

His old watch.

Our wedding album.

The sun was starting to sink low when I heard the crunch of tires on gravel.

I stiffened, panic shooting through me — until I glanced out the window and saw them.

My parents.

Their faces were tight with confusion, grief, and something worse — hope.

Hope that maybe I was finally coming home.

I stepped outside, hugging myself against the wind.

For a long moment, none of us spoke.

Then my mother broke, rushing to me with tears pouring down her cheeks.

I let her wrap me in her arms, let her sob against my shoulder, even as guilt sliced me raw.

My father hung back, eyes glassy.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out again. “I’m so sorry I stayed away. I thought I was protecting you.”

Their confusion deepened.

I looked at them — really looked — and knew they deserved to hear it all.

The truth.

The danger.

The reason why I had to disappear after my family was stolen from me.

The reason I could never stay.

“I wasn’t just grieving,” I said, voice trembling.

“I was being hunted.”

Shock rippled across their faces.

My mother pulled back just enough to search my eyes, her fingers trembling against my arms.

“Hunted?” she whispered. “Jude, what are you talking about?”

I swallowed hard, forcing down the wave of nausea that always came when I thought about it — about them — the monsters who tore my world apart.

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“I couldn't stay after...” My voice cracked. I took a shaky breath. “After Tyler and Callie were killed, it wasn't random. It wasn't just a car blowing up.

Their faces paled.

“They were killed because Tyler and I knew what was going on. Senator Marcus Vance thought he had killed both of us.

“No,” my Dad said fiercely, shaking his head. “No, Jude. Don't say that, it was not your fault.”

“It's the truth,” I said, my voice steady even as my soul fractured all over again. “I had gotten close to something... something bad. I didn't even know it at the time. But Tyler did. He tried to warn me. They died because of me. And Callie...

I couldn't finish. I didn't have the strength.

Tears blurred my vision. I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, fighting for air.

When I opened them again, my father stood right before me. His jaw was clenched so tight that a muscle ticked in his cheek. His hands—hands that had taught me how to ride a bike and how to bait a fishing hook—reached out and gripped my shoulders.

“You listen to me,” he said roughly.

“You are not to blame. You hear me, Jude? You did what you had to do.”

I nodded, even though I didn't believe it.

Even though I wasn't sure I ever could.

My Dad stepped forward. His voice was low and full of anger. "Who were they? Are they still out there?"

I hesitated. The answer was complicated.

Some were dead. Some were still shadows I couldn't reach. And some... some might never stop looking.

"They're not your problem," I said quietly. "They're mine. They always were."

"You should have come to us," my mother whispered, tears running down her cheeks.

"I know," I said, my heart breaking all over again. "I just couldn't risk it. Not after losing Tyler. Not after losing Callie. I couldn't lose anyone else."

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the empty street.

We all stood there for a moment, wrapped in grief, anger, and love so fierce it hurt.

"I'm going to sell the house," I said after a long silence.

They turned to me, surprise flickering in their eyes.

"I can't keep it. It's not a home anymore."

I paused, voice thick with tears.

“I need to say goodbye. I need to find a way to live again. Tyler and Callie would want that. They wouldn’t want me stuck here... trapped by what happened.”

My mother nodded through her tears.

My father squeezed my shoulders.

I finally let the tears fall freely, not hiding them this time.

Maybe for the first time in years, I didn’t feel completely alone.

And when I looked up at the darkening sky, I silently promised Tyler and Callie that I would keep living.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

It was time to close the chapter.

And maybe, it was time to start writing a new one.

The house was almost empty now.

Just a few boxes stacked by the door.

Just a few last ghosts clinging to the walls.

I stood in the center of the living room, holding the framed photo in my hands — the one of Tyler swinging Callie around in the backyard, both laughing so hard you could almost hear it when you looked at the picture.

I pressed the frame to my chest, squeezing my eyes shut. I have cried so much since I came here. I couldn't cry anymore.

"I'm sorry I left," I whispered, my voice breaking. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry."

A tear slid down my cheek.

"I never stopped loving you. And I never will."

The house creaked in the wind as if breathing one last time.

I carefully set the frame in the box marked "Keep" and looked around the room one

more time.

“I’m going to be okay,” I said aloud, forcing the words into the air, into the bones of this house that had held so much love and loss.

“I promise.”

I turned toward the door but stopped when my gaze caught on the kitchen table, the one where Tyler used to drink his coffee and where Lacey used to color with crayons, scattered everywhere. I walked into the kitchen and took her drawings from the fridge. I would frame them and hang them in my next kitchen.

I smiled through the ache, brushing my fingers lightly over the worn wood.

“Thank you,” I said softly.

“For every single moment.” With a final breath, I closed the door behind me.

I locked it and tucked the key into my pocket, not because I needed it anymore but because it was a piece of my old life I wasn’t ready to let go of completely.

As I walked to my truck, the first stars began to blink into the sky.

And somewhere deep inside me, past the wreckage, past the pain, a tiny spark of something new flickered to life.

Hope.

I slid into the driver’s seat, gripping the steering wheel.

A text lit up on my phone, waiting for me.



From Cyclone.

You don't have to do this alone.

I'm here whenever you're ready.

I stared at the screen, a tear slipping free.

Then I smiled a genuine, shaky, broken smile and started the engine.

It was time to go.

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

Wherever Cyclone was...is where I would be. That kind of thinking was starting to feel like home, too.

26

Jude

The highway stretched out before me, I crossed into California. Every mile felt lighter. Every breath came a little easier.

I was leaving the shadows behind.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I ran toward something instead of away.

Cyclone.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, my heart racing as I neared the coastal town where he lived — where he and his Team had built something solid. The Golden Team.

The scent of saltwater hit me long before I saw the ocean, and when I finally pulled onto the street lined with beach houses and palm trees, my heart just about beat out of my chest.

There it was.

Cyclone's house — perched at the edge of the sand, the windows glowing warm

against the early evening sky.

I parked across the street, hands shaking as I sat there for a moment, staring at the life he'd built. It's been three months since I last saw him. I was so nervous.

Was I crazy for coming here without calling him?

Maybe.

But something inside me knew if I waited and let fear creep back in, I might never be brave enough to take the next step.

So I grabbed my bag, slammed the truck door shut, and marched across the street before I could lose my nerve.

The front door was open, a screen door in its place, and from inside, I heard laughter — deep, familiar voices.

Cyclone wasn't alone.

I hesitated.

And then I heard him.

That low, warm voice I'd know anywhere, weaving through the others like a lifeline.

I pushed the screen door open and stepped inside, following the voices to the back of the house.

A half-dozen men lounged on the deck, eating barbeque and all looked up at me like I'd just dropped out of the sky.

But it was Cyclone's face that made me smile.

Shock.

Joy.

Something wild and unstoppable sparked in his eyes.

"Jude."

It was just my name, but it was everything.

Before I could take a breath, he was moving, crossing the deck in three long strides.

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And then I was in his arms, lifted clean off the ground as he swung me around like I weighed nothing at all.

I laughed — the sound strange and wonderful in my throat, and wrapped my arms around his neck, holding on like I never wanted to let go.

When he finally set me down, he kept his hands on my waist, like he needed to make sure I was real.

“Tell me I'm not dreaming,” he said, his voice rough.

“You're not dreaming,” I whispered, blinking back tears. “I'm here to stay.”

Someone cleared their throat behind us — a deep rumble of amusement — and Cyclone smiled, not letting me go as he turned us toward the others.

“Looks like you're about to meet the family,” he said, squeezing my waist.

His voice dropped low and teasing, just for me.

“Brace yourself.”

I laughed again, heart full for the first time in years.

One by one, they came forward — tall, rugged men with kind smiles and curious eyes — each offering a handshake, a hug, a welcome.

“You know most of these guys,” Cyclone said, nodding to a towering man with a crooked grin. This is Oliver, Gage, and Raven. You know the rest of them.”

I smiled at all of them. I was now in their family, a life I never thought I'd have again.

The last man, a quiet giant with dark eyes, clapped Cyclone on the back and gave me a knowing nod.

“It’s about time you showed up,” he said.

The others chuckled.

I flushed, smiling shyly.

“I had some things I needed to finish first,” I said.

Cyclone's hand slid up my back, steady and warm.

“Well, you’re here now,” he said, voice thick with emotion.

“And I’m not letting you go.”

I leaned into him, breathing in the scent of salt and sun and Cyclone, and for the first time in a long, long time...

I believed him.

I wasn’t alone anymore.

I was home.

Jude

“So, Jude,” Oliver said, a sly grin tugging at his mouth. “You’re the woman who finally got our boy here to stop pretending he’s married to the job.”

The others chuckled.

Cyclone groaned and rubbed his hands over his face.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:15 am*

“She’s been here thirty minutes, and you’re already trying to embarrass me.”

I smiled, feeling a warmth in my chest that had nothing to do with the fire.

“I’m just glad to be here,” I said honestly.

Well, we will see you around, Oliver said, and they all got up and started putting their paper plates in the garbage.

“You don’t have to rush off because I’m here,” I said, hoping they would leave anyway.

Cyclone leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to my temple.

“You’re safe now,” he whispered.

And for the first time in a long time, I believed him.

I let myself relax, sinking deeper into the warmth of the fire, the laughter, the feeling of belonging, as the guys headed out.

For a long time, Cyclone and I just sat there. Peace washed over me. I told him everything I had done since I last saw him.

The ocean kept whispering, the fire kept burning, and for the first time in what felt like a lifetime...



I let myself dream about a future that didn't hurt to imagine.

Maybe healing didn't come all at once.

Maybe it came in small moments like this.

A touch.

A laugh.

A home you didn't know you were missing until you walked through the door.

I leaned against Cyclone's shoulder and closed my eyes, breathing him in.

Yeah, I was finally home.

28

Jude

The night wrapped around us, quiet and full of something heavy and beautiful.

Cyclone shifted in his chair, turning to face me fully.

His hand brushed mine — a touch so light, it would've been easy to pretend it didn't happen.

But I didn't pull away.

"You okay?" he asked quietly, his voice rough around the edges.

Different from the easy, teasing tone he used with the guys.

This voice was just for me.

I nodded, staring into the dying fire.

“I think so,” I said honestly.

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“I didn’t know if I could do it... going back. Saying goodbye.”

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

“But I did. I closed that chapter in my life. They will forever be in my heart, but I’m okay.”

Cyclone's hand found mine again, firmer this time, his thumb stroking slowly over my knuckles.

“You didn’t just do it, Jude,” he said, voice low and sure.

“You survived it. You faced it head-on. You’re stronger than you think.”

I blinked fast, looking up at him.

The firelight made his eyes look darker, softer, full of something I wasn’t sure I deserved.

“I don't feel strong,” I whispered.

“I feel like I’m barely holding it together.”

His fingers tightened around mine.

“You don’t have to hold it together with me.”

He leaned closer, his forehead almost touching mine.

“You don’t have to be anything but exactly who you are.”

Something inside me cracked open, raw and aching.

For so long, I’d worn armor over my heart and soul.

But with Cyclone... it just didn’t have to.

“Cyclone,” I breathed, the weight of his name too much and not enough.

I didn’t have the words for what I needed.

But somehow, he knew.

He cupped my face with both hands, tilting my chin until I looked right at him. Let’s make love. I’ve missed you so much,” he said hoarsely.

“Tell me, if you want me to stop.”

I shook my head, a tear slipping free.

“I don’t want you to stop.”

And just like that, he kissed me.

Slow.

Deep.

Full of everything he hadn't said and everything I hadn't dared to hope for.

I melted into him, gripping the front of his T-shirt like it was the only thing keeping me grounded.

The kiss deepened, his hands sliding into my hair, his touch reverent and desperate all at once. He picked me up and pulled me onto his lap, my legs went around him as I pushed myself close so I could feel his heat. His cock was hard I reached down and my hand felt it through his pants.

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Then I squeezed it. “I want to be naked with you. I want you to make love to me hard and fast, and I don’t want you to stop.”

Cyclone pulled my shirt over my head, and then my bra came off. His hands squeezed my breast, his mouth took turns sucking them. I cried out. “I want more,” I whispered. His mouth covered mine in a brutal kiss. That almost made me orgasm.

When we finally pulled apart, I was breathless.

Shaking.

Alive in a way I hadn’t been in years.

Cyclone pressed his forehead to mine, both of us breathing hard.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said fiercely.

“Not now. Not ever. You hear me?”

I nodded, my heart thudding so hard that it hurt.

“I hear you.”

And I let myself believe it for the first time in six years.

Cyclone kissed me again, softer this time, as if sealing a promise between us.

Then he stood. I wrapped my legs around him as he walked inside and into his bedroom.

He pulled my leggings down and lay me back on the bed, as he kissed every inch of my body. I couldn't keep track of how many times I orgasmed that night. Or the next morning.

29

Jude

Two days later, I woke up tangled in Cyclone's sheets, the sound of the ocean drifting through the open window.

Sunlight warmed my skin, and I just lay there for a moment, smiling like some fool who couldn't believe her luck.

Cyclone was in the kitchen when I padded in barefoot, wearing only one of his old T-shirts.

He wore jeans, boots, and a gray T-shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders.

The second I saw the bag on the floor by the door, my heart sank.

He caught the look and crossed to me, tugging me gently against his chest.

"Just a short job, sunshine," he said against my hair. "Three days, tops."

I curled my fingers into his shirt.

"I know. I'm just not used to... this. To missing someone."

He pulled back just enough to look me in the eye, his hands cradling my face.

“You have no idea how much I'm gonna miss you, too,” he said, voice rough.

“But I'll be back before you know it.”

I nodded, even though my chest ached.

“I'll be fine,” I said, forcing a smile. “I'll find something to keep me busy.”



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He grinned, brushing his thumb along my jaw.

“You better. Otherwise, you're gonna drive yourself crazy worrying about me.”

I laughed, smacking his chest lightly.

“You’re not that special.”

He kissed me, slow and deep and lingering, before grabbing his bag and heading for the door.

Right before he stepped out, he turned back, his smile soft and full of something. “I love you, Jude.”

Simple. Raw. No fear.

“I’ll be home soon.”

And then he was gone.

The house felt too quiet after he left.

Too empty.

The ache of missing him settled deep and sharp.

I cleaned the kitchen.

Did laundry.

Organized the closet.

And still... the minutes crawled.

By the next morning, I knew I couldn't just sit here and wait for him to return.

I needed a life.

I needed purpose.

I remembered the card I tucked into the back pocket of my jeans — the one his friend Owen had handed me at the bonfire, almost like a joke.

“Call me if you get bored,” he’d said with a wink.

“We always need smart people around here.”

I had taken it out and put it in the dresser drawer that I claimed as mine. I found it and glanced at it. Owen Security & Investigations.

Private Investigators.

Surveillance. Protection.

It wasn't just busy work.

It was meaningful.

It was a way to take everything I'd lived through — everything I'd survived — and

use it for something good. Maybe I could help someone who needed me.

Before I could overthink it, I grabbed my phone and punched in the number.

It rang twice before someone answered.

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“Owen here,” came a deep, amused voice.

I swallowed hard.

“Hey. It’s Jude. You said you might have some work for me?”

There was a pause — then a warm chuckle.

“I knew you would call.”

Another pause.

“Come in tomorrow morning. We’ll find a place for you.”

I grinned for the first time all day.

I was starting over, and a new job was next on my list. Thank the Lord I didn’t have to stay at home. I would go crazy if I stayed home all the time.

I was building something new.

And when Cyclone came home, I wanted him to see that I was starting my new life with him, and that meant having a new job.

I wanted him to know that the woman he loved wasn’t broken anymore.

She was just getting started.

Jude

The building didn't look like much from the outside.

Just a long, low structure tucked between a surf shop and a motorcycle garage, the windows shaded, no obvious signs that screamed "Private Investigator's Office" to the world.

I kind of loved that.

It felt... safe.

Hidden, just like I used to be.

I wiped my palms on my jeans and pushed through the door.

Inside, it was all polished wood floors, black leather couches, and a massive desk that looked like it had seen its fair share of heated conversations.

The walls were covered in framed photos — old missions, news articles, commendations.

It smelled like coffee and something faintly metallic — gun oil, maybe.

It smelled like purpose.

"Well, look who showed up," a voice called from behind the desk.

I turned to see Owen— tall, muscled, tattooed — grinning like he'd been expecting

me all along. Even before I called him.

He tossed a file onto the desk and motioned me forward.

“Ready for your first test?”

I lifted my chin.

“Yep.”

He laughed and nodded toward the chairs across from his desk.

“Sit.”

I did, crossing my legs, heart hammering a little harder than I wanted to admit. It felt good to be doing something.

“This,” he said, tapping the file, “is a real case. Small potatoes, but still important. The local business owner thinks his employee is stealing inventory. Wants proof before he fires him.”

He slid the file toward me.

“Your job? Find out if the kid’s stealing.”

I opened the folder, scanning the notes.

Employee name, address, schedule, basic background.

No police record. No obvious red flags.

“Not exactly James Bond stuff” Owen said, smirking.

I smiled back, feeling a spark of confidence.

“Good. I'd hate to have to shoot anyone on my first day.”

He laughed again, loud and genuine.

"You'll do fine, after all, you were a CIA agent."

Then his face sobered.

“But seriously, Jude — you see something shady, you don't go charging in solo. You call us. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Good,” Owen said, standing.

“Go home, read the file. Tomorrow you'll start shadowing. You'll follow him, take notes, and report back. And Jude?”

He leaned on the desk, lowering his voice.

“I meant what I said. You don't take chances with your life.”

I nodded.

As I walked back out into the sunshine, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

Cyclone.

Miss you like hell already.

Be good. Don't let Owen recruit you for anything crazy. ;)



I smiled so big my cheeks hurt. Owen must have sent Cyclone a text that I would be here this morning.

God, I missed him, too.

Miss you more. I texted back. Come home safe.

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I tucked the phone into my bag, and headed for my truck, the file folder tucked tight against my chest.

New job.

New beginning.

New life.

And for the first time in forever, I wasn't scared.

I was ready.

31

Jude

The next morning, I pulled into the tiny strip mall parking lot and cut the engine, heart hammering in my chest.

Across the lot, nestled between a tanning salon and a pizza place, was the store I was supposed to watch — a sporting goods place called “Canyon Outfitters.”

According to the text Owen sent me five minutes ago, my target—an employee named Austin Price—had just clocked in.

Now it was my turn.

First surveillance assignment.

No pressure.

I slouched down in the seat of my truck, pretending to scroll my phone like I wasn't a complete amateur about to blow my cover.

The plan was simple: watch Austin, see if he slipped any merchandise into his backpack at the end of his shift, and follow him home if needed.

Simple.

Right?

Right.

Thirty minutes in, my phone buzzed again.

Another text from Owen.

I just drove by. You need to relax. You look like you're on a stakeout for the FBI. Smile or something.

I rolled my eyes and tried to adjust, pretending I was just some bored girlfriend waiting for her boyfriend to get off work.

When the front door swung open, I sat up straighter.

Austin.

Tall, wiry, baseball cap pulled low, backpack slung over one shoulder.

He wasn't headed home.

He was headed toward the back alley behind the shops.

Crap.

I fumbled for my phone, trying to open the camera app with sweaty fingers.

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The damn thing froze, the screen stuck between apps.

“Seriously?” I muttered, tapping it frantically.

Meanwhile, Austin disappeared around the corner.

Heart pounding, I grabbed my keys and slipped out of the truck, moving fast but casual, like I wasn’t totally tailing a suspected thief through a sketchy alley.

I rounded the corner just in time to see him handing a brand-new pair of hiking boots — still with the tags on — to a scruffy guy leaning against the dumpster.

The guy handed Austin some cash. Stupid kid.

They fist-bumped.

Transaction done.

I lifted my phone and finally snapped a few quick pictures.

Proof.

Clear as day.

Before they could spot me, I backed up, turned the corner, and practically sprinted back to my truck.

I slid behind the wheel,grinning at the same time, shaking my head. I hoped this wasn't the kind of work I would always get.

I pulled up Owen's number and shot him a text:

Got your proof. Clear hand-off in the alley behind Canyon Outfitters. Sending pics now.

I attached the photos and hit send, my heart pounding, still excited that I caught him on the first day. Now, I was ready for the next job.

Owen's reply came fast:

Welcome to the team. Come by the office later.

I laughed out loud, the sound bubbling up like champagne. It didn't take much to make me happy.

God, it felt good to be doing something that had nothing to do with running through a jungle.

To not just survive, but succeed at something.

As I pulled out of the lot, my phone buzzed again.

Cyclone this time.

Good morning, beautiful.

My heart melted right there in my chest.

I pulled over and texted back:

Miss you too.

I chuckled.

For once, the future didn't feel scary.

It felt wide open.

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And for the first time, I couldn't wait to see what came next.

32

Jude

When I walked into the office the next day, Owen handed me a small folder.

“First case officially closed.

And... if you're serious about sticking around, we could use someone with your instincts.

Permanent gig. Are you interested?”

I blinked, the weight of his offering hitting hard and fast.

A real job.

A real future.

A life that wasn't just surviving day to day.

“I'm interested,” I said, my voice steady.

“Very interested.”



He grinned, reaching out to shake my hand.

“Welcome to the team, Jude.”

The second our hands touched, the front door creaked open behind me.

I turned — and my heart stopped.

Cyclone.

Standing there in the doorway, duffel bag slung over one shoulder, that slow, crooked smile lighting up his whole face.

His eyes — God, those eyes — locked onto mine and didn’t let go.

“You finished early,” I breathed, already moving toward him.

He dropped the bag without looking away from me.

“Couldn’t stay away another minute.”

Before I could say anything else, he closed the distance and hauled me into his arms, lifting me clean off the floor like I weighed nothing, and kissing me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, burying my face against his shoulder, breathing him in — the leather, the sunshine, the scent that was just purehim.

Cyclone set me down but didn’t let me go, cupping my face in both hands.

“You okay?” he murmured, his forehead resting against mine.

“I’m good,” I whispered, heart pounding.

He kissed me — slow and deep, right there in the middle of the office, like we had all the time in the world.

Like nothing and no one else mattered.

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When we finally pulled apart, breathless and smiling like idiots, Owen cleared his throat loudly.

“You two wanna take that somewhere else?” he teased.

“Some of us are still single and bitter.”

The others laughed, and even I couldn’t help but grin.

But Cyclone just slipped his hand into mine, lacing our fingers together.

“Let him be bitter,” he said, his voice low and sure in my ear.

“I’ve got everything I need.”

And for the first time in a long, long time...

So did I.

33

Cyclone

By the time we returned to the house, the sun was slipping low over the ocean, painting the sky in streaks of pink and gold.

I should’ve been exhausted — I hadn’t slept much on the road, pushing harder and

faster just to get back to her — but the second Jude smiled at me, I felt like I could go another hundred miles.

I watched her kick off her shoes by the door and walk barefoot across the hardwood floor, her hair a wild mess from the ocean breeze.

Beautiful.

Strong.

Mine.

She headed into the kitchen, pulling two beers from the fridge without asking.

Already knowing what I'd want.

Like she'd been here forever.

Like she belonged.

She handed me one and snuggled up next to me on the couch.

“Tell me about the job,” she said, tilting her head, a small smile tugging at her mouth.

I leaned down and kissed her before answering.

“It was clean.

The family needed protection from a psycho ex-business partner. We arrested him as soon as we got all the evidence we needed.

She smiled, proud and fierce.

“You saved them.”

I shrugged, feeling the old, familiar weight settle on my shoulders.

“We did our job.

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But the whole time I was out there, all I could think about was getting back here.”

Back to her.

God, I loved her.

I loved every scar, every stubborn wall she tried to hide behind.

I loved how she smiled now; she was less cautious and more real.

I loved the way she fought for her own damn life, even when it would’ve been easier to give up.

“You tell me about your week, sunshine,” I said, pulling her across my lap.

She grinned, her whole face lighting up.

“I caught my first case,” she said proudly.

I set my beer down, and turned her to where her knees were on either side of me. I needed my hands free to touch her. I rested them on her thighs, feeling the heat of her skin under my palms.

“I never would have thought otherwise,” I said, voice low.

Her eyes softened, that vulnerable light flashing through them, the one she didn’t let many people see.

I kissed her forehead, then her temple, then the corner of her mouth.

“You know,” I murmured against her skin, “if you keep showing off like this, I'm gonna have to marry you just to keep you from getting hired away by someone else.”

She laughed — that beautiful, soft laugh that broke something wide open in my chest.

“Is that how it works?” she teased, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“You lock me down before the competition steals me?”

“Exactly.”

I kissed her again, longer this time, slower, savoring her.

“You're mine, Jude. Always will be.”

Her fingers threaded through my hair, tugging just enough to make me groan against her mouth.

I lifted her, carrying her toward the bedroom like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Because with her in my arms...

It was.

She didn't protest.

She just held onto me, smiling against my throat, her heartbeat pounding against mine.

When I laid her down on the bed, she looked up at me with so much trust, so much love shining in her eyes, it damn near leveled me.

We made love slow that night — no rush, no desperation.

Just touch and whispers and everything we hadn't said out loud yet.

Promises made skin to skin, heart to heart.



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Afterward, tangled together in the dark, I brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her forehead.

She was half-asleep, her body warm and soft against mine.

“I mean it, Jude,” I whispered against her skin.

“I’m gonna marry you someday. As soon as I know you’re ready, I will propose to you.”

She didn’t open her eyes.

She just smiled — a small, secret smile — and tucked herself even closer against me.

And I knew, deep in my bones, that someday wasn’t that far away.

34

Jude

The days that followed blurred into a kind of beautiful routine.

Early mornings with Cyclone, lazy coffee on the back deck, teasing texts while he worked with the Team, and I settled into my new job at Owen Security.

For once, my life wasn’t about survival.

It was about living.

Laughing.

Loving.

But peace, as I was learning, was fragile.

And it never lasted long.

It started on a Thursday.

Just an ordinary day — coffee run, a quick meeting with Owen about a new case, a walk along the beach during my lunch break.

The pier was quiet, and the spring tourists were still a few weeks away.

The breeze smelled like salt and sunscreen, and kids were laughing somewhere farther down the boardwalk.

I stood at the railing, sipping my coffee, letting the sun warm my face.

And then...

I felt it.

The prickle.

The unmistakable weight of being watched. I knew that feeling.

I turned slowly, scanning the crowds — tourists in sun hats, a guy selling T-shirts, a

couple walking a dog.

Normal.

Ordinary.

Safe.

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But my instincts didn't lie.

They never had.

Not when it mattered.

I caught the flash of him a second later — a man, tall, broad-shouldered, wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled low.

Too casual.

Too careful.

His body language screamed military or intel training.

He was watching me.

No doubt about it.

The coffee slipped from my fingers, splattering onto the wooden boards, but I barely noticed it.

My heart hammered against my ribs, my brain already cataloging details.

Height: six-two, maybe six-three.

Build: athletic.

Age: mid-thirties.

Weapon? Oh yeah, he definitely had a weapon or two.

I turned sharply and started walking, blending into a group of tourists heading toward the parking lot.

I didn't run.

Didn't draw attention.

I just moved fast and clean — muscle memory from years of training kicking in.

I glanced back once.

The man hadn't followed.

Not yet.

But I knew how this worked.

I knew the playbook.

Someone had found me.

Someone from the old life.

Someone who wasn't supposed to know I still existed.

By the time I reached my truck, my hands were shaking.

I slid behind the wheel, locked the doors, and started the engine with a hand that wasn't as steady as I wanted it to be.

I needed to tell Cyclone.

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I needed to tell Owen.

But first...

I needed to get off the street.

Fast.

As I peeled out of the parking lot, my mind raced ahead, calculating possibilities.

It could be nothing.

A mistake.

A lookalike.

But I knew better.

Nobody “accidentally” watches you like that.

Nobody “accidentally” tracks a ghost.

My past, the one I thought I had buried six feet under—had just come back to life.

And if I wasn’t careful, it was going to bury me for real this time.

Jude

By the time I pulled into the lot at The Golden Team offices, my heart was pounding so hard I could barely hear myself think.

I parked crooked, half on the line, but I didn't care.

I slammed the truck door and rushed toward the front entrance, punching in the security code with shaking fingers.

The second I stepped inside, River looked up from behind his desk.

One look at my face, and he was already pushing back his chair, standing.

“What happened?” he asked, voice low and serious.

Not a hint of teasing now.

“I need to talk to you,” I said, my voice tight. “Now.”

He nodded once, motioning me toward the small conference room off the main floor.

I moved quickly, barely noticing Sean and Gage in their office glance up from their desk, their easy smiles slipping into frowns as they followed us.

The second the door clicked shut behind us, River turned to me, arms crossed, face unreadable.

“Talk.”

I told him everything.



The man on the pier.

The way he watched me.

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The instincts that screamed it wasn't random.

When I finished, River was silent for a beat, his expression turning grimmer by the second.

"You sure?" he asked. "You sure it wasn't just a tourist with bad manners?"

"I'm sure," I said firmly.

"I know what a tail feels like. This wasn't some guy checking me out.

This was a pro."

River swore under his breath and scrubbed a hand down his face.

"You think it's CIA-related?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe Vance is reaching out behind those prison walls."

"But I disappeared, River. I disappeared for a reason.

If someone's found me now..."

I trailed off, swallowing hard.

"If they found me, they're not here for a reunion."

He stared at me a second longer, then pulled out his phone and hit a speed dial.

It barely rang once before the other side picked up.

“Cyclone,” River said, his voice clipped.

“You need to get to the office. Now.

It's Jude.”

He hung up without waiting for a response.

I sucked in a breath, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

“I didn’t want to pull him into this.”

River gave me a look.

“Tough. You’re his life now. You think he’s gonna sit this one out?”

I didn’t answer.

Because deep down, I knew he was right. I just wanted to keep him safe.

Less than ten minutes later, the front door slammed open so hard it rattled the windows.

Cyclone stormed in, wild-eyed, scanning the room until he found me.

He crossed the floor in three long strides, grabbing my face between his hands, searching me like he thought I might disappear.

“You hurt?” he rasped, his voice breaking.

“No,” I whispered, heart twisting at the raw panic in his eyes.

“I’m okay.”

He pulled me into his chest, holding me so tight I could barely breathe — and I didn’t care.

I needed it.

Needed him.

“What happened?” he demanded, not letting go.

I told him everything again, my voice steadier this time, feeding off his strength.

When I finished, Cyclone turned to River.

We will call in the Golden Team. They’ve been through this and know who we’re dealing with. We won’t call the police; we can handle this alone.

River’s face was hard as stone.

“We need to start digging.

We’ll check the cameras near the pier.

We’ll keep an eye on her.

And if anyone even looks at her wrong...

He didn't finish the sentence.

He didn't have to.

Cyclone pressed a kiss to my hair, his voice so low only I could hear it.

"I'm not losing you, Jude. Not now. Not ever."

And for the first time since I spotted that man on the pier, I believed it.

I wasn't running anymore.

I wasn't alone anymore.

And if my past thought it could come for me again...It was about to find out just how wrong it was.

36

Cyclone

I didn't let go of her hand.

Up three flights of stairs to the office. One hand steady on her lower back, the other ready to catch her if she so much as stumbled.

Jude didn't stumble.

She didn't say a word either.

She was composed—too composed—that terrifying stillness that comes from

training, not peace. I could feel the tension rolling off her in waves, vibrating through her skin.

We walked into the surveillance room. Sean already had footage pulled up from the pier. Oliver was working another screen, tapping keys like it was just another Thursday.

But this wasn't just another day.

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This was my girl being hunted.

River tossed a rough sketch onto the table. “Ball cap. Shades. Built like he knows how to kill someone with a pen.”

I barely glanced at it. “Doesn’t matter. He’s already dead.”

Jude stood beside me, arms folded tight, jaw clenched. I wanted to pull her in and hold her again, but I knew she needed space right now—space to track, calculate, and not fall apart.

And then Sean froze the feed. “There,” he muttered. “Is that him?”

Jude leaned in. “Yes.”

Even grainy and distant, the guy radiated wrong. The way his body angled, ready to move. The way he never looked straight at her, but always watched.

He’s a hunter.

No doubt about it.

Jude shifted closer to me. I wrapped my arm around her, anchoring her to my side. Her body eased just slightly into mine. That tiny moment of surrender gutted me.

Then Sean zoomed in.



A tattoo. Black ink. Barely visible beneath the edge of the guy's sleeve.

Coordinates.

Jude gasped. "I know that mark," she whispered, stepping forward and planting her hands on the desk like it was the only thing holding her up.

Her voice went rough. "They were burned into a wall in a ghost site. Syria. It was off-books. Deep black."

I didn't give a damn about black sites. I cared about the tremor in Jude's voice.

I stepped in behind her, placing my hands gently over hers. "Hey," I said, low and steady. "Look at me."

She did.

And I saw it—the fear she never let anyone see.

"This guy's not just following you," I said. "He's tracking you. Deliberate. Strategic. He's not curious. He's coming for something."

Her throat worked like she was trying to swallow back everything at once. "He's part of something I ran from, Cyclone. I thought I buried it. Burned it down."

My grip on her tightened. "Then we dig it up and finish it right."

"I don't want to drag you into this," she whispered.

I leaned closer, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. "You're not dragging me. I live here now. Right beside you," I said, touching her heart.

She let out a shaky breath and finally leaned back into me.

And in that moment, I knew one thing for certain.

No matter what shadow crawled out of her past—

It was going to have to go through me to touch her.

We stayed like that for a beat—her back against my chest, my arms around her, the rest of the world muted beneath the thrum of fear and fury.

Then River cleared his throat quietly. “We’ll keep digging. Jude, if you remember anything else—any detail, even small—tell us. We’ll track him.”

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I nodded once. “I’m taking her home.”

Jude hesitated, her body going tense again. “Shouldn’t I stay? Help—”

“No,” I cut in gently, brushing a hand down her arm. “You’ve done enough. You’re not a target. You’re a person. My person. You don’t have to be in mission mode right now.”

She looked up at me, her eyes glassy but fierce. “What if I don’t know how to be anything else?”

I cupped her cheek. “Then we figure it out. Together.”

Sean, surprisingly, offered a quiet nod. “We’ll handle the tech side. You go two can go home and relax.”

Jude didn’t speak, but when I led her toward the door, she followed. Her fingers curled into mine like they were made to fit.

Downstairs, I unlocked my truck and opened the passenger door for her. She slid in, staring out the window as I rounded the hood and climbed behind the wheel.

The silence between us wasn’t awkward.

It was heavy.

Full of memories I didn’t know yet, and battles she’d fought alone.

I waited until we were almost home before speaking again.

“You know I’ll kill anyone who tries to harm you?”

She turned toward me slowly. “I don’t want you to have to.”

“But I will,” I said simply. “If it comes to that.”

A breath caught in her throat. “I spent years learning how to disappear, Cyclone. How to hide everything. Who I was. What I saw. What I did. But with you... I don’t want to hide anymore.”

My home wasn’t far from the office. Along Highway One, on the beach.

I reached across the seat, threading my fingers through hers.

“Then don’t,” I said. “You don’t have to hide from me.”

Her grip tightened.

And for the first time since she walked through the office door—heart pounding, eyes wide—I felt her exhale.

Not just a breath.

A surrender.

Not to fear.

To me.

By the time we pulled up to the house, the sky was streaked with orange and gray. A storm building on the horizon, and something darker still crawling under my skin.

I killed the engine and turned to her.

She didn't move.

Didn't speak.

Just stared at the dashboard like she was still stuck in the past.

“Jude.”

Her name broke the silence.

She blinked slowly, then turned to face me, her expression unreadable. But her eyes—God, her eyes—were full of things she wasn’t ready to say.

“Come on,” I said gently, reaching for her hand.

She let me pull her from the truck and lead her inside.

I didn’t turn on the lights.

Didn’t need to.

The house glowed softly from the dim light leaking through the windows, wrapping us in shadows and quiet.

She kicked off her boots by the door without a word. Shrugged off her jacket and dropped it on the bench.

I watched her every move.

Not because I didn’t trust the silence.

But because I did.

She walked into the living room, paused at the edge of the couch, then turned back to me.

“Everything feels like it’s spinning,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Like if I let go for even a second, I’ll fall apart.”

I stepped closer, slow and steady.

“You’re allowed to fall apart,” I murmured, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. “You’ve been holding everything together for too long.”

Her jaw trembled. “What if I don’t know how to come back from it?”

“Then I’ll be there to put you back together.”

She sucked in a shaky breath. “You can’t fix me, Cyclone.”

“I’m not trying to,” I said. “I’m just not going to leave you alone with the pieces.”

That broke something in her.

She stepped into me, and I caught her. Her arms wrapped around my waist, her face buried in my chest.

I held her tight.

No words.

No promises.

Just presence.

She pulled back a moment later, her fingers curling into the hem of my shirt.

“I don’t want to feel scared right now,” she said, her voice low and raw. “I want to feel something else. Something that’s mine. Not his. Not theirs.”

I didn’t answer.

Just lifted her chin and kissed her.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Slow. Deep. Anchoring.

She kissed me back like she was drowning—and I was air.

I walked her backward toward the bedroom, never breaking contact. Her hands fisted the back of my shirt, and mine roamed over her back and sides, memorizing every inch.

When we hit the edge of the bed, I pulled back just enough to look at her.

“You sure?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “With you? Always.”

I slid my hands beneath her shirt, lifting it slowly, reverently. Like a man unwrapping something sacred.

Because she was.

When I laid her back against the sheets, she didn’t look afraid.

She looked like a woman claiming something that had once been stolen.

And I’d spend the rest of my life making sure she never lost it again.

Cyclone

The first thing I felt was her.

Soft, warm, and tangled up in me like we'd been made to sleep this way forever.

Jude lay with her back against my chest, her legs woven between mine, one hand resting over the pulse in my wrist like she needed to make sure I hadn't disappeared.

I stayed still, not wanting to break the moment.

Outside, the sky was pale gray. Gentle, steady rain tapped against the window. The storm had come and gone sometime during the night, but the air still felt heavy with something unfinished.

I didn't care.

Not yet.

Not while I had her here.

Her breathing was even, but I felt the shift in her body when she woke. There was just the tiniest hitch of breath, a slow blink, and her fingers tightened slightly over mine.

She didn't move right away.

Neither did I.

Then, after a few long seconds, she whispered, "You're still here."

“Yeah,” I said softly against her shoulder. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A pause.

Then, a breath of a laugh. “I half-expected to wake up and find it was all a dream that I imagined you. That I imagined peace.”

My chest ached.

I slid my hand up, brushing my thumb gently over the inside of her arm. “It’s real, Jude. I’m real. This is real. No one will ever take this away. I love you, and I will always love you.”

## Page 71

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

She rolled to face me, her hair a mess, eyes still shadowed with everything she hadn't said yet.

"I don't know how to do this," she admitted. "I haven't been with anyone since my Tyler."

"Do what?"

"Wake up next to someone and not immediately start building walls. Not to calculate escape routes. Not brace for the worst. I love you, but will my past always be in our way?"

I tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Then don't try to do it all at once. Just start here. With me. Right now."

Her eyes searched mine. "I meant what I said last night. I don't want to be afraid anymore."

"Then you won't be," I told her. "Not while I'm breathing."

She smiled, small but real. "That's a big promise."

"It's not a promise," I said, leaning in to kiss the corner of her mouth. "It's a fact."

She let out a shaky breath and nestled closer, her head resting under my chin.

And for a while, we just stayed like that.

Wrapped in silence.

Wrapped in each other.

The outside world would come soon enough, with answers, threats, maybe worse.

But in this bed, in this moment, Jude wasn't a ghost from the CIA or a woman on the run.

She was mine.

We were still tangled in each other when the knock came.

Three sharp raps on the front door.

Not urgent. But not casual either.

Jude stiffened in my arms.

She didn't speak.

She didn't have to.

I felt it in the way her breath caught. The way her body went still, like she was bracing for something she couldn't name.

"It's okay," I murmured, already sliding out of bed. "I'll get it."

She sat up slowly, wrapping the sheet around her like armor.

I grabbed a T-shirt off the floor, yanked it on, and crossed the room in three long

strides. One quick glance out the front window told me what I needed to know.

River.

I cracked the door open. “This better be good.”

He held up both hands. “Sorry to drop in, but... we’ve got something.”

My gut tightened. “Bad?”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

River's mouth flattened. "We found another sighting. A different camera feed. Not from the pier. From last week."

Behind me, I heard Jude's footsteps approach. She stood beside me in my shirt, eyes sharp despite the haze of sleep.

"Where?" she asked.

River met her gaze. "At a gas station off Highway 74. A car matching the description of one tied to your old ghost site pulled in. Same guy behind the wheel. He didn't go inside. Just sat. Waited. Watching the pumps. Like he was expecting someone."

Jude's expression darkened. "That's how they operated. Intercepts. Extraction points."

I stepped in. "So what—you think he was here before she saw him?"

River nodded once. "And it gets better. Oliver ran the plates. They're fake—but the shell company the car was rented under? It links back to one of the CIA's oldest cover firms. One they shut down three years ago."

I felt Jude's breath hitch beside me.

River hesitated. "You were never just collateral damage, were you?"

She didn't answer right away.

Then, quietly: “No. I was the mission.”

The silence after that was thick.

I reached for her hand, grounding her. “What’s our next move?”

River looked between us, jaw clenched. “We find out what he wants. And we get to him before he gets to her.”

Jude’s grip on my hand tightened.

And just like that, the quiet was over.

38

Cyclone

I barely remembered closing the front door.

One second River was gone, the next I was pacing the living room like a caged animal, my mind running hotter than it had in years.

A ghost op.

Targeting Jude.

Sitting out there in a car, waiting like it was nothing.

No plan yet. No demand.

Just watching.



Hunting.

She stood near the fireplace, silent, arms crossed, wrapped in my shirt. But her jaw was locked, her shoulders tight. She was thinking, calculating. Already halfway back in the field.

I didn't want her there.

Not anymore.

I stopped in front of her and cupped her cheek. "You're staying here. With River or someone I trust."

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t start.”

“I’m not asking,” I said. “You saw what he is. I know what he is.”

“So do I,” she snapped. “That’s the point. I know how they move. I know how they think. You go in blind, and you’re dead before you open your mouth.”

“Then give me the intel,” I said, lowering my voice. “Give me everything. Every location. Every contact. Every pattern. And then let me go after him.”

“I’m not some asset that needs protecting, Cyclone.”

“No,” I said softly. “You’re not. You’re the only thing in this whole damn world I can’t lose.”

She froze.

I hadn’t meant to say it like that. Not yet. Not when everything was coming undone.

But hell if I was going to take it back.

“You’ve been surviving alone for too long,” I said. “But this—this—you don’t have to do alone anymore.”

Her throat bobbed. Her fingers dug into the hem of the shirt like she needed something to hold onto.

After a beat, she nodded once.

Not a surrender.

A trust fall.

“I’ll tell you everything,” she whispered. “But if something goes wrong—if you get hurt—”

“Then you come drag my ass out,” I said, brushing a kiss across her forehead. “Just like I’d do for you.”

She gave me a watery smile. “Deal.”

I exhaled, finally letting the mission mode click in behind my ribs.

This wasn’t just a recon op.

This was personal.

Whoever that bastard was out there, whatever he thought he could pull—

He had no idea what was coming for him.

39

Cyclone

The conference room at Golden HQ wasn’t fancy.

Just ten chairs, a long table, a pot of burned coffee, and enough history between the

men inside to level a country.

I stood at the head of the table. River, Gage, Sean, Tag, Gideon, and Oliver sat around it, watching me with the kind of focus we usually saved for warzones.

Because that's what this was now.

A war.

And it had Jude's name on it.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

I dropped a map and a printout of the fake plate Oliver had traced on the table, then flicked the projector on.

“Target was spotted last week at a gas station near Highway 74,” I said. “Same guy Jude saw at the pier. Same car. Oliver’s confirmed the shell company that rented the vehicle was a known CIA front, shut down three years ago.”

“Which means someone’s reactivating old ghosts,” River muttered, arms crossed.

“Or someone’s using them,” Gage added.

“Either way,” I said, “he’s not just passing through. He’s here for Jude. She saw a tattoo on his forearm. Coordinates from a Syrian ghost site. One she operated in. Off-books. Real black.”

Sean let out a low whistle. “You’re saying this guy was on the same op?”

“She doesn’t know. But she was the mission once. And if he’s back...” I swallowed hard. “He could be here to finish what someone else started.”

Oliver leaned forward. “What’s her status?”

“Grounded,” I said tightly. “I’ve got her with River until this is over.”

River didn’t argue. He didn’t need to. He’d already posted two eyes on the house and was running surveillance like we had a foreign dignitary under protection.

“She gave me a list of former contacts,” I added. “Names, locations, dead drops. Anyone tied to that site. If we can find a link, we find a motive. And maybe we find the bastard’s weakness.”

Gage stood and began pulling gear from a locker against the wall. “You want him brought in or taken out?”

“Brought in,” I said. “If possible.”

“Define possible,” Sean muttered.

“If he so much as looks at her again, all bets are off.”

They didn’t question it.

Didn’t push.

They knew.

This wasn’t just about stopping a threat.

It was about protectingmy future.

“We’ll split up,” River said. “Gage and I will check the rental agency, see if they’ve got more camera angles. Sean and Oliver—you track credit card trails. Anything that ties this guy to a location. Cyclone, you stay close but low. If this guy knows you’re here, he may bolt.”

I nodded once. “But if he comes near her—”

River cut in. “We bury him.”

And just like that, the Golden Team was in motion.

The hunt had begun.

40

Jude

I stood at the kitchen sink, staring out the window, pretending to care about the raindrops crawling down the glass.

But really, I was counting the seconds.

Listening for footsteps.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Watching for movement.

My body buzzed with that old, familiar energy—the kind that came before impact.  
Before detonation. Before death.

Cyclone said I was safe.

He said River had posted eyes on the house, and I believed him.

But my gut didn't.

It hadn't stopped twisting since the knock on the door.

He was here before I saw him.

He'd been watching me longer than I realized. Waiting.

That fact alone made my skin crawl.

I reached for the coffee pot with hands that barely trembled and poured a cup I didn't want. The bitter smell grounded me. I didn't drink it—I just held it, letting the heat warm against my palms.

Behind me, the floor creaked.

I didn't jump.



I turned slowly.

River stood in the doorway, arms crossed, a rare softness in his usually hard face.

“You look like you’re waiting for the world to end,” he said quietly.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” I replied. “My world ended once. I didn’t think it might end again.”

He didn’t smile. Just stepped into the room and leaned against the counter. “Team’s moving fast. If this guy’s got a pattern, they’ll find it.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then Cyclone will,” River said. “You know that.”

I nodded. Of course, I knew that.

That was the problem.

If anything happened to him—because of me—I’d never forgive myself. He is the reason I’m back from that hellhole I’ve been in for the last six years.

“You don’t have to prove you’re strong right now,” River said, voice lower now. “You’ve already proven it. You survived whatever this was the first time. You walked away. You built a life.”

“A life someone just walked into like it belonged to them,” I murmured.

River was quiet for a beat. Then: “Do you still have it?”

I froze. “Have what?”

He gave me a look. “Don’t play dumb. Your go-bag. The one you swore you threw away.”

A silence stretched between us.

Then I turned and walked to the pantry, reached behind a bin, and pulled out a black canvas bag.

River just nodded. “Didn’t think you could help yourself.”

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

“I don’t like being hunted,” I said, setting it on the table.

“I know.”

He walked toward the front of the house, giving me space—but not really leaving.

He wouldn’t.

I sat down at the table, the bag in front of me, and slowly unzipped it.

Inside was everything I told myself I didn’t need anymore.

Cash, a burner phone, photos, IDs—the last pieces of the person I used to be—the mommy to the most beautiful baby girl in the world. I felt a tear slip out, and I wiped it away.

I picked up the folded photo near the bottom.

A blurry black-and-white surveillance still. The one from Syria.

The man in the photo was mid-stride, half-shadowed, face mostly obscured.

But something about him had always bothered me.

Something I couldn’t name.

Until now.

Because now I had a real-time version of him burned into my brain.

Same build.

Same walk.

And now I was sure.

They weren't just connected.

They were the same man.

My stomach flipped as I grabbed the burner phone and started dialing Cyclone's number.

But before I could hit send—

A noise outside.

Soft. Fast.

Like a footstep on gravel.

I rose slowly, heart pounding, reaching for the Glock tucked in the back of the kitchen drawer.

Then I stepped toward the window, carefully keeping out of the sightline.

And there, just at the edge of the tree line, I saw it.

Not a person.

Aflash.

Metal. Glinting in the gray light.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Lens.

Someone was watching.

Again.

Only this time?

I wasn't running.

41

Jude

I dropped to a crouch beneath the window and breathed through the rush of adrenaline.

Don't panic. Don't freeze.

Assess. Decide. Move.

I hadn't been field active in months, but the rhythm of it all—the process—was still carved into my bones like a scar.

I set the burner phone down and picked up my real one. Faster. Direct.

I tapped Cyclone's contact and hit call.

He answered on the first ring. “Hey, you okay?”

“No,” I said quietly, already moving through the kitchen, keeping my body out of line with the windows. “There’s someone in the trees. Watching. I saw the lens.”

Silence for a heartbeat.

Then: “Where are you now?”

“Kitchen. Just spotted him through the window off the back deck. He’s tucked behind the brush, ten o’clock angle from the oak.”

“Armed?”

“Didn’t see a weapon. Just glass. Scope or camera, I can’t be sure.”

“I’m five minutes out,” he said. “Do not engage.”

“River’s here.”

Another pause. “Good. Stay inside. Lock the doors. I’m coming.”

“I’m not scared,” I said, my voice low, even.

“I know you’re not,” he replied, voice rough. “That’s what scares me.”

The line went dead.

I moved to the side door, locked it, then crossed the house and did the same at the front. River reappeared a moment later, already holding his sidearm.

“Someone in the trees,” I said before he could ask. “I called Cyclone.”

River nodded once, already scanning the room, windows, and angles. “Good. We’ll wait him out. He gets close, we get eyes. He runs, we follow.”

I gripped the edge of the counter, grounding myself.



## Page 78

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

The old me would've already been out there, circling wide, moving quiet through the trees, getting the drop on the bastard before he even knew he was made.

But this wasn't Syria.

And I wasn't alone anymore.

I was part of something now.

Someone.

I took one breath.

Then another.

And when I looked up, River was watching me.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded. "I'm done running."

He gave me a grim smile. "Good. 'Cause I think he's about to find out what a mistake it was to come here."

River moved with lethal calm, his eyes sweeping every window and corner like he was cataloging vulnerabilities.

I knew that look.

It was the same one I used to wear before a breach.

“You think he’s still there?” I asked, nodding toward the back.

River checked his watch. “If he’s smart, he’s already gone. But something tells me he wants to be seen. Wants you to know he’s watching.”

My stomach twisted. “Why?”

River looked at me. Really looked. “Because sometimes the best way to break someone isn’t to shoot them—it’s to pull every thread until they unravel themselves.”

I swallowed. Hard.

He wasn’t wrong.

Psych ops 101.

Make them paranoid. Keep them on edge. Isolate them. Then strike.

But I wasn’t that girl anymore.

Not the one who disappeared in the desert and came back invisible. Not the one running through a jungle, trying to get away from the people wanting me dead.

No.

Not again.

“I’m not cracking,” I said. “He doesn’t get to have that.”

River arched a brow. “Didn’t think you would. But we both know this isn’t random. He didn’t follow you for weeks just to stare at your house.”

I nodded. “He wants something.”

“Yeah,” River said darkly. “And my bet? He’s about to ask for it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

The floor creaked as we moved toward the back of the house. River stayed near the side wall, while I took position just inside the door. I kept low, listening. My ears tuned to the subtle shifts in the air outside.

Branches swayed.

A bird scattered.

Then silence.

“Anything?” I whispered.

River shook his head. “He’s quiet.”

Too quiet.

I moved toward the window again, this time slower, more deliberate.

And that’s when I saw it.

A scrap of white.

Tucked under a rock just outside the tree line.

My pulse kicked.

“There’s something out there,” I murmured.

River stepped beside me. Squinted. “Shit. That wasn’t there ten minutes ago.”

A note.

Left like a calling card.

“Don’t touch it,” he said quickly. “Cyclone’s almost here. He can—”

But I was already reaching for the door.

“Jude.”

“I’m not going far,” I said. “And I won’t touch it.”

He swore but followed me anyway, covering every angle as I crept barefoot across the deck, down the stairs, and across the damp grass.

The wind picked up as I knelt by the rock.

It was a torn scrap of paper. Clean edges. Typewritten.

The kind of message no one could trace.

I didn’t pick it up—I just leaned close enough to read.

Three words.

“You remember me.”

My breath caught.

Behind me, River swore again. “Get inside.”

I stood slowly, heart pounding, eyes scanning the trees.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

But the shadows were empty now.

He was gone.

But he'd left enough behind.

And suddenly, I wasn't just part of this anymore.

I was the center of it.

42

Cyclone

I hit the gravel drive doing forty.

The second I saw Jude standing at the edge of the trees, barefoot in the wet grass, with River hovering behind her like a damn shadow—I slammed the truck into park and was out before the engine stopped rattling.

“Jude.”

She turned slowly.

Her eyes met mine—and they were calm.

Not empty.

Not panicked.

Focused.

That scared me more than anything.

I jogged to her, my boots kicking up wet sand, and stopped just short of pulling her straight into my arms.

But I didn't.

Not yet.

Because her hand was clenched at her side, tight around something I couldn't see.

And her voice was steady when she said, "He left a message."

My stomach dropped.

River handed me a glove. "Didn't touch it. She found it under that rock."

I crouched and lifted the paper carefully.

Three words.

You remember me.

My jaw locked.

I read it again. And again. Just to make sure I wasn't missing something.



“Does it mean anything to you?” River asked.

“Not yet,” I said. Then I looked at her. “But it means something to you.”

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Jude's lips parted, then closed again. Her throat worked as she swallowed hard.

And then she nodded.

"I think... I think he was at the site. The black site in Syria. I don't remember his name—he never gave one. But there was a man. Someone who wasn't supposed to be there. Someone who—"

She trailed off, eyes flicking toward the trees like the memory lived out there.

"He watched," she whispered. "He didn't interrogate. Didn't speak. Just watched. Every day."

Her voice cracked.

"And when it was over... when we exfiltrated... someone gave the kill order. But it never went through."

I stood slowly. "He was meant to be silenced."

She nodded.

"But he wasn't."

River blew out a breath. "Which means this isn't just about old ghosts. This is a man who survived being erased."

And now he was writing himself back into Jude's life—letter by letter, step by step.

“This ends now,” I said.

I turned to Jude, gently gripping her shoulders.

“You're not leaving this house without me. Not until we find him. Not until I end this.”

She didn't argue.

Didn't fight me.

She just leaned into me, her forehead pressing into my chest, and whispered, “Okay.”

But I felt the tremor in her bones.

And I knew—

This man hadn't just come back to haunt her.

He'd come to finish what someone else started.

Not if I had anything to say about it.

43

Unknown Man

He sat in the back of a nondescript rental sedan, engine off, parked beneath a canopy of trees three miles out from town.

The woods around him were still, damp with morning rain, mist curling through the underbrush like ghosts too stubborn to leave.

Fitting.

He rolled the message slip between his fingers—another one already printed and waiting in the passenger seat.

Not a threat.

## Page 82

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

A reminder.

She needed to remember.

Because he hadn't forgotten.

Not the bunker.

Nother.

The girl with sharp eyes and a sharper mind.

Too clever. Too dangerous. Too important to let disappear like the other CIA members that made it through the testing.

He'd watched her in silence back then. Just like he'd been ordered to. They didn't realize what they had signed up for. He had his orders. He would do what he was supposed to do except with her.

And when the kill order came down, he followed protocol—at first.

Until he realized what she'd done.

She'd taken something.

Not just the files or the codes.

Something deeper.

Something that belonged to him.

And now?

He wanted it back.

Not the information. Not the asset.

Her.

The version of her that had burned the world down to escape.

He leaned forward, plucked the second note off the seat.

Four words, typed in block letters:

You were mine first.

He slid it into a fresh envelope and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

A delivery for tomorrow.

Patience was the key.

She was starting to crack—he'd seen it in her face.

And soon, when the time was right, he'd finish what was never allowed to begin.

This time?

There would be no exfiltrating.

No team.

No Cyclone.

Just him.

And her.

Exactly how it was always supposed to be.

44

Jude

Isat on the edge of the bed, the weight of that memory pressing down like a stone.

I hadn't seen his face clearly then.

Just the shape of him. The eyes. That smile.

But now, after the man at the pier... after the note...

There was no doubt in my mind.

It was him.

He was there in Syria.

And he was here now.



And back then, he watched me like I was his.

Now, he wanted to prove it.

I remember how the guy gave me the creeps back then. Tyler and I were still dating, and they sent me to this horrible place when I first went to work for the CIA. I couldn't wait to leave that place.

I told Tyler about him, and he told me to forget the creep. But the memory stayed with me for a long time. I can't believe he came here. Is he here to kill me?

45

Cyclone

The warehouse was abandoned.

Just like the file said.

No lights. No cameras. Just wind slamming against a rusted tin roof and the echo of my boots on concrete.

Sean and Gage flanked the east and west entrances. Oliver sat in the van out front, tapping into satellite coverage while River coordinated from base.

This wasn't a raid.

It was a feeling.

A gut pull to a name on Jude's list.

An old CIA guy, who once ran logistics on black op sites—retired, vanished, supposedly living off-grid outside Riverside.

Only he wasn't retired.

Not really.

## Page 84

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

I found him on the second floor, sitting in a folding chair next to a pile of expired MREs and a stack of shredded field notes.

His beard was longer than I expected. His eyes were sharp as razors.

He looked me over once.

“You’re the hammer,” he said.

I didn’t answer. Fuck I didn’t know what he was talking about. Are all of these people crazy?

He chuckled. “Thought so. You’ve got the look.”

“What do you know about the man watching Jude?” I asked, voice low.

“Not much to tell,” he said. “He never had a name. Not one that stuck. We called him the Auditor.”

“The Auditor,” I repeated. “Cute.”

“Not my idea,” the man muttered. “He wasn’t a cleaner. He didn’t erase people. He...observed them. Studied them. Figured out how they broke. Then made notes.”

My pulse thudded. Was this worse than I thought?

“And Jude?”

“She was the one he couldn’t figure out,” the man said, almost like it bothered him. “All that fire in her. All that control. He thought she was a perfect subject. And when she left that site...”

He looked at me.

“He didn’t take that well,” he said.

I stepped closer, fists curling at my sides.

“You’re telling me he’s not here for intel. Not revenge. Just... obsession?”

The man nodded once.

I turned without another word.

Because if I stayed, I might have killed the bastard just because he’s a crazy idiot.

Outside, I called River. “It’s him. He’s called the Auditor.”

“Got it,” River replied. “Oliver’s pulling every record we can find.”

I ended the call and climbed into the truck, my jaw clenched so tight it hurt.

This wasn’t a mission anymore.

This was personal.

And if that son of a bitch wanted to get close to Jude again?

He’d have to come through me.

And I'd make damn sure—

He didn't walk away.

## Page 85

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Jude

The envelope came just after noon.

No footsteps.

No knock.

Just a soft thud against the porch and the faint creak of the mailbox.

I felt it before I saw it.

River reached the door first, gun drawn, eyes sweeping the perimeter.

“Clear,” he called.

I followed, slow and steady, heart steadying with every step.

He held the envelope in two fingers like it might detonate.

White. Unmarked. Crisp.

My name typed across the center in clean black ink.

River didn’t open it.

He didn’t have to.

He looked at me. “Your call.”

I took the envelope and brought it inside, laying it flat on the kitchen table. My hands were steady now. My fear replaced with something sharper.

Resolve.

I slid my thumb beneath the flap and peeled it open.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Typed. Again.

Six words this time.

“You looked at me first.”

My breath caught in my throat.

I stared at the words, willing them to mean something else. Something simpler. Safer.

But they didn’t.

Because he was right.

I had looked at him. The guy gave me the creeps. All I wanted to find out was why he kept staring at me. Later, I found out the CIA was trying to see if I would break. Bastards.

Back in that bunker, through that glass. I would see him watching me.

I'd broken the silence. Broken the rules. Broken pattern. Because I stared back at him.

And he'd never let it go.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Behind me, River cursed softly.

“He’s not testing you anymore,” he said. “He’s taunting you.”

“No,” I said quietly. “He’s warning me.”

I folded the paper, slower this time.

“He’s saying this isn’t about revenge.”

River’s eyes darkened. “Then what is it?”

I looked out the window.

At the trees.

At the open sky I hadn’t stepped into since that morning.

“It’s acclaim.”

Before River could respond, headlights swept across the living room wall. A truck door slammed, and I was already moving.

The front door opened.

And there he was.

Cyclone.

Rain still clinging to his shoulders, jaw tight, fire in his eyes.

“I know who he is,” he said, voice rough. “And I’m not letting him near you again.”

I stepped into his arms and pressed the paper into his hand.

He looked down at the message.

And his entire body went still.

47

Unknown Man

He watched them through the scope.

Close, but not too close.

The porch light bathed her in a golden glow. Her body relaxed in his arms—Cyclone.  
The soldier. The obstacle.

A flicker of something sharp curled behind his ribs.

Not jealousy.

Disappointment.

She was supposed to be different.

She was supposed to understand.

Instead, she had handed herself over. Let someone else carry the weight. Let someone else hold her.

## Page 87

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

I knew all about her husband and child. That was before I broke out of that rat hole of a prison they put me in. They thought I was crazy. Because I told them this woman belonged to me, and I was going to get her.

I watched Cyclone take the note from her hand.

Read it.

Feel its weight.

Good.

Let him know.

Let him see.

He was part of this now, whether he wanted to be or not.

But he wouldn't be there when it ended.

No.

She had to come back to the silence.

To the mirror.

To the version of herself she left behind in that bunker.

That's where he'd be waiting.

And when she finally looked at him again?

Really looked?

She'd remember who she was meant to be.

Who she was meant to be with.

And this time, she wouldn't walk away.

48

Cyclone

Jude sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the fireplace, a stack of old files open on the rug, a pen tucked behind her ear. Her hair was tied in a messy knot, and she was wearing my hoodie, sleeves pushed up, jaw set.

It was the most dangerous version of her I'd ever seen.

And the most beautiful.

She looked up when I handed her the rest of the surveillance photos Oliver had pulled.

"He's close," I said. "Too close. I think he wants us to find him—just not on our terms."

"He's baiting us," she murmured, scanning the photos. "Making us chase shadows

while he stays in control.”

“Not anymore.”

I dropped down beside her, spreading a second set of intel across the floor—locations tied to old ghost sites, aliases used by dead operatives, CIA facilities long scrubbed from existence.

“He called himself The Auditor,” I said. “At least, that’s what others called him. No real name. No digital footprint. But he worked observation detail at multiple sites before Syria. He’s been doing this a long time.”

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

“Then why now?” she asked. “Why break cover? Why me?”

I looked at her.

Dead-on.

“Because you’re the one that got away.”

Her breath hitched, but she didn’t argue.

Instead, she nodded toward the map spread out between us. “We need to make him think we’re coming unglued. We go quiet. Stop reacting. Pull back surveillance. He wants control? Let him have it—for now.”

“And then?” I asked.

She met my eyes.

And there was steel behind hers.

“Then we take it all back.”

Jude leaned forward and circled a point on the map—a hiking trail near a remote overlook, where the cameras were broken and cell signal dropped to zero for about half a mile.

“He’ll push me into isolation,” she said. “That’s how he worked before. Observed

first, then cut off communications. No noise. No help. He needs silence to do what he does.”

I nodded. “So we give it to him.”

“But on our terms,” she added.

She looked up at me, her eyes sparking now—not with fear, but with focus.

“I can stage a pattern,” she said. “A subtle withdrawal. Miss a few calls. Skip our usual runs into town. We tone down house security—not really, but we make it look that way.”

“We leak something on a closed channel,” I added, catching on fast. “Make it seem like you’re slipping. That the pressure’s getting to you. That I’m pulling back too—like you’re getting left behind.”

Jude’s smile was sharp. “He’ll eat that up.”

We moved faster now—years of training snapping into place like muscle memory.

She pulled up a floorplan of the house on her tablet and marked weak spots we wanted him to think we were vulnerable—a stuck fence gate, motion lights that sometimes failed, and a window latch we’d “forgotten” to fix.

“We plant audio,” I said. “Just enough chatter for him to pick up if he’s still running mics. Let him hear you crying. Let him hear me not coming home.”

Jude arched a brow. “That’ll take acting.”

I grinned. “You think I can’t fake a bad mood?”



“Not for long,” she said dryly. “You get too grumpy and I’ll throw you into the woods myself.”

I laughed—but the truth was, underneath the adrenaline, I was proud of her.

This wasn’t a woman being hunted anymore.

This was a woman laying a trap.

And I’d never wanted anyone more.

I leaned in, voice low. “We do this together. You don’t breathe without me knowing. You don’t move without backup within five seconds.”

She gave a little nod.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

But her eyes never left the map.

“He’s waiting for me to break,” she whispered. “So that’s what I’ll give him.”

She circled a final point on the edge of the woods behind the house.

“He’ll come for me here. Right here.”

I stared at the spot.

A clearing. Shielded on three sides. Just out of camera range.

Perfect for a trap.

Deadly if we weren’t ready.

But she was right

He’d go for control.

He’d go for silence.

And we’d be waiting.

The house was quiet.

Too quiet.

But for once, I didn't hate it.

The trap was set.

The team was in position.

And for a few stolen hours, the world had gone still.

Jude stood at the bedroom window in nothing but one of my shirts, sleeves rolled up, her hair spilling down her back. The rain outside tapped against the glass, slow and steady.

She didn't turn when I stepped inside.

She didn't have to.

"I've never done this before," she said softly.

I frowned. "Done what?"

She looked over her shoulder, eyes shadowed and soft.

"Gone into a fight with something to lose."

I crossed the room in three long strides and wrapped my arms around her from behind. She melted into me, her hands coming to rest over mine.

“You’re not going to lose me,” I said into her hair.

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t need to.”

She turned in my arms slowly, her eyes meeting mine.

“You’re everything, Cyclone.”

It was quiet.

So quiet I almost missed it.

But it hit harder than any gunshot.

I cupped her cheek, brushing my thumb over her skin. “Say it again.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re everything to me.”

God.

I kissed her like a man dying of thirst.

Her arms slid around my neck, pulling me in, and that fire that always lived between us ignited. But this time, it wasn’t wild or rushed.

It was slow.

Intentional.

She peeled the shirt off herself, and I let my hands roam—mapping skin I already knew but would never stop wanting. I kissed my way down her throat, across her collarbone, tasting the promise in every heartbeat.

She tugged my shirt over my head and flattened her palms to my chest. “I don’t want safe tonight,” she whispered. “I want you. All of you.”

“You have me,” I said, voice rough. “Always.”

We fell to the bed, tangled in sheets and heat, letting the storm rage outside.

But inside?

It was calm.

It was right.

I moved over her slowly, reverently, like I was worshipping something sacred.

Because I was.

And when she came apart beneath me—eyes locked on mine, breath shuddering, body trembling—I followed her over the edge, holding nothing back.

When it was over, I pulled her into my chest, our legs still tangled, her hand resting over my heart.

“Promise me something,” she whispered.

“Anything.”

“Whatever happens next... don’t hold back.”

I kissed her temple.

“Not a chance.”

50

Cyclone

The Morning Before

The first light of dawn slid through the window like a whisper.

Jude lay beside me, one leg hooked over mine, her breath warm against my chest. Her hand moved lazily along the scar on my ribs—the one I never talked about.

“Bullet or blade?” she asked softly, her voice thick with sleep.

“Both,” I said with a smirk. “Bullet made the mess. Blade tried to finish it.”

She smiled against my skin. “You’re hard to kill.”

“Getting harder now that I’ve got something worth staying alive for.”

Her fingers stilled.

And then she tilted her head up to meet my eyes.

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Every word.”

I kissed her slowly—no heat this time, just truth.



When we finally moved, it was quiet and unhurried. We dressed side by side, loading gear in silence, syncing communications, strapping in knives and radios like it was second nature.

It was.

But this time felt different.

Not because of what we were walking into—but because of what we could lose.

“You ready?” I asked as I checked the wire on my mic.

Jude nodded, tying her hair back with the calm of a woman walking straight into the fire.

“Let’s end this,” she said.

51

Jude

The trap was already in motion.

We had cameras on the clearing, drones overhead, and River running silent ops from the van a mile out.

But to him, it looked like I was alone.

Just like he wanted.

I walked down the trail behind the house, slow, shoulders tense, eyes scanning the

treeline.

I wore no gun.

No communication radio.

Nothing that looked like defense.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Just an old hoodie, jeans, and a thousand-yard stare I'd practiced in the mirror.

Let him think I was breaking.

Let him believe it.

I reached the clearing and stopped in the center.

Waited.

Breathed.

And then—movement.

Just a flicker, between the trees.

My heart pounded.

I didn't move.

Didn't flinch.

Let him come.

Let him think he was winning.

Because in exactly four minutes, Cyclone was going to light this entire place up.

Jude

He stepped out of the trees like he'd been waiting his whole life for this moment.

Same build.

Same walk.

Same dead eyes.

He wore a plain jacket, dark jeans, a calm expression that would've looked harmless to anyone else.

But I knew better.

I'd known since Syria.

Since that mirror.

Since the moment I saw him smile.

The air thickened between us as he crossed the clearing—slow, deliberate, like he was savoring every step. A predator who thought the kill was already his.

He stopped ten feet away.

Close enough for me to smell the faint trace of aftershave.

He smiled again.

Just like before.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

“I was beginning to think you’d forgotten me,” he said, voice smooth and patient.

“I didn’t,” I said calmly.

“You always were the smart one.”

I didn’t reply.

Didn’t give him anything else.

Let the silence work against him for once.

He circled me slightly, eyes dragging across my face, my shoulders, like he was trying to dissect me with nothing but a glance.

“Interesting choice,” he mused. “Coming here alone. No weapon. No backup. Brave.”

I tilted my head, letting just a trace of ice slip into my voice. “Or bait.”

That smile twitched.

But his eyes stayed on mine.

“I studied you,” he said. “Watched how you moved, how you lied, how you broke people down. But I never got to finish my report.”

I took a step forward. Controlled. Steady.

“You don’t get to define me.”

“I already did,” he whispered. “In that bunker. You looked at me first. That meant something.”

“It didn’t.”

He blinked.

The smallest flicker of something human.

Then it was gone.

And in that moment, I realized something.

I wasn’t afraid of him anymore.

He wasn’t a ghost or a shadow or a monster under my bed.

He was just a man.

Broken. Obsessed. Alone.

I took another step forward, forcing him to flinch.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I said. “You’re going to try something. And you’re going to fail. Because you were never in control.”

He opened his mouth.

But before he could speak—

“Down!”

Cyclone’s voice cut through the trees like thunder.



## Page 94

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

I dropped just as a flash-bang cracked across the clearing.

Light. Sound. Chaos.

The Auditor reeled back, shouting, reaching for something in his coat—but he was already too late.

Cyclone hit him like a freight train.

And the trap?

Snapped shut.

53

Cyclone

He reached for his coat—too slow.

I was already on him.

I slammed him to the ground, one knee to his back, wrenching his wrist until I heard the pop of cartilage.

He grunted in pain but didn't scream.

Sick bastard probably liked it.

“You should’ve stayed buried,” I growled, yanking the weapon from his coat—a slim black blade, serrated, he wore gloves so there would be no fingerprints.

Of course.

He tried to roll, elbow aimed for my ribs, but I blocked it and slammed his face into the dirt.

Blood was smeared across the ground.

Still, he smiled.

“You can’t protect her forever,” he hissed through cracked teeth.

I grabbed a fistful of his collar and hauled him up so we were face to face.

“Watch me.”

He laughed then. Low. Unsettling.

Like the sound of something breaking that you couldn’t fix.

I didn’t say another word.

Didn’t have to.

River and Gage moved in from the trees, guns raised, faces unreadable.

“Bag him,” River said.

I shoved him into Gage’s hold. “You so much as twitch, and I’ll break the other arm,”

Gage snarled.

The Auditor didn't resist.

Didn't struggle.

## Page 95

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

He just turned his head—and looked at her.

At Jude.

And smiled one last time.

But Jude?

She didn't flinch.

Didn't blink.

She stared right back.

And then she turned away.

54

Jude

The moment the cuffs snapped around his wrists, I felt something lift.

Not the fear.

Not the anger.

The weight.

The constant second-guessing. The need to look over my shoulder. The nights spent wondering if I'd see him in my dreams.

He was real now.

And caged.

River walked him toward the transport van. Cyclone stayed behind.

He turned to me, blood on his knuckles, breathing hard.

And when his eyes met mine, I saw it all there.

The rage.

The relief.

The love.

I walked to him, slow but sure, and wrapped my arms around his waist.

He held me like I was the only thing keeping him standing.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

I nodded. “I am now.”

We stood there in the clearing, the storm finally passed.

And for the first time in years, I wasn't looking over my shoulder.

I was looking ahead.

With him.

55

Cyclone

The kettle whistled.

Jude didn't move.

She was curled up on the couch in my hoodie and leggings, a dog-eared paperback in her lap, and her feet tucked under a quilt she claimed she didn't need but liked to have her feet warm.

I crossed the room with two mugs and handed her the one with the chipped rim—the one she always reached for.

“Green tea?” she asked, eyeing me over the edge of the mug.

“Calm blend,” I said. “River's orders.”

She snorted. “Tell him I survived CIA black sites, I can handle a little caffeine.”

“Tell him yourself. He's making spaghetti and bossing Sean around like it's boot camp.”

She grinned.

Grinned.

God, I'd missed that.

She curled her legs tighter beneath her and leaned against my side as I sat down beside her.

"You ever think it would feel like this?" she asked after a moment.

"Like what?"

"Safe. Simple.Ours."

I looked down at her, at the way her lashes brushed her cheek, at the little crease between her eyebrows that only showed up when she was lost in thought.

And I told her the truth.

"No. But now that I have it, I'm never letting go."

56

Jude

Three days later, I woke up before the sun.

Not because of nightmares.

Not because of fear.

Just because I wanted to watch the man beside me breathe.



Cyclone slept like a soldier—on his back, one hand draped over his chest, the other resting near mine.

Even in sleep, he kept me close.

I traced the line of his jaw with my gaze, memorizing the way his lashes curled at the tips and the faint scar above his temple.

## Page 97

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

He'd nearly died for me.

But more than that—

He'd stayed.

When I told him the truth.

When I fell apart.

When I couldn't promise him anything but the mess I was still trying to clean up.

He'd stayed.

I slipped out of bed, padded into the kitchen, and made coffee—his mug, my mug, side by side.

He joined me a few minutes later, shirtless, hair sticking up, eyes sleepy but soft.

“Can I ask you something?” I said, handing him his mug.

“Always.”

“What if I never stop looking over my shoulder?”

He stepped closer.

Wrapped an arm around my waist.

Pressed a kiss to my temple.

“Then I’ll always be the one behind you.”

57

Jude

The sun was setting behind the hills, streaking the sky in gold and rose as we sat on the back porch.

Cyclone had his feet kicked up on the railing, a beer in one hand, his free arm slung around my shoulders. I leaned into him, head resting against the solid weight of his chest.

We didn’t talk for a while.

Just listened—to the wind, the birds, the soft rustle of trees.

To the quiet we’d both fought hard to earn.

Then he shifted slightly, his thumb tracing slow circles along my arm.

“What do you want, Jude?”

His voice was low, steady. No pressure. Just truth.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean now that the war’s over. Now that he’s gone. What’s next?”

I sat with the question for a while.

Let it settle in my bones.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Because no one had ever asked me that before.

Not likethat.

I took a deep breath.

“I don’t want to disappear again,” I said finally. “I don’t want to live in the shadows. I want a real life. Something I build. Not something I run from or survive through.”

His grip on me tightened just a little. “That’s good,” he said. “That’s really good.”

I looked up at him. “What about you?”

“I want whatever you want,” he said simply. “A house. A home. Somewhere we can park the truck and put up a mailbox with both our names on it.”

I smiled. “You want a mailbox?”

“I want you.”

The words hit me like sunlight—warm and gentle and blinding in the best way.

I reached up and cradled his face in my hands.

“I don’t know how to be normal,” I whispered. “I don’t even know what that looks like anymore.”

He leaned into my touch.

“Good,” he said. “Because I don’t want normal. I want you. Exactly as you are.”

And right there, with his lips on mine and the world going quiet again, I finally believed it.

I wasn’t lost anymore.

I was found.

Epilogue

Three Months Later

Jude

The house was quieter these days.

Not tense quiet.

Not watching-your-six quiet.

Just... peace.

The kind that lived in coffee cups left half full, bare feet on hardwood floors, and the low hum of a guitar playing in the next room.

Cyclone sat on the back porch, strumming something soft while our dog—yes, our dog, a rescue mutt named Bravo—dozed at his feet. He wore his favorite old jeans, the ones that should’ve been thrown out months ago, and a plain

white T-shirt that clung in all the right ways.

I leaned in the doorway and just watched him for a minute.

God, I loved him.

Not because he saved me.

But because he never asked me to be anything other than me.

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

We'd built something here.

We'd planted flowers out back, put up shelves I never used, and even picked out a mailbox. A real one. Black metal, bolted into the post with both of our names painted across it in crooked white script.

Jude + Cyclone.

A life.

A home.

A future.

He looked up and caught me staring, that crooked grin pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“See something you like?”

I stepped outside and dropped into the chair beside him, tucking my legs up and stealing the beer from his hand.

“Yeah,” I said, sipping. “I see everything I want.”

He reached over and laced our fingers together, his thumb brushing over my ring finger—not rushing, not asking, just...waiting.



One day.

When we were ready.

And for the first time in a long time, I wasn't afraid of tomorrow.

Because no matter what came next...

I wouldn't face it alone.

The End

Keep Reading For More Of The Golden Team

OLIVER

Prologue

Emery

The silence after a swim was always the best part.

Muscles humming, lungs burning, heart still thundering from the last lap—it was the kind of silence that came with peace.

With control.

I towed off my hair, tossed the damp cloth over my shoulder, and headed toward the locker room. The humid air curled around my ankles like steam off the water.

It was after hours. The whole facility was empty, lights dimmed. Just how I liked it.

Private.

Safe.

When I signed the contract, they promised top-tier training, total seclusion, no cameras, and no press.

But they forgot to mention the men with guns.

## Page 100

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

I heard the sound as I turned the corner—just a whisper of fabric and a sharp intake of breath.

Too fast. Toodeliberate.

I froze.

Listened.

Then—footsteps.

Heavy. Muffled. Not trying to be silent.

They weren't worried about me hearing them.

Because they didn't think I was a threat.

Wrong.

I grabbed the first thing I could—one of the metal kickboards from the supply rack—and backed toward the hallway exit.

Then I saw the first man.

Black shirt. Military stance. Headset in one ear.

Not security.

Definitely not staff.

He smiled when he saw me.

Bad smile.

“Ms. Blake,” he said, voice smooth. “We’ll need you to come with us.”

My pulse spiked.

“What for?” I asked, eyes scanning, calculating. “Coach forget to tell me about my fan club?”

Another man appeared behind him.

And a third stepped in from the left.

Shit.

“Now, please,” he said again, stepping closer.

I threw the kickboard.

Not because I thought it would stop him.

Because it distracted him just long enough for me to run.

I bolted barefoot across the tile, heart slamming against my ribs, every step echoing like thunder in the empty corridor.

I made it ten feet before one of them caught up and grabbed my arm.

So I turned—and slammed my elbow into his jaw.

He staggered.

## Page 101

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

Another came from behind.

I kicked.

Screamed.

Fought like hell.

But there were too many.

Too fast.

I hit the ground, knees scraping against tile, arms pinned.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be,” one of them muttered.

I spit blood onto the floor and looked him dead in the eye.

“Good.”

Then everything went dark.

58

Oliver

The house was too quiet.

Olly was at school. The dishes were done. The dog had finally stopped barking at the neighbor's cat, which kept coming into the yard to make Duke bark.

And I had run out of reasons to pretend I didn't miss working with my buddies.

I stood in the kitchen, sipping coffee that had gone cold twenty minutes ago, staring out the window like something out there might change.

But it didn't.

The ocean looked the same, high up here looking down.

Just stillness.

It should've felt peaceful.

But all I felt was restless.

I'd built this life—brick by brick—after the last mission nearly ended me. And then Dana showed up and said I had a son, and she was dying. I decided to care for her. After all she was once my wife, and my son's mother, even if Olly was four when she told me about him. I couldn't let her go into a place and die with nobody there for her.

After the funeral, I took Olly to Disney World. We stayed three weeks, traveling everywhere on a whim—just my son and I. That was last year. Now, I was ready to go back to work.

Sometimes, I felt like a lion pacing in a cage.

The phone buzzed on the counter.

I glanced at the screen and stopped pacing.

CYCLONE.

I answered without thinking. “Yeah.”

His voice was tight. Focused. No greeting. Just mission-mode.



*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:16 am*

“I need you on a plane.”

“Where?”

“Southern Europe. Off-grid training facility. Female target extraction. Name’s Emery Blake. You did say you were ready to get back to work.”

I frowned. “Yes, are you talking about the swimmer?”

“Yeah. Gold medals and magazine covers she vanished three days ago. No ransom. No demands. Not a single goddamn trace.”

“Why me?”

“She’s got fight. And she’s scared. She needs someone who can calm a fire without putting it out.”

Emery Blake: Olympic royalty. America’s Golden swimmer. And now... missing.

Cyclone’s voice dropped lower. “Oliver—whoever has her? They’re not amateurs. If she’s still alive, it’s only because they want something.”

I straightened.

Coffee forgotten. Mind already racing.

“I’m ready right now.”

“Wheels up in two hours. I’ll meet you there.”

I hung up and looked around the kitchen. I needed to tell Olly goodbye. I walked next door to Lyon’s home and took Olly’s suitcase to Niki.

“Are you sure you’re up to babysitting a five-year-old boy? He has so much energy.”

I love Olly, of course, I am up for watching him. How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know,” I said, explaining everything about Emery Blake and how she had disappeared without a trace.

I hope you find her. Are you going to the school to tell Olly goodbye?”

“Yes, I’m headed there right now. Thank you, Niki. I’m so glad Olly has you living this close. I’d better get going.”

59

Emery

Waking up hurt worse than getting hit.

My head throbbed. My mouth was dry. My wrists burned.

I blinked against the dark, the edges of the room swimming as my eyes adjusted.

Concrete walls.

Metal door.

No windows.

One camera.

Red light blinking.

Great.

## Page 103

*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:17 am*

I was in some kind of cell or something. Probably underground. Definitely off the grid.

And thank God someone had made the mistake of not gagging me.

I sat up slowly, testing my limbs, swallowing the hiss that crawled up my throat when pain shot through my ribs.

Bruised. Maybe cracked. But nothing broken.

Not yet.

The rope burns around my wrists were fresh. My skin was raw. But my hands were free now, which told me one thing:

Why was I taken?

Were they holding me for ransom?

Sure, I had money, but not that much that I could pay a high ransom.

I'm glad that I'd stopped fighting.

No telling how badly I would have been beaten

Idiots. What do they want from me?

I moved to the edge of the cot and pressed my ear to the wall.

Nothing.

Then again.

Still nothing.

Not even air vents.

These bastards were smart.

But not smart enough.

They'd left me water in a metal cup. I was thirsty, but what did they put in the water?  
Think Emery. What the hell was going on?

Still thinking.

Still dangerous.

They took my phone.

They grabbed my body from the locker room.

They took my control for now.

But they hadn't taken my mind.

And they sure as hell hadn't taken my will.

I didn't know who was coming for me—if anyone even was.

But if I had to get out of this place now?

I will get out of here.

And if someone was coming?

I wish they would hurry. I'm tired of this room.

60

Emery

The door creaked open with a sound that felt deliberate.

Like they wanted me to hear it.

I stayed still.

Sitting on the edge of the cot. Shoulders relaxed. Hands folded in my lap.

Let them think I was docile.

Let them assume.

The man who stepped in was tall. Maybe late forties. Wore tactical pants and a black thermal that hugged his frame like he lived in the gym. His hair was buzzed short. Eyes pale and flat.

No name badge. No insignia.

He smiled.

But it didn't reach his eyes.

"Good morning, Ms. Blake."

"Emery," I corrected, voice cool. "You want to play house, you might as well use my name."

That earned me a tilt of the head.

"You're not what I expected," he said.

"Let me guess. You thought I'd be crying in the corner?"

He smiled again, wider this time. "That would've made this easier."

"For whom?"

He stepped forward. Too close.

I didn't flinch.

Didn't move.

Just looked him dead in the eye.

"You've made a lot of noise," he said. "The footage from your little sprint down the hallway is already being buried. But not before it hit the wrong inbox."

"Then you've got a problem," I said. "Because if someone knows I'm gone, they're coming."



He leaned in, lowering his voice.

“That’s the thing, Emery. They had already looked. And your precious Olympic committee? Your sponsors? They think you ghosted. You disappear for months at a time. That’s your brand now.”

His voice dipped lower.

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*Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:17 am*

“You’re off the radar. Just like we like it.”

I smiled, slow and cold.

“And you still needed three men to drag me in here. Doesn’t say much about your operation.”

The smile slipped.

There it was.

Crack in the armor.

He turned without a word and walked out.

But not before I saw the twitch in his jaw.

Not before I heard the lock slide shuttwice.

He was nervous.

Good.

Let him be.

Because someone out there had that video.

And someone was coming.

He just didn't know yet—

They were bringing hell. My father had friends in high places. Once you are a Navy SEAL, you are always a Navy SEAL. Who does he think taught me how to fight? My Dad wouldn't let me stop training until I could hold my own in a fight. He saw with his own eyes how this world was.

61

Oliver

The private airstrip was tucked into the hills like it had something to hide.

Perfect.

We touched down just after dusk—low light, no chatter. Cyclone and I moved fast, light gear only, with backup support coming in from the coast if things went sideways.

We didn't plan for sideways.

We planned for straight through.

As soon as the wheels hit the tarmac, Cyclone handed me a file folder thick with redacted lines and satellite maps.

“This is the facility,” he said, pointing. “Privately owned, minimal staff, allegedly for ‘elite athlete recovery, and training.’”

“Looks more like a front.”

He nodded. “Because it is, most of the time.”

I scanned the maps. “And Emery?”

“Last ping from her phone was ninety-six hours ago near this loading dock. No exit logs. No return flight. She vanished from inside the perimeter.”

I felt my jaw tighten.

She hadn't just been taken.

She'd been ghosted.

Deliberately.

Professionally.

This meant that whoever was behind it wasn't just after money. They wanted her gone. Why?

And that made this personal.

"We're going in clean," Cyclone said. "No full-force entry yet. We blend. Ask questions. Make noise if we have to. But we keep it tight."

I nodded, already scanning for the path in—and the quickest way out if it all burned down.

"What do we know about her condition?"

Cyclone looked at me.

"She fought. Hard."

Good.

I didn't want to rescue someone who broke under pressure.

I wanted to rescue someone who held out long enough for us to reach her.

Someone who'd make them regret ever laying a hand on her.

And judging by the faint grin on Cyclone's face as he passed me a radio and a knife, he knew exactly what I was thinking.

We were going to find Emery Blake.

And God help the men who stood in our way.