



# Delta: Retribution

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Suspense

**Description:** Fallen Navy SEAL and Titan Group's Delta recruit Trace Reeves wants nothing more than a one-night stand to forget that his twin brother was killed-in-action. But when his one-time fling becomes his high value target, the lines blur between her rescue mission and saving himself.

Delta: Retribution is the first title in the new Delta series, a spin off from the Titan series. This novella was available in the Hot Alpha SEALs: Military Romance megaset.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

## CHAPTER ONE

Trace Reeves was lost in a woman he only knew by first name. Mallory. There had to be more to her than the crush of a hot-as-hell kiss and the sweet smell of her hair as it dangled around him. Her mix of daring and confidence had left him lust drunk. Then she batted those eyes, and he could've sworn the badass-babe act was a front for something so much deeper. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

Well, actually, his fingers were all over it. All over her—and what a rockin' body.

She was the perfect way to escape after his day stuck at Landstuhl. He'd been nosing around the medical center near Ramstein Air Base. Seeing wounded survivors served as a constant reminder that he continued to fail the only person who mattered—his brother in blood and in arms. His twin turned soldier turned fallen comrade. Heart racing, he pinched his eyes closed, ordering his stomach to calm. It'd been weeks, but time felt as though it had stopped. So much anger lived within him, and he couldn't let it go.

Tonight, drowning the night in beer had been the plan. It made him forget about the fruitless questioning of wounded, shell-shocked soldiers who may've seen something after his brother's attack. Screw it. He'd learned crap and had needed a drink—and a woman. Then, he'd had both.

But the woman lying next to him was a surprise. An American. Maybe southern, given her slight accent. She was definitely fiery, given everything wild he'd heard come out of her mouth. If they'd been back in the States, she might not have been old enough to grab a beer with him. Not that it mattered in Germany.

His hands had stroked her supple body, and God, he loved a woman who was more than skin stretched over bones. Mallory cradled a pillow. She was a terrific mix of innocent and sex kitten, and fuck, man, that combination worked for him.

“That was wild.” She sounded breathless and sated.

“It was.” Surely there had to be a better response than that. But he hadn’t expected stranger sex to make his mind go numb.

Something had just worked between them. Sparks and fire that made for mind-numbing sex. Great chemistry. She had matched him for every crazy move he’d made in that hotel room, and damn, it felt good to burn off all the tension from the day. As if he could finally breathe when he fucked her. The deeper her nails had dug, the lighter his mind had felt.

Her fingers skimmed over his biceps, tracing the outline of his intricate tattoos. The swell of her full breasts taunted him. Running his tongue over the tips of her nipples had acted like a stroke to his shaft, and now he wanted her again. He wanted to taste her neck and tease her collarbone, but what he most wanted was to watch her fall apart again while she called his name.

She twirled a piece of hair and smiled while scrunching her nose. “Sorry. My hair smells like that bar.”

“Didn’t notice.” Because she smelled like sugar—but he could keep that to himself. He nodded to the back of the room. “Take a shower.”

“My mascara would be a mess. That’d drive me crazy.”

“I’ll go start the water.”

“You don’t listen very well.” She leaned against him and bit his shoulder.

“But I do when it counts.”

She laughed, nodding, then rolled back onto her pillow. “You are kinda cute.”

Wasn’t that some shit? “No one’s ever called me ‘cute.’ Ever.”

“Tough guys can be cute,” she said.

What was it about this girl? It had to be her innocent eyes, coupled with his own stress, because he couldn’t keep his hands off her. A strong tug, and she was on his chest, laughing and kissing. His fingers threaded through her silky hair. “Playing to my ego, huh, babe?”

Another light-up-the-room smile played on her heart-shaped face. “You don’t seem the type to need an ego boost.”

“I don’t.”

“So what do you need, Trace?”

Easy answer. “You. In a shower. Now.”

“That’s direct.” Laughter fell from her lips.

“You weren’t clued in to that before?” How many beers had he had tonight? Noticing her laughter and her hair wasn’t his MO. Hell, paying attention to much other than himself was out of character. He set her to the side, rolled out of bed, and headed toward the bathroom. A quick glance in the mirror assured him that, in the last few hours with her, there was no question, he had not turned cute. But it had been some of

the best hours in recent history. Damn. He slapped the water on in the shower, waited until it was steamy hot, and moseyed back to the bed. He couldn't think of a better way to forget the day—

The bed was rumpled and empty.

His stomach dropped. The small room was the loneliest sight he could recall. On the nightstand, his wallet remained. Already knowing the answer, he double-checked, and all of his cash and cards were still there. She was gone and hadn't left with a thing, except maybe a slice of his ego.

Trace scrubbed his hands over his face and found a pair of shorts. He stepped into them and sat on the edge of the bed. Nothing was ever as it seemed. Beer and the bat of a girl's pretty eyelashes had momentarily made him forget that.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

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Oh my God. What had Marlena done? She'd fallen into the eyes of a dangerous-looking man? For what? For insane, liberating sex? Well, yeah. But ugh, holy moly, she'd had a one-night stand. The words played over and over in her head as if she were a dirty slut puppy who needed that shower she'd just ducked out of.

A one-night stand? That was so not like her.

Stomach churning, she thought she might puke, and that had nothing to do with a few too many drinks. Brian's voice burned in her ears. No one will ever want you. They'll use you and walk away. Just like me.

But with his voice on replay, she'd hit the bar to drink a German. The bar crowd hadn't actually been Germans. They were US military from a nearby base—the same base that she'd been brought onto and sneaked out of.

All the slinking around made her feel dirty. They never wanted anyone to see her, but as soon as they could ditch her, they did. They watched her and protected her until they were done. Then she was released into the world, on her own until they flew her back home.

If you were so smart, they'd make sure your work didn't kill you. That's what Brian had said. Could she ever ignore him? No. But maybe in this situation he was right. It seemed the US military wanted her brains but didn't care much about her. He was right. He was always—

No. Marlena shook her head. Well, Brian—her user of a father who wasn't worthy of the term "dad"—was right, up to a point. If the wrong person knew that she was more than a college kid, that she was the designer of one of the most dangerous weapons the US had ever manufactured, they'd torture every bit of knowledge out of her then leave her to die. Maybe she should've played dumb when those military folks approached her, asked her a few questions, then promised the world if she came to work on a top-secret project. They'd played to her weaknesses. They'd said she'd make a difference, be important. Matter.

What a joke. She was smart; they'd used her—were still using her—and she had learned barely anything about the dangerous world she was tiptoeing around.

A familiar cold panic spread through her veins. She knew nothing about protecting herself, and making up a stupid fake name hadn't done anything to make her safer. Mallory? Come on, Marlena. Too bad the glowing high from her sex with a stranger hadn't last long. Tonight was the first time in a very long time that she'd let go. It felt so good, but wow, was it stupid.

She pulled out her hotel room key and pressed her head against the door, shaking it. Mar hadn't even been smart enough to have a one-night stand in a different hotel. Brian would laugh.

Stop it. She sucked in a breath and pushed her shoulders back. She'd fake it until she had it—the "it" being confidence. That was her grand plan to get over the ridiculous ideas Brian had planted in her head. If uncertainty pricked at her thoughts, she'd shut it down with a faux confidence.

That was complicated. Faking a backbone could easily be construed as bitchy. An ugly bitch, just like—

Screw Brian and his promises that no one would ever find her attractive. She'd

known better. Deep, deep down, Mar knew that if she could let go, she could be herself, and that self was a sexy handful. Even if that meant she had to try it with someone she'd never see again, she'd succeeded. That big, bad, tattooed man wanted her. The thought of his blond five o'clock shadow on her palms made shivers cascade down her spine. The hard set in his amber eyes turned her to mush, even while it said his soul was years older than his physical age.

He had been out of her league in a built, brawny way, and she'd walked out on him without saying good-bye. Swinging the hotel room door open, she had taken enough steps to collapse on her bed in the dark. Running out on him wasn't fake-it-'til-ya-make-it confidence. It was a complete-bitch move, coupled with a solid dose of insecurity.

Marlena sat up on her bed and hung her head in shame. She'd be back in the States by tomorrow, and this would be a distant memory. Until then, her hair might've smelled like the bar, but the rest of her smelled like a rugged man who'd almost orgasmed her to death. She'd shower later, thank you very much.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

### CHAPTER TWO

Trace's phone rang and rang on the hotel-room nightstand. He fell asleep then ignored his alarm clock. Finally, the door banged.

Once. Twice.

A kick threw it off his hinges, and Trace grabbed the gun under his pillow and jumped up, ready to point and kill.

"Stand down, asshole."

Two men stood next to his commanding officer.

"What the fuck?" He lowered his weapon. The two men glared. He didn't recognize them. They eyed him up and down, assessing him, making him wish he'd slept in something besides boxer briefs.

"You missed check-in," his commanding officer said, arms crossed.

He didn't have a response for that, because he didn't give a shit. Some things were more important, and that meant tracking down the fuckers who'd killed Michael.

The man who looked as if he went toe-to-toe with the devil on a regular basis stepped forward. "Trace Reeves?"

"Yeah?"

“The answer is ‘Yes, sir.’”

He tilted his head. “‘No, sir’ is coming from me. Fix my door, and I might consider not laying you on the ground.”

The man stepped closer. “Say again?”

“Fix the door, fucker.”

The man’s fist knocked his jaw faster than he expected for a guy with at least fifteen years on him. Trace jumped him, punches flying. Punch after punch met an equal retaliation. They hit the floor, destroying a table. Then they were rolling and falling, with head butts and throat shots. Blood flew, and anger made his body fight without thought processes.

The man pinned him against the wall. He pulled a gun and pressed it to Trace’s temple. Fuck. Trace tossed up his hands.

“I said stand down.” Sweat and blood covered the man’s face. Pure, 100 percent badass poured from him. “You have one chance. Listen closely.”

Trace dropped his hands when the man stepped back and holstered his weapon. “One chance for what?”

His CO stepped forward. “Everyone’s sorry about Michael, but it’s not an excuse. Missing check-ins. Disappearing without notice—”

“I have my reasons,” Trace growled.

“You’re a bad day away from dishonorable discharge and time in the brig.”

Trace dropped his gaze. He knew that. Fuck, he knew it. But it didn't matter. Nothing did.

The dark-haired man wiped his nose. "You're a good fighter, kid."

"I know," Trace said.

"You've got an attitude for shit, you pussy-face bitch."

"What's it to you?"

"My name's Jared Westin, and I'm your only chance." He pointed to the other man.

"That's Brock Gamble, Delta team leader for Titan Group."

Well, hell. That got his attention. Titan was legendary. "Okay." Trace bent over, grabbed a shirt, pulled it on, and then kicked on some shorts.

Brock nodded.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“We’re recruiting.” Jared eyed him. “Twelve months of training and testing says you’re a smart fuck. Two years of combat operations says you’re a skilled operator. But you’re deteriorating, and no one wants anything to do with you.”

Trace coughed a bitter laugh. “I have my reasons.”

“I know what they are, and I don’t care.”

Brock stepped forward. “You want a spot on my team, you get a pass from Uncle Sam. Titan owns you.”

“No one owns me.”

Jared shook his head. “I would. But you’ll get your time to do what you need to for your brother. You work ghost jobs, and when you’re off, you’re off. I don’t care if you sift through desert sand or fuck pretty girls. I don’t care. But when I say work, you work.”

He belonged to no one. Not even the infamous Titan Group. “No.”

“Fine.” Jared turned and walked through the downed door. Brock followed, and neither turned back when two military police walked in.

His CO shook his head. “You’re AWOL, Reeves. You didn’t show up. Hell, you didn’t have permission to leave. Your ass should be in Afghanistan with your team. Not goddamn Germany.”

His muscles tensed. He could get past two MPs and a CO. He could fight and take them out, or die trying.

“Before you do anything stupid, there’s a dozen more of them outside the door. Choose wisely, Reeves.”

“Goddamn it.” He rubbed his face.

Jared Westin stepped back into the doorway. “You come with me now, you walk out unshackled.”

“Fuck!” Trace tore at his close-cropped hair. “Goddamn it.”

But there were no options. And it was Titan Group. Hell, Delta team was an urban legend, and he was being recruited for it? With time to continue his hunt without anyone asking questions?

He looked from the MPs to his CO and over to Jared Westin. “Fine. Titan. You own me.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Two weeks later...

The leather chair creaked as Trace leaned back into it. He stared down the giant war-room table. All around them were computer and television screens. It was his first time at Titan's HQ, and after running through hell with Jared and Brock, he was okay with a cushy leather chair—for a moment.

Delta had been called home and was in a rebuilding phase. The men already on the team had seen it coming with the recent catastrophe in Somalia. They'd lost four men, then Brock had become their new team leader. Everyone seemed about as comfortable as Trace had been with the idea of returning to civilization, even if no one minded a comfortable chair every once in a while.

Delta was a ghost team. They weren't meant to traipse into war rooms. They received their orders wherever they were, appeared, did their work, and disappeared. They defined "off the grid," melting into their own shadows when they were done with a job.

Trace found comfort in that, more than he had in the last few weeks with his SEAL team. God, that had killed him, and he'd changed. Cracked, really. There was no saving him.

And then Delta became an option, and he thought he might make it. No trails, no existence, no life—nothing other than a team he meshed with, who let him dance with his demons without comment. That was how they liked it.

Brock Gamble, Titan's former second-in-command, was the team leader. He got what made Trace tick, pushing his anger into training and letting him roam wild without any questions.

Brock threw a pile of key rings onto the table. Sudden apprehension tickled Trace's nerves.

"We're grounded for a couple weeks." Brock glanced at Trace. "Temporary, but expect to stay a while."

Apprehension churned itself into anxiety. "Keys?"

"One of them is for a townhouse, the other a car."

"Temporary," Brock had promised. A house and car didn't sound temporary. The urge to puke hit him hard. He'd been tricked... He had to get back overseas and work on his own projects. He didn't have time for team building and trust games or whatever else was planned for them.

Jared walked in, cracking his knuckles, and dropped into a chair. A bulldog trotted—slowly—into the room and plopped down next to him. "Never thought I'd see you boys sitting around a conference table."

No shit.

But no one said anything. Brock leaned forward and ran his hand over his chin but stayed mum.

Jared continued, "As you may've heard, GSI is gone, has been for a few months, and we've secured their contracts."

GSI had been a Titan competitor in the black-ops, private-security world. Jared flashed a look at Brock, but nothing registered across either man's face. But it was noteworthy, if for no other reason than it seemed to create an interesting dynamic between the two.

"You're still our ghost operations team. But I need Delta filling in where the main team can't be. Standard jobs based out of the States. Anyone who can't handle it, I'll understand." Jared glared directly at him.

Hell. All eyes in the room shifted to Trace. Great, fuckers. Trace made no show of noticing.

Brock cleared his throat, pulling all eyes forward again. "Everyone good?"

No one said a word, and that was the right response.

Jared nodded. "If you want out of your contracts, that's fair. I'm changing the ground rules on you, even if it's only temporary." He stood, and his bulldog did the same, pacing along the length of the room. "If you want to stay off the grid, go underground, then take a sabbatical. Go off the clock until Delta's back on the darkest, dirtiest missions that exist on earth." Trace could feel the eyes begin to drift his way again. Jared cleared his throat. "But for now, until I add a few more bodies to the main team, I need you."

Brock nodded. One by one, Delta nodded. Ryder. Luke. Javier. Colin. Everyone except Trace. He hadn't nodded, yet no one seemed surprised.

"Trace?" Jared crossed his arms.

Maybe a sabbatical was what he needed—but what guy in his twenties did that? A guy who was cracking up. The key ring of doom was going to be his death. A car and



house? The thought made him itchy. He couldn't handle the humdrum of civilian life. Seriously, what was he supposed to do? Find an ammo store he liked, buy a coffee maker, and watch TV until Brock called him up and said to grab his go bag?

Grounding the team was a death sentence. Delta was starting to feel like the only way he'd survive after Michael's death and the questionable falling-out with his SEAL brothers.

Once a SEAL, always a SEAL? Didn't feel that way.

If Jared would put him to work right away so he didn't have time on his hands, maybe Trace could handle life with a leash around his neck. He chewed the inside of his mouth. As long as he was busy, he wouldn't leave Delta. He couldn't. It was how he functioned at the moment.

Trace squared his shoulders. "If the team's in, I'm in."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“First job, high-value-target rescue.” Jared opened a folder and passed out intel packets. “HVT’s Marlena McCloud. Abducted by a South American arms dealer whose legitimate business dealings revolve around sugar production. His name is Marco Romatar. Intelligence has her in his compound in northern South America, somewhere in the Guyana region.”

Trace paged through the packet of papers. He studied the strategic details more than he studied the girl. How hard would it be to pinpoint a chick wandering around the jungle? If he focused on an easy HVT operation, then maybe he’d be able to take a deep breath.

“Guyana? Like the land of Jim Jones and the Jonestown suicides?” Brock asked.

Jared nodded. “Romatar has several sugar growers down there. Satellite images and recon from a British ops team shows them farther back in the jungle. A remote, decently equipped house on a marshy river. Armed guards patrolling water and land. Questions?”

Javier nodded. “British ops didn’t extract?”

“HVT to us. They didn’t know why. I don’t know why, and I didn’t ask. They saw an American, passed the intel along in a friendly, FYI kinda way. She means something to someone. This HVT is a high priority, no other details provided.” Jared turned toward the television screen and picked up the remote. Hitting Play, he went back to his chair, and his dog dropped to the floor as the screen lit up and a surveillance video came to life.

The grainy parking-lot footage showed a woman in heels making her way down a row of cars. A van rushed up. Two men grabbed her. The van peeled out. The entire scene took less than ten seconds.

Jared paused it again. “That was from a secure CIA ops site outside Washington, DC. Underground, security badges, the works. The van was let out by the guard on duty without so much as a second glance, and no one heard from her again. But she fit the description from the British team. We’re not 100 percent confident, but it’s what we have to go on. Brock, more to add?”

“We’re itching to go. It’ll be a complicated extraction, but based on what we’ve mapped out, it’s doable, using local resources and floating the river.” He leaned forward and slapped the table. “We’re a go. Plan to load up in three hours.”

Trace breathed a sigh of relief. Three hours he could manage. The only downside was that he wasn’t in the desert looking for the only thing that might give him peace.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Marlena woke on the dingy bed and sat up. Days of waking in this compound hadn't done great things for her belief that she was getting out anytime soon. No one from work would miss her, and she routinely cut classes to keep up with the workload, so none of her classmates would think twice about her absence.

Mr. Romatar was in charge. That much she knew. He was the reason she'd been brought to wherever they were. It was hot and humid. The flight had taken hours, and no one spoke English unless they wanted her to work. Then it was English with a thick accent and a serious agenda. They all called her "the kid," and it drove her crazy, but they knew what she was working on. They had classified information. She'd known from day one that this stupid job she'd agreed to do for the government would get her killed.

So much for all the security-clearance hoops she'd jumped through and the assurances that anyone who had an inkling of what she was doing was also cleared. You're safer working with us than you are in chemistry lab. Ugh. Liars.

Mr. Romatar had armed guards, but Marlena mostly met with intelligent employees who asked many questions and took copious notes. Could her project be replicated? How would they make adjustments for any number of caveats? Part of her was pissed that her contemporaries were taking the shortcut in creating their weapons based on her knowledge, and part of her was pleased that they didn't question what she told them.

And she'd told them only enough. If they tested her descriptions and plans, they

would work. If they tried to put various parts together, they would mesh. But she hadn't told them the one key part to her plan, the engineering component that had taken her a few semesters to figure out. On paper, everything looked as it should. She could swear that she'd shared everything, and when it didn't work, she'd have both protected whomever they were intent on attacking and maybe prolonged her life by prolonging her usefulness.

There was a rap on her door, then it swung open. The same man who met her every morning stood there, a container of milk and a breakfast bar in hand. "Ready?"

"I think so." She smiled because there was nothing else to do. Brian would've laughed at her. Called her weak. He would've thought she should outwit them. But out-talking men with guns wasn't her forte. As a matter of fact, if she hadn't been lured in by the idea of being patriotic, she never would have thought about how biological engineering could help protect her country. Now look at her.

Marlena rubbed her temples.

"Miss McCloud?"

Her stomach churned. She'd meant to change her name, wanting nothing to do with her father, but it would've messed with all the paperwork it took to keep her college grants and scholarships. Marlena shook her head and stood, accepting the breakfast offerings with a verbal "thank you" and mental middle finger.

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The HVT rescue op was underway. Trace moved beneath the murky jungle water. His goal was to find the boat that would give them an under-the-radar arrival. He'd drag Romatar's men down after Ryder picked them off with his sniper rifle.

Trace sighted the rickety jungle boat a dozen yards ahead. Timing was everything, and the Delta team was on point. On land, maybe lounging in a tree, Ryder waited.

In his ear, Titan team leader Brock counted down their plays, as the boat drifted with the lazy current. “Trace: three, two, one.”

With “Go” buzzing in his earpiece, Trace lifted his hands out of the water and caught his enemy, who was dead, thanks to Ryder’s shot. He dragged the man under, submerging the body in two seconds without so much as a splash, then quietly popped back up for the second hit as the swamp boat floated by.

His hands shot up silently a hair of a second after Ryder’s bullet hit his target above the water’s surface. With eyes barely above water, he grabbed the dead man, submerged his body, then pulled himself over the edge of the boat.

“Clear,” Ryder said.

“Move...” Brock’s strategy was going smoothly. They’d take out the two on the boat, take their place, infiltrate the jungle compound, and rescue their high-value target. “Now.”

One short breath later, the guys pulled over and stayed down. Trace posted in the bow, taking the place of the first man they took out. Luke took his place in the aft, guiding the boat toward the dock. Colin and Javier stayed down and out of the line of sight. The boat drifted, docked, and moved to the outside of the house, surrounded by the river and jungle. Their foursome split, hitting their assigned spots.

“Eyes on three tangoes,” Trace whispered.

Luke, Colin, and Javier gave their count. In total, they could see five armed guards on the exterior and no one through the windows. They were going in blind, and wasn’t

that a rush. Adrenaline fueled and honed Trace's readiness, making the tips of his fingers pulse.

"Sniper: go." Brock's voice stayed in their ears. "I repeat: Sniper, we're a go."

Ryder took out the targets after Roman, a spotter from Titan's main team, called their marks.

"Breach team, go," Brock called into his earpiece.

Trace slipped through the back door. Luke moved through a window. Colin and Javier mimicked the action on the side entrance.

Pushing against the wall, Trace scanned the room, subdued the enemy in front of him, and bounded up the stairs, knowing that his boys would cover him when he came back down with the HVT.

He scanned a few rooms. Not what he expected. They were set up like science labs. What kind of high-value target was the woman? He assumed she was an intelligence operative because the details on the woman were generic at best. But based on what he saw, maybe she was a scientist? A teacher?

Trace cleared one room, then the next. Empty.

"Nothing here," he grumbled.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Team members in the house gave the same responses.

Roman's voice crackled in his earpiece. Then static.

"Repeat," Brock ordered.

Once again a crackle, then more clearly, Roman came through. "We've got movement. One hundred yards away, tunnel exit. HVT is with 'em."

Shit. Trace bounded down the stairs. Colin and Luke were behind him, Javier coming broadside. Roman gave directions as the team ran forward. They had no other guidelines than that. Thick brush became nearly impassable. Leaves slapped his face as Trace ran through the jungle, following Roman's guidance.

Brock called, "If you have shots, you have a go."

"We're flying blind here." Luke's voice sounded in his earpiece.

"One more second," Ryder whispered. Two shots fired. "Girl's alone. Trace, to your left, twenty feet."

And Trace was there in a second, searching for a screaming woman or for any sign of life. He jumped over a downed tree and pushed through a thorn bush.

There. He caught sight of a feminine shoulder almost hidden behind the tree. The HVT. He went wide, trying not to scare her. She faced the other way as he approached, her head rotating as if searching for incoming assault. Her hair was back



in a ponytail, and she stood over two dead men, thanks to Ryder's shots. She held what had to be one of her captor's automatic weapons. It was pulled up, ready to fire.

"Behind you," he said calmly. Last thing he needed was her to take someone out with an accidental trigger finger.

She swerved, the long barrel of the automatic weapon pointed at his face. Her finger was on the trigger. "Go away. Leave me alone."

He put his hands up. "I'm one of the good guys."

"Prove it."

It was almost pitch black out, and the canopy of trees overhead didn't allow for too much moonlight. But even in those circumstances, he could tell that she was more pissed than scared. And there was something familiar about that voice. Maybe even that attitude.

He tried again. "We're your extraction team. Put your weapon down; we're bringing you home."

She dropped the barrel an inch in the dark. "Convince me you're a good guy or walk away." She jerked the gun at him. "Or I'll shoot you. Your choice."

His eyes narrowed, annoyance picking at his already uneasy attitude. He didn't have time for this.

Brock gave orders in his ear. "Acquire the target alive by any means necessary. Confirm."

Well, their team leader didn't have a high-powered rifle pointed at his face. "Give me

a minute, boss.”

“One minute and counting.”

Great. He turned his attention back to the HVT. “Easy there, girl. I’m American. We’re bringing you back to the US.” He slowly dropped his weapon, letting it sling over his chest. “See, a gesture of good faith. You’re the only one pointing a gun at anyone. I really don’t want to be shot today. Hurts like a bitch.”

Though a point-blank shot by her gun would kill him.

She laughed, and it tickled a memory. What the hell was happening?

“That doesn’t prove anything.” She moved the barrel of the gun away from the center of his chest but not by much. “Back away from me.”

“Or what? You’re going to kill me.” He inched forward. “I’m on a seven-person team of shadows that have you surrounded. I go down, one of them gets you, and they won’t be nice about it.” Surrounded by almost inhabitable rain forest, he had to laugh. “Even if I wasn’t your ticket out of here, what, you’re going to walk to the nearest village?”

She didn’t answer.

Enough. He ducked, lunged, grabbed the assault rifle, and spun her around. They crashed onto the tree that hadn’t hidden her from him, and he whispered into her ear. “My name is Trace. I’m taking you home. Trust me, listen to me, and we both live. Got it?”

Nothing. She didn’t struggle. Didn’t say a word. She wore a thin tank top, no bra, maybe some camo pants. Something familiar, again, grazed the back of his mind.

“You hear me?” He wouldn’t step away from her until they had an agreement. “Nod or speak. No time for a standoff.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Trace?” Her voice was hesitant and his reaction definite.

That voice, he knew it. From what part of the world? Or which female op? He couldn't remember. He didn't know anyone named Marlena McCloud. He would've remembered a name like that. When he first heard it, the name stuck with him, as though it were too soft to be that of an operative or too fluffy to be in intelligence.

She turned her head. Even though the black jungle night hid all details, a sudden, very clear realization settled over him. What. The. Hell. “Mallory?”

“Something like that.” She dropped her head then shrugged out of his hold. He could barely make out her features, but there was no mistaking that voice—just as soft as the name McCloud.

Brock barked in his ear, “Rendezvous. Now.”

Handing her back her rifle, he couldn't put two and two together. “You know how to use this?”

Because the Mallory he knew didn't know how to use an assault weapon. She was a pretty girl barely legal enough to be at a bar, an American who had had a couple of beers. She was giggles and gumdrops and nothing that would know how to fire one those babies.

The woman snagged the gun. “Please get me the hell out of here.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

Marlena's heart slammed in her chest. The Trace in front of her was the same Trace that she'd been in bed with for a first-name-only good time. Her one-night stand was coming back to haunt her, and it did so in the shape of a jungle-slaying white knight. One-night stands happened, but this didn't. How could they find each other on two different continents, neither of which she was sure they both lived on full-time?

Nervous energy pulsed through her while she tried to focus on the killers who lurked somewhere in the jungle, not the distraction-worthy, gun-wielding savior pulling her quickly through a wall of vegetation.

Trace raised his fist, and they stopped short, making her slam into his back. It was a solid wall of cut muscle covered by a bulletproof vest and a small arsenal strapped to his body. The way he acted, he clearly was in communication with someone, though who it was, she had no idea.

An animal screeched near her. She jumped, clinging to Trace, arms wrapping around his thick torso. He turned his head, glancing at her in the dark. She couldn't see his face, even that close up, but could feel the stare.

"This is going to be awkward, huh?" His low voice was muffled by the thick jungle that surrounded them. Birds squawked. Something that sounded much larger and...hungry growled in the near distance.

She tried to replace cold fear with fake strength. That was what had allowed her to survive her abduction. Hell, it was probably the cause of her one-night stand. She

took a deep breath and lied. “I don’t do awkward, don’t worry about it.”

He laughed. “I don’t recall there wasn’t a lot you wouldn’t do.”

Instant heat flooded her neck and cheeks, but she tried to channel über-confidence. “You’ve got jokes.” She gave him a quick jab with her elbow. It made him chuckle until his hand cupped her shoulders and shoved her down into the warm dirt.

In the distance, bullets rang out. Her body jumped with each crack of fire. The jungle acoustics screwed with her. Which way were they coming from? Who did Trace work for, anyway? This was way too much trust to be levied in a guy just because she’d slept with him. Bark peeled off the trees around them, splinters floating down from bullets.

Trace kneeled over her, tugging her close and blocking her body. The familiar scent of him reminded her of their night together. He watched the black abyss, gun pointed toward attackers she couldn’t see. He wasn’t gentle with her. Then again, they hadn’t been gentle with each other last time they’d been together, and she’d enjoyed the hell out of it.

More gunfire. Why on earth was she thinking about that right then? God.

Despite the oppressive heat, shivers ran down her back. Her memory betrayed rational thought and replayed flashes of his broad chest over her and him driving into her, hands gripping her tight, teeth raking her skin, and her nipples, and much lower. She pulled a quick breath.

“You okay down there?”

As her eyes became more accustomed to the dark, she saw his chin tilt toward her. He had absolutely no idea what had gone through her head. Good—that’d be

embarrassing. But he'd been fun, and the night she'd had with him had been her one wild reprieve in an otherwise obsessively private last year. Stop! Thinking! About him in bed. Though, at least Brian wasn't commentating in her head, at the moment.

"Hey, whatever your name is, you doing okay?"

It would've sounded mean if there hadn't been a smile in his voice. And amusement right then would've been crazy, given that they were surrounded by people trying to kill each other—trying to kill them—but she felt safe with him, and he didn't seem that bothered by the whole situation.

Leave it to her to run into her meaningless sex partner when he was saving her life. Of course. "Yup. Doing great."

"Good, 'cause we're on the move again." When he stood them up, he towered over her. "Let's go, Cinderella."

He pulled her through thickets and under branches. Bugs tickled her skin. Sweat dampened her clothes, making them stick to her. He was soaking wet, but she had no idea why. It wasn't from their effort.

They came to a stop, and he lowered himself into a squat, pulling her with him. "Why Mallory if you're Marlena?"

Surprised it took that long for him to ask, she tried to think of the best answer and not to gasp from her run. Panting like that wasn't sexy—not that it mattered—and moving through the jungle wasn't as easy as it looked in the movies.

"Not explaining the name?" he asked.

She closed her eyes. Oh, just trying not to sound like an out-of-shape oaf. "Mallory,

Marlena. I did that for all the reasons you were sent to find me.” And in all her out-of-breath glory, her foot caught on a root, and she hit the ground. “Shit. Sorry.”

In a second, he had her up and in his arms. She was close enough to feel his even breath. His camo-painted face stared down at her, and she was locked in their crazy moment until he broke the stare. “I’m not trying to manhandle you. But this’ll be faster.”

What—?Oh. He took off quickly, with Marlena cradled in his arms. In theory, his running through the jungle while holding her didn’t seem the faster route. But in reality, they covered significantly more ground when she wasn’t trying to walk.

“Ten-four, soldier.”God, where did that come from? Maybe not enough oxygen had reached her brain after chasing him in the humid rain forest.

“Soldier, huh?” He laughed and jumped down an embankment that didn’t slow him at all but made her stomach flip into her throat.

“Aren’t you?” That was the only logical conclusion. She’d met him right off of Ramstein, and now he was dressed like a military badass in a jungle somewhere. An American soldier was the only answer she could come up with.

“Something like that.” He ducked them under brush then came to a stop, looking around in the darkness and checking something in his hand. “So I’m a soldier, and you’re a high-value target. What’s the deal on the name?”



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

And back to square one. Until she knew who he was, she hadn't much to say. "How do you know where we are?" Jungle noises hissed at her, forcing her to inch impossibly closer to his weapon-covered chest. "'High-value target' sounds ridiculous—just so you know."

He pulled up short, completely silent, making her still-panicked breaths stand out.

"Stay," he whispered, setting her down. Trace pivoted, watched into the nothingness... and banded out rounds from his gun.

The bright light and loud noise made her jump back, but he grabbed her into his arms and started back on their fast moving pace.

"Why are they chasing us?"

He never took his eyes off the distance. "Hunting us."

Her stomach dropped. Hunting. "Why?"

"You know why they had you. I don't. You're high value. You're worth dying for—for them and for us. I've got plans after this job is over, so it won't be me dying today." He slammed to a halt again and pressed her against a tree, covering her from the dangers that lurked around them. Pops fired, and bark from the tree exploded around her. "You good?"

She didn't know if it was the memory or the moment that made her flush. "I'm sorry." The tree's bark and branches scratched into her back. "About before."

He laughed. “Never been ditched like that before, babe. You made that night unforgettable.”

If he could see her cheeks, he would’ve seen red. White-hot embarrassment crept through her, choking her, and she dropped her chin. She had made one mistake, taken a chance—really, a risk—one time of random sex with a stranger, and it had to turn out like this. Cringing, her body tried to cave in on itself.

“Hey, Cinderella.” He touched her chin, bringing her gaze back to him. “I wasn’t trying to be a dick.”

“I’ve never pulled a move like that.”

“Ditching a man when he hit the shower? Or getting wild with someone you’ve never met.”

Oh my God. She groaned. “This is humiliating.”

“Nah, I got a kick out of it.” He lofted her back into his arms. “Alright, time to get you back home.”

Home. What did that mean anymore? After Brian continued to show up at her door, embarrassing her and belittling her when he needed a fix, she had moved to a shabby-chic apartment and hoped he wouldn’t find her. It wasn’t her favorite place, but it was convenient to school and to the local military base that she went to every so often.

Fine, the sexy stranger could bring her back to the United States, where she could bunker down until she was called to do her patriotic duty again and hope to God she didn’t end up someplace like this.

### CHAPTER SIX

Trace located the rendezvous point on the river minutes before a rickety fishing boat drifted by. A light flashed two times, and he flashed a response—two quick and one long. The boat veered off the murky, marshy river, and Trace put Marlena in and hopped in behind her.

Roman and Ryder, who manned the shitty vessel, nodded their hellos. Marlena acted unsure of them, maybe of the boat, and definitely of their plan to take their time in meeting the rest of the team and getting the hell out of South America.

She sat on her bottom, looking small and unassuming. “The man who took me—”

“Romatar,” Roman jumped in.

She nodded. “He has a lot of money invested in a project. They won’t be happy about this, and they have a lot of men with guns.”

Trace sat on a bench next to her. “There’s a lot of money invested in you coming home. I’d bet on us any day of the week.”

“Oh.”

They floated down the slowly winding river. Mosquitoes the size of baseballs hovered around, and if they hadn’t been in stealth mode, Trace would’ve wasted the time picking them off as target practice.

Mallory-Marlena—whatever her name was—moved from the bench to the floorboards and was asleep in five minutes. Her back pressed against his shin, and there was nothing better to do than keep an eye on her. She was far more interesting than the scenery, anyway.

As high-value targets went, she didn't look like much. Not deadly or dangerous. With dark-brown hair that had fiery red highlights, lips that looked used to being shiny and pink, and days-old eye makeup smudged around her dark, almond eyes, she was damn sure the best-looking HVT he'd ever picked up. So, it hadn't been a few too many drinks, back in Germany, that had told him she was well past a solid ten.

Ryder and Roman sat on the boat's bench on the lookout. Their trigger fingers were at the ready, but Trace also knew they were watching him watch her as the minutes dragged by. The incoming questions would arrive soon enough. They'd all been privy to his conversation with her in the jungle, even if it was one-sided through their earpieces.

"So what's the deal?" Ryder asked.

It'd taken him fifteen minutes to ask. Not bad, considering he was a nosy bastard. Trace shrugged. "No deal."

The Aussie sniper tilted his head, angling for a better glance. "You know her... well?"

In the pit of his stomach, Trace didn't want her around Ryder. Didn't want her to hear the accent that his buddy could dial up, given the right girl. But did he know her? No, not in any real sense. He only knew her naked and in bed. "Not really."

"Ah." Roman nodded. "I get it."

Ryder chuckled. “Even the grim reaper needs a little piece of action, occasionally.”

“Alright, assholes.” Even if that’s what it had been, he didn’t like the way it sounded. “Small world, that’s all.”

Marlena stirred on the ground, wiping at her eyes. Slowly she propped herself on her elbows and took them all in. “Hey. Sorry I fell asleep.” Her eyes drifted over them and then out to the water.

“No worries.” Ryder smiled. It was amazing how much of an accent he could punch into that.

She didn’t seem to notice. Her eyes leveled on Trace, brows raised. “Are you going to tell me who you guys are?”

He nodded. “Titan Group, Delta team.”

She tucked her legs under her, and the rickety boat swayed in the water. Her forehead pinched. “I hate boats.”

How could anyone hate boats? Floating down the water was the most relaxing thing he could think of, as long as no one was shooting at him. And even then, he enjoyed the hell out of it. “You going to be sick?”

She gave half a smile. “No telling.” When she moved, the boat rocked back and forth, and her grin faltered. “Eh, maybe.” She waved her hand. “No. Just ignore me.”

Now, that’d be pretty damn hard. She wasn’t wearing a bra. While she’d been sleeping, her dark-cherry nipples hadn’t been in his line of sight. But with the sun breaking, a soft morning glow illuminated her threadbare white tank top. That sorry excuse for a shirt wasn’t hiding much. Not that he hadn’t seen it all before. Shit. He

scrubbed his face with dirty hands.

“How about you, Trace? You alright over there?” Roman laughed.

Dick. They had another thirty minutes or so until they docked and met up with the rest of the team. From there, the job would be a cakewalk. Go wheels up. Get her to the states. Debrief.

After that, he had the small problem of surviving in the temporary stateside housing. Maybe he'd beg Brock and Jared to release Delta into the wild again.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Javier had told him to think of it as his own man-castle. Luke and Javier were ready to tear it up in the States for a little bit, and having their own place to crash made it easier. But Trace could barely swallow the thought of four walls that trapped him, a roof that felt as if it were closing in. There were so many things he could be doing—should be doing—instead of relaxing in a comfortable bed in safe shelter.

Colin had suggested that maybe Trace stop torturing himself. But screw them all, they hadn't lost their brother. Guilt over Michael's death strangled his thoughts, even a million miles away.

He needed off this rickety boat. Off this side of the globe and back to the desert-dry world he'd been tracking and triangulating. Sooner or later, he would find the tribe responsible for his brother's death. They were nomadic people. Terrorist goat herders, for lack of a better description. Except they were a highly functioning cell, complete with advanced technology and an intelligence network that had consistently been one step ahead of him, and those fuckers had to have had the one thing Trace wanted: Michael's dog tags.

He'd been so close that he could feel the retribution at his fingertips. So damn close, he could almost feel the tags in his hands. When he had them, he was certain he'd finally be able to take a deep breath. Until then, the search was on—

“Seriously, this time. You okay over there, buddy?” Roman's eyes narrowed like he knew the rabbit hole Trace had just fallen into.

“Yeah.” He stared up at the morning sky until the boat rocked again.

Marlena was failing at another attempt to move on the piece-of-shit fishing boat. “Who sent you for me? How did you know where to find me?”

Trace shrugged. He didn’t know who had hired Titan. Delta wasn’t there to explain, just to move her from point A to point B. But he had a few questions of his own.

“If we’re trying to stay alive, shouldn’t we row this little boat faster?” She stared at the paddles lying on the floor. “Or at all? Floating with the current seems counterintuitive.”

Trace shook his head. “No one speeds down this river. We do that, we stick out and find trouble.”

“So we just sit here?” She pushed reddish-brown hair behind her ear, and at that moment he remembered the sound she made when his tongue ran across her earlobe.

He sucked in a breath. “For another half hour, plus or minus.”

“My two cents say we should get the hell out of here a little faster. Just so you know.” She peered up while bracing her hands on the side the boat. Her face was green, her nipples were showing, and all while, her voice had a bit of bossiness to it.

He couldn’t stop the grin from forming and even chuckled. “We’ll take it under advisement.”

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t get it either.” Ryder stared at him, then to Roman. “But who the hell’s heard Trace laugh recently?”

Her eyes narrowed, and despite the smudged makeup around them, they were



addictive. “You’re laughing at me? Just drive the boat faster. Surely you can go a little faster and not make a scene.”

“You’re a hot, bossy mess, Cinderella.”

“I said I was sorry,” she said.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t call you on it.”

“What the hell are you two talking about?” Ryder asked.

Lips pursed, she didn’t look one bit interested in explaining, which made him like it all the more. “Nothing, man.”

Trace moved off the bench and sat next to her on the floorboard. “What’s the deal with you, anyway? Why’d your cute butt end up down here?”

“I don’t like to share.”

“Or tell the truth.”

She smacked him but smiled. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Don’t know if that’s possible.” Ryder laughed.

“Private conversation, buddy.”

“On a boat the size of my couch.”

Trace turned to Ryder and glared. “I get it, now shut up already.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

He turned back to Marlana, and the boat rocked more than he had intended it to. “Sorry, total accident. I swear.”

She elbowed him, making the little boat move, and her queasy look surfaced again. “I’ll pay you every dime I have if you get me off this awful raft.”

“It’s a boat.”

“Boat. Whatever.” Something jumped out of the water and snagged one of the baseball-sized mosquitoes. “Crap. Just get me home.”

“Where’s home?”

She sighed. “Nowhere, anymore.”

That sounded familiar. “I get that.”

Brock barked into his earpiece, “Air support’s early for your rendezvous. Be at that dock in fifteen minutes, and keep your eyes up.”

“Roger that.” Trace glanced at Roman and Ryder then at Marlana. “Looks like you might owe me every dime you’ve ever made.”

Ryder and Roman picked up oars, and Trace surveyed the horizon for anyone who seemed interested in their downriver push. Every time he darted from bank to bank, upstream and down, he stole a glance at her.

They skimmed through the water. Marlana sighed, relief on her face, and then she caught him staring. She wiped her expression clean, replacing it with an almost laughable calm. It couldn't have been more fake, and he couldn't have wanted to kiss her any more than he did that second.

The dock came into view as a chopper began its descent. Marlana leaned into his arm. "Instead of tossing you every dime I've ever made, how about you let me make up that shower I missed out on?"

Roman kicked him in the back. "It pays to be a winner."

Hooyah to that.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

After a boat, helicopter, and airplane ride, Marlena was tucked safely in an underground compound. Jared Westin and Brock Gamble had introduced themselves and then walked out, leaving her with the national-defense stiff who'd been overseeing her project. Not once had they asked if she was okay or if anything had happened to them. They'd been caught up in the details of their classified project and whether any of it had been leaked. She told them the truth: that she'd given her captors enough busy work—making it as complicated as possible—that they may've thought they'd received covert intelligence, but it was nothing more than graduate-level engineering homework.

Their secret was still safe, but it wouldn't take a genius to connect the dots to technology that already existed and be on an equal weapons-making playing field. She sighed, stood up, and saw that Jared's dog had stayed in the room. For some reason that made her a little less empty inside.

She had seen less and less of her friends since starting her super top-secret, giant pain-in-the ass job, and when she was most alone, she heard her dad's—no, Brian's—voice in her head, telling her that her intelligence was the only thing that made her worthwhile and that she'd be exploited. Well, Brian had been right on that account. Wow, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mentally and physically.

But at least she'd gotten away from Romatar.

Still... Abandoned friends and a self-esteem problem weren't the greatest

combination, and then she had those crazy couple of days and no one she could talk to. But she did have a one-night stand who she couldn't help but feel drawn to.

Too bad that once Delta had deposited her at the Titan Group's home office outside DC, he'd walked away with his team. Not that she could blame him. Though there was a part of her that thought he'd snatch her away from everyone and have her make good on that promise of a shower.

Marlena bent down to pet the drooling bulldog that guarded the door. The dog's tag read THELMA, and she rolled over, begging for belly rubs.

A door opened behind Marlena, and she jumped, her heart racing. Panic seized her throat. She spun to see Trace leaning against the doorjamb. His muscles popped in the cotton shirt, the colors tattooed on his arms making her want to inch closer just to touch them.

"Hey, you." His eyes danced, alert to the fact that she'd been staring and having a heart attack at the same time.

"Sorry." The more time that passed, the jumpier she became, especially after the interrogation she had just suffered through. That stupid reaction had been happening ever since she had woken up in Mr. Romatar's compound and continued after her rescue. It had to be an after-effect of the abduction, but still, it was embarrassing.

"Don't apologize. I didn't mean to scare you." His quiet smile didn't do much to still her spastic thoughts. "Little bit edgy, huh?"

"No. I don't. Yeah, I guess so."

His smile morphed into something more confident, and he strolled to the table and grabbed a chair, pushing it to her. It rolled over, and he sat in another. Thelma ran to

him, jumping into his lap.

Trace grunted as the dog landed. “Good Lord, Thelma. You’ve been eating rocks lately?”

He grabbed a handful of furry wrinkles and rubbed while the dog stretched in his lap. Marlana took a seat in the chair and pivoted back and forth. Alone under fluorescent lights, her ballsy let’s-jump-in-the-shower promise seemed insane. She wanted it so badly and couldn’t match the level of hotness this guy had. She was so out of his league. He even liked dogs. Hugging a wrinkly bulldog was pretty much the only thing that could make this guy any better looking.

“So, Marlana.”

He made her name sound like sex. She’d heard her name a million times, during twenty-one years walking the earth, and never once had it made her want to get naked. When Trace said her name, she prayed the fabric would just melt away. Looking down just to double-check, a smidge of disappointment teased her when she saw herself fully clothed.

She bit her lip then forced a smile. “So, Trace.”

“I get the feeling you’ve been thrown to the wolves recently. Sergeant Dick and Captain Shithead looked about as nice as fucking on sandpaper.”

Her brows furrowed. “Guess that wouldn’t be too nice.”

“You’re not military, are you?”

“No.” She tilted her head, toying with a stray strand of hair. “You really don’t know anything about me? They just sent you to find me and bring me home?”

“Yup.”

“Well, it wasn’t because they were concerned about me, that was for sure,” she scoffed.

“You’re in intelligence?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what?” he asked.

“I’m a biological engineering student. Getting my bachelor’s and master’s in a combined accelerated program, and I lucked into this program.” She used air quotes on lucked. “My freshmen year, I wrote an article that was picked up by a scientific journal. Guess I piqued the government’s interest. They came calling. The rest is history.”

“Oh.” He winked. “So, you’re smart.”

That made her laugh. “Depends.”

“I like smart.”

And that made her blush. She could feel the hot flash move across her cheeks.

“Um...”

“You need a ride? You look exhausted.” He tossed up his hands. “In a you’re-very-pretty kind of way.”

An ache eased in her chest. She hadn’t realized it was there, but since it had dissipated, she could relax more with him. “A ride home would be appreciated.”

“Thought you didn’t have a home anymore.”

“You were listening,” Marlena said.

“Surprising, right?”

“Not that surprising.” She threw her hands up with a laugh. “In a you’re-a-very-macho-listener kind of way.”

He stood, pushing Thelma off his lap. “Cute. Come on.” With a hand on her back, he walked her to the door. She couldn’t help but notice that between the time she’d been left with Titan honchos and secret project pricks, Trace had showered. He smelled squeaky clean. She, on the other hand, needed a shower.



Scooting in front of him, his hand caught her elbow, pulling her close. “What’s the deal with you and running off?”

“You’re very clean.” She made a face. “And I’m very not.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

Whoa, baby, I sure noticed. She wasn’t sure if he had just lied, but she prayed he hadn’t. “Let’s just keep some distance between us. I’m pretty sure if I don’t find a toothbrush soon, both of us will be totally grossed out.”

“Whatever you say, hot stuff.” He patted her bottom as they left the room.

Behind her, Thelma rolled over and groaned. Marlina bit her bottom lip, unsure of what she should think or say. Instead of doing either, she trailed behind Trace through a labyrinth of security doors until they were in a parking lot. Not her favorite type of place. Every time she saw one, she thought about Mr. Romatar’s people grabbing her, shoving a rag in her mouth, and watching her wake up when they were on a plane flying to what she’d since then discovered was South America.

It was time to fake confidence again, because surely Trace wasn’t the type of man to hang out with weak girls. They reached a black car with black windows, and he beeped it unlocked then grabbed her door.

“Need a hand in?”

She jumped into the car, fumbling the handle and closing herself away from him. “I’m good.”

Right. Super-duper confident. She hung her head until he joined her in the front seat. Then she looked out the window, feeling like the most awkward girl ever. “My place

is off exit twenty-one. It's a temporary until..."Until I figure out where I should go and why I'm so dang lost. "Until something better comes along."

The parking garage was a cement maze full of barriers and security measures. It was more secure than any secret location she'd been whisked away to for her project.

After a few minutes on unmarked roads, Trace hit the highway. "I've got a temporary place now, courtesy of Titan." He mumbled something she couldn't make out. "Too bad I'm climbing the walls."

She turned, not expecting him to say that at all. "You? You're the calmest person I've ever met."

He chuckled. "Not all the time I'm not, Cinderella."

"I don't believe you."

"I've been forced stateside. I'm not handling it well, but it had to be done. So, I'm doing it."

Trace didn't live here? "Where would you be?"

"Anywhere else."

"Germany?"

"No..." He shook his head. "I was following up on an investigation of sorts."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Sounds vague. Is everything you do for Delta or Titan, whoever, is it all—”

“That was a personal project.”

“Oh,” she said.

“When we’re off the job, I have something I’ve been working on for a few weeks now.”

“What is it?”

He didn’t answer but just changed lanes needlessly. “You hungry? I’m going to grab a burger from a drive-thru.”

Sore subject. That was interesting, because she thought nothing fazed him. “Burger’s good. Thanks.”

They went through the drive-thru and left with bags of food, eating quietly as he drove. He took an exit and followed her directions to her house. Then they were home, the end of the road for her time with him.

She looked at the condo duplex while they sat in her driveway. Everything felt tense. It wasn’t sexual tension, but more like she’d said something that went too deep. “Thanks again.”

Trace nodded, and a car zoomed down her street. She flinched. It was just someone racing down the block. So stupid. Her lungs had almost jumped out of her chest for no

reason. God, she was a jittery moron. It was embarrassing. She couldn't go around hopping in the air every time a car made a noise or a door slammed.

"Marlena?"

Her eyes shot to him. She knew he could see right through her. Weak. Still, she painted on her smile. "Yes?"

"I'll call you later, make sure you're doing okay."

"You don't have my number."

"Not sure why that would stop me from calling you."

"It's new and unlisted."

His face tightened as though he were running through the possibilities as to why. "That's interesting. Call you later."

Marlena opened the door and got out. Why did she constantly offer information that wasn't needed? For the same reason she'd run from him: she couldn't control herself around him, and that was scary. From then on, every interaction with him would be mapped out. Except they had no plans. She'd been a one-night stand he happened to rescue, and his offer to call was an easy way out of an uncomfortable drive home. Still, it couldn't hurt to hope she was wrong.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

When Marlana walked through the door of her place, she was surrounded by desolation. It was so empty. She'd lost her cell phone when the Romatar men abducted her. But there was still her landline. She never used it, yet it was there, mocking her after Trace had said he'd call. The only reason she had a phone at home was in case of emergency. It was a silly safety net.

She showered, nuked a microwavable dinner, and vegged out in front of the TV. Tucked into a blanket, sleep called for her—

The ringing of her home phone jolted her awake.

No way did he call, just no way. But her phone rang, echoing from the kitchen... and maybe this was a dream. She stared toward the kitchen in absolute disbelief. He couldn't have taken the time to look up her unlisted number. Right?

Jumping up with the blanket tucked around her, Marlana shuffled for the phone. "Hello?"

"Told you I'd call."

Her stomach fell, but she smiled. "You did."

But "why" was the question. There was no reason for him to throw her a pitying bone. If he hadn't wanted to call, he'd never see her again.

Trace cleared his throat. "Are you surviving okay at your place? Because I hate mine."

"I dozed off on the couch while watching TV." God, she sounded like a loser. Why say that?

Trace laughed. "Me too. Bored as hell. I hit up a game of pool with the guys then came back here. To a townhouse. In a car. Shit."

"I don't get it. How else would you have driven home?"

He laughed again. "I'm not really a car guy."

"Oh. You're a... like a truck guy or something?"

"I can deal with any good set of wheels that make a fun time out of escape and evade. I guess the Charger's okay. It can gun it and all. But... a car and a house make me feel antsy, that's all. Anyway. What's the deal with your new digs?"

She'd already fessed up about being home alone with nothing to do. "The job's to blame."

"Too simple, Marlena. Something else is there."

"You're right, but I don't want to get into it."

"Fair enough. Are you still jumping when doors shut and cars drive by?"

She sucked in a breath. "No!"

"Right."

“Well, I’ve been by myself. No cars or doors to make me jump.”

“It’s not abnormal after the shit show you were pulled through.”

She sighed. “I don’t want to think about it, much less talk about it.”

He didn’t say anything, and they sat there. She twirled the phone cord around her finger and leaned against the wall. There was a nice level of comfort knowing he was there. If a door slammed, maybe she wouldn’t jump. Then again, she was supposed to be alone, so if a door slammed, she should jump. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight.” His low voice made her shiver. “I shouldn’t have left you earlier. I shouldn’t... be saying that. Hell, Mar. I have to go.”

“Wait!” Wait, what? A man ditching her shouldn’t be such a surprise except that it was, and deep down, it felt as though maybe he needed her that moment more than she needed him. “Trace?”

Seconds floated by. “Yeah?”

Her dad would bet against her. Brian would shake his head and say that no one needed her. Marlana closed her eyes and shook her head. Fuck Brian, that piece of shit dad. “I don’t want to be alone tonight either. But I’m not good for much. I’m just—”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Meaning what?”

“I’m too tired to jump you in bed, and I’m too jumpy to be good company. I need to get out of my house. I just—”

“One eleven Mason Brick Drive.”

She would’ve expected nerves or anxiety. Anything but the calm that made her feel free from her personal demons. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

\*\*\*

Walking around barefoot and in jeans, Trace drained a beer and stared at his cell phone. The smart move would’ve been to call her and say he couldn’t keep his eyes open. That maybe another time would be better, like when she was raring to go and wanted to strip down naked. But that wasn’t in the cards tonight. They hadn’t been home from South America more than twenty hours. Sure, she said she’d dozed. But after what she went through, she probably needed an Ambien and a few days of sleep.

Headlights hit his driveway, and she was there. Damn, if there wasn’t a stirring in his chest. He opened the door and watched her get out of her car then went outside. “Red car, red hair. Suits you.”

She scoffed but then put too much assurance into her voice. “Absolutely. Power color.”

Something didn’t jibe, but he didn’t care. “Red’s sexy. No idea about power colors.



Like I said, it suits you, Cinderella. Come on.” He took her small hand in his and led her up the stairs. “This is it. Looks decent, feels like a jail cell.”

As she took in the room, he took her in. Pajamas. A cotton T-shirt and flannel pants with little water skiing panda bears in Santa hats. If outside in the dark, she’d been sexy, inside... this whole look... it was cute.

She caught him looking. “What’s that half-smile, half-frown thing? If you don’t like my jammies, too bad.” She twirled in a circle. “I’m—hey, are you watching one of those Bournemovies?” And just that fast, she plopped on his couch, tucking her legs under her butt.

The girl liked thriller spy flicks. Add another point in the cool-chick column. Nothing she did was expected. “Want a beer?”

“It might put me to sleep.”

He tilted his head. “You’re dressed for it.”

Her eyes raked over his bare chest. “I...”

“I’ll get you that beer.” Because for once it felt like he should think of someone besides himself for a change. The woman could barely stand. The clothes she wore served as a sign to stay away. But he just couldn’t. He needed a freakin’ barrier. “A beer and a blanket.”

A minute later, he had a cold one in her hand and a blanket over her legs. He sat in the middle of the couch and pulled her close to him. She smelled like sugar, and it might’ve been his death sentence, sitting there with her all cute and smelling like the first time he’d had her. Mouth watering, he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on Matt Damon blowing shit up. It didn’t work. Instead, he heard the IED blasts that

stole his brother away from him. A growl roared up; his eyes shot open. He was ready to tear the walls down and—Marlena was asleep, nestled between the arm of his couch and his bare chest. Her just-opened beer was balanced loosely in her hand. God, she was beautiful.

Trace set her beer on the coffee table and scooped her up in the blanket. Without thinking, he headed toward the bedroom and laid her in his bed, crawling next to her. Marlena sighed softly but didn't wake. "I don't know what to think about you, Cinderella."

He curled around her sleep-lax body and kissed her sugar-scented hair. If he were ever to be normal, if he didn't have a wicked fight brewing deep in his chest to retaliate for Michael's death, then that moment might have been his heaven.

\*\*\*

Marlena woke surrounded by hard warmth. She wasn't in Mr. Romatar's compound, this wasn't her bed... The night before flashed in her memory. The last thing she remembered was sipping a beer and snuggling next to Trace. Slowly, she turned over, and there he was—rugged, and inches away from her. In his bed. Her stomach surged into her throat.

"Morning," he whispered.

Unsure of the right thing to say, she sat up. "I should go."

The heavy weight of his arm flopped over her and pulled her tight. "You should not."

He couldn't possibly want her to stay. Right? Instead of voicing that, she lay straight as a spike and stared at his ceiling.

“Marlena.”

“Hmm?”

“Go back to sleep.” His morning, gritty voice raked over her senses.

“I’m really okay. I should get—”

Trace took her face in his hands and leveled her with the softest kiss she could imagine. His full lips brushed over hers; his tongue teased. She melted against him, needing that reassurance and hating that one kiss, and she was a mess.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Now can we go back to sleep?” His phone rang. “What the fuck now?”

Hand slapping all around his nightstand, he finally found it and answered. The alarm clock read six in the morning. Who would call so early?

“Got it,” he said to the caller after a few seconds. He rubbed his face and sat up. The blanket slipped off him, and even through his jeans, she could see that he had a hard-on. “Don’t mind me.”

Trace stretched and crawled out of bed. Every muscle in the man’s body was carved. Corded. Holy moly, she might pass out. Had she ever seen something so ruggedly handsome? And the tattoos... A work of art. That was the only way to describe him.

“We’ve got a job, and I’ve got to run.” He dropped his jeans and walked toward his closet.

Holy moly? More like “Holy butt cheeks.” Marlana sucked a breath, fell back on the bed, and covered her face with a pillow. “Trace, you are too much to handle.”

She heard his laugh then peeled back the edge of the pillow.

“I thought that about you last night, and seriously, if something wasn’t very time-sensitive, I’d give the boss the finger and stay here with you. Santa-bear jammies and all.”

### CHAPTER NINE

Delta hit jobs hard. Trace loved that. Just like when he was on his SEAL team, they worked nonstop, pushed their operations to the brink of no return then sidled back home. But there was that catch again: home. He itched to get back to Afghanistan, itched to scour the desert for answers and find his brother's missing personal effects. There hadn't been much to bury after the IED had hit. All he wanted was his brother's goddamn dog tags. Shit. Trace rubbed his hand over his face. Without thinking, he hit the only number he had programmed into his phone.

Marlena picked up on the second ring. "Hi."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"No one else has this number."

That made him feel good, possessive, as though no one else should have that number. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to catch up on missed chapters. Turns out when you can't tell your professor you were abducted by international terrorists, you don't get a free pass on missed classes and notes."

He laughed dully. "Sucks."

"You okay?"

“Yeah, sure.”

“Where did you go? What’d you do?” Marlana asked.

“You know. Same old.”

“Rescued another one-night stand. Super stud, huh?”

That time, he laughed genuinely then hated himself. He was on the phone; Michael was dead. Trace had been kicked off his SEAL team—that would’ve destroyed his brother—and he was flirting with a pretty girl that he’d been excited to call when he got home. What. The. Hell. It was wrong.

“Trace?”

The bare walls closed in on him. He moved to the couch. The fabric scratched at him. “I think I have to go. Call you later, Mar.”

His heart beat faster, and he tried relocating to the bed, the hallway floor, the living room. No matter where he went, he itched to escape. The easiest fix would be to crack a bottle of something with a burn. Maybe he would drink the incoming headache away. But that could be a rabbit hole, starting trouble he didn’t need with Delta.

Though... if that happened, maybe he would come to blows with Jared or Brock. It’d feel good to get knocked around and throw a few punches. He balled his fists, needing to do something.

Trace dropped to the floor and counted off stomach crunches. After one hundred, he gave up counting, tore off his shirt, and kept going until sweat poured off him and his muscles screamed.

A bell rang as he growled through the last sit-up. He fell back, breathing hard. What the hell? Doorbell. Hello. He wiped his brow with his shirt and popped up. It wasn't the Middle East. There were no war zones here. Just suburbia, where people rang doorbells, trying to sell crap Trace didn't need. He swung the door open.

"Hey." Marlena stood with a six-pack in hand. "Surprise. Can I come in?"

Her eyes raked down his half-naked body. Warmth flowed in his veins. It was the kind of heat that had nothing to do with killing himself with calisthenics. And God, she looked good—the way her shirt clung to her breasts. The way her pants covered her hips. It brought a vivid, instantaneous memory of his hands holding those hips while she rode him until she moaned.

"Yeah." He took a step back. "Sure."

She walked past him as if she owned the place and threw down her purse. Then she headed toward the kitchen and stowed the beer—minus two longnecks—in the fridge. "Here."

"Thanks." All he could think about was Marlena naked. Naked and climaxing on his cock. That didn't seem like a good conversation starter.

"You sounded... off."

Not sounded. Hewasoff. Everything was disjointed, mostly because of the routine of life and picket fences surrounding him. But some of it was Marlena. He couldn't place his finger on it, but when she came to mind, he felt a hole in his chest as though she were something he should have but couldn't. Or wouldn't. His thoughts were so jacked.

"Trace?" She put her beer on the kitchen counter. "If there's some kind of problem

with showing up unannounced, clue me in. Actually, now that I say that out loud”—she smiled, laughing—“it does sound a little much.”

“No. It’s fine. Just... Four quiet walls make me a little claustrophobic. That’s all.”

“That why you’re drenched in sweat?” Her nose wrinkled.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Shit. “Yeah, guess so. Was planning to work out until I dropped, at least that was my plan.”

“I have a cell phone again.” She wiggled it in her hand. Her eyes ran over him then shot across the kitchen. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it.”

He did not want her to go. At all. Pressure built in his chest. “Give me a minute. Lemme shower off, and we’ll drink some beer.” There was hesitation hanging between them. “Be back in a minute. Don’t leave, Cinderella.”

Without waiting, he turned and headed for the bathroom. Leaving her while he showered was a risk, given they’d been in this exact situation before, and it hadn’t ended well. Quick as he could, he ran shampoo through his hair and a washcloth over his body, ignoring the fact that his dick was semi-hard.

Maybe she was on his couch. No way he was lucky enough to get out and find her in his bed. It didn’t matter. Anywhere he could lay her down and relieve the stress ratcheting up in his chest. One good kiss. One wild fuck. That would help.

Dressed and heading toward the kitchen, he knew it before he saw: The kitchen was empty. The couch couldn’t have been more pathetic. She was gone.

No, she wasn’t walking out on him. Not when he knew that he needed her. Burying himself in her would soothe away the empty ache in his soul. Sit-ups didn’t do shit compared to how good it’d feel to sink deep into her pussy. He wanted to hear her wear out his name and feel her tear scratches into his back.

Trace grabbed his phone, not knowing her new number. The text message alert blinked for his attention. Sorry. Shouldn't have shown up unannounced.

The hell with apologies. He hit Call.

She answered on the first ring. "Hey—"

"I was gone for a second," he growled at her.

"And I was wrong to show up like that."

"Marlena." He blew out, the tightness in his chest eating him alive. "Don't make me chase you down."

"Why would you?"

"Hell, why wouldn't I?"

She sighed. "I didn't get too far."

He walked by a window, saw her parked in his driveway still, head leaning back. "Get back in here."

"Trace—"

"Mar, don't make me get you."

"I don't respond well to orders."

That was bullshit. He remembered their night in the hotel room. He'd seen the look in her eyes when he'd told her to get on her knees, to play with her breasts. Goddamn,

that one-night stand was hot, even weeks later. He pictured her with her eyes closed, delicate fingers squeezing her plump tits. His cock went from semi-interested to a repeat performance, begging for release. “I can’t figure out if you’re absolutely, totally used to getting your way or scared of me. You run when I say don’t. You leave when I want you to stay. You show up when I don’t expect you; you smile when I know you don’t want to.”

She looked at him from her car.

“When you called before, Marlana, I didn’t sound off, I was off. I was crawling the walls. Damn it.” Breathing in, he couldn’t quite get deep enough of a breath. “Get in here. I need you.”

The car door opened. He held his breath until she was at his door. In his door. In his arms, against the wall. His lips hovered over hers. “Why?”

“It’s hard for me to trust others, and— I don’t trust myself.”

“I’m out of my element.” He licked her bottom lip, so full and delicious he couldn’t help but kiss her again. “Fucking you seems like the only thing that might help.”

She nodded, tugging at his shirt. His hands ran all over her. Smooth skin, full breasts, a body made for holding. Heaven in his hands. That was the only thing that stilled his crazy mind. But she didn’t trust him—or herself—and God, all he wanted was the confident, trusting woman he’d had before.

“When I was a stranger, you didn’t hold back. Did you?”

She turned her face away. He caught her chin and brought her gaze back to him. “I didn’t hold back.”

“Don’t now. Promise me.” Her eyes rounded, and she nodded, but not enough that he believed her. “Promise.”

“I can try.”

“I want you. You know that, right?”

Her head tilted. “Yes.”

But her voice was so quiet. “This red hair. Lips I want to suck.” His hands drifted over her breasts, down her stomach, teasing the snap on her pants. “These legs I want to be between. Trust me, Mar. If you don’t know how sexy you are, I’ll show you.”

“Trace...” Still pressed against his wall, her head fell to the side when he undid her pants. Then he went back to her breasts.

“I want the real Marlena. The girl from the one-night stand.” He walked his fingers over the silken fabric stretched across her chest. Her nipples reached for him. He tweaked one until her jaw dropped open and her eyes listed to the side. “Undress.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t make me spank that perfect round bottom.” She blinked. Her cheeks flushed, bottom lip catching between her teeth. Pure lust poured off of her, so hot the room might melt around them. “You want that, don’t you?”

Her fingers toyed with the hem of her shirt. But not fast enough. “You don’t know what I want.”

“Goddamn, pretty girl. You’re wet just thinking about it, aren’t you?”

Her breathing started faster. Soft, luscious breasts begged for his rough hands. She nodded. “I’m...”

“You’ll trust me to take care of you.”

She nodded again.

“You’ll know how sexy you are, even if I have to force it on you. I’ll bring you to the edge and make you come and come again.”

Still nodding, she whispered, “Yes.”

“Lose your clothes.”

Her shirt, shorts, bra, and thong were on the ground in seconds. He spun her around, breasts and cheeks pressed against the wall, and he walked his fingers down the ridge of her spine, letting them stop on the swell of her ass. All his pent-up energy, that rip-the-walls-down tension, was gone, and he could only focus on her.

Completely naked, she peeked over her shoulder. “But you’re still dressed.”

Smack. “Quiet, pretty girl.”

She moaned, and he smoothed his palm over the spot he’d spanked. “Feel good?”

“No.”

“Liar.” He did it again.

Her head fell back a little. “I don’t understand.”

“Why you like it?” Because fuck him, he didn’t either. But it had to do with that almost smile that surfaced on her face after she absorbed the sting.

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Fingers between your legs. Touch yourself.”

He danced his hands over her red butt cheek and watched her back arch. Ass in the air, cheeks pressed against the wall, back hollowing out in a perfect, creamy-skinned slope. Marlena’s eyes drifted shut, and she teased her clit.

“Trace...”

“Tell me when you’re close.”

“I’m close.” Her breaths panted.

“Tell me when you’re closer. When you’re going to fall.”

He watched her leaning into the wall, doing as he commanded, and stepped close to her. He raced his hands over her body. Whatever stole her confidence, he damn sure wouldn’t let it affect them. She could be whoever she wanted to be to the outside world, but when it was them—just them working through their issues—she had to be raw and real.

Her shoulders tensed. Her legs were spread, and little sweet noises fell from her murmuring lips. “I’m going to—”

He spanked her ass with one hand, not soothing away the sting, and pushed the fingers of his other hand into her wet pussy. Marlena screamed his name, bucking on his hands, falling into his arms, riding the wave of her orgasm with both their hands

between her legs.

Finally, he could breathe. The restlessness that'd plagued him since the moment he was off assignment subsided as he imagined how it'd feel to thrust into her until she came again. "I'm nowhere near done with you yet."



### CHAPTER TEN

The barren apartment was small. It took him only a few strides to have her in his bed. His clothes were off, a condom was in hand, and they were under the covers in a heated tangle of arms and legs. His lips were on her neck, her nails scratching down his back.

There was something good about having her there, even if he didn't plan to use the place for long.

"I want to know." She bit his earlobe. "Tell me what your demon is."

The words pulled everything to a standstill. Rigid in her arms, he'd forgotten his demons for a few minutes, and that was the point of this. "Not how this game works."

"I want to take care of you."

He pulled back. "Why?"

"You deserve it."

"Ha. Bullshit." He went back to her neck, but she took his face in her hands. Trace said, "Seriously, Marlana, let's get back to what we do well."

Her face fell for a flash, but determination lit her face. "Tell me something."

Ah, man. This wasn't where he wanted to go. It was too dark, too angry. Fuck the

world. Except when he had her in his arms.

“Trace?”

Fine. She could know why he felt like a caged animal. “I’m a piece of shit who let down his brother. Let down my SEAL team.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Believe it. I’m angry because I’m grounded. I can’t go overseas until Delta gets the green light to go back to ghost operations.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s not much to it. I don’t exist. I don’t live in one place or do one thing. When we’re not doing jobs that no one will admit to, I’ve got my own personal mission in life. So there it is.” Fuck, man. His heart racing, he couldn’t breathe. “And the only thing that has kept me from losing my shit is you. In bed.”

She bit her lip, looking away. When her gaze came back, the intensity made his chest swell.

“Have me until you forget whatever you need to forget.”

Shit, that wasn’t the only reason. “No, it’s not—”

“Trace—”

“No. Just...” He needed to get out of the bed and out of this house. Why the hell did he think he could do this? He didn’t deserve her, and he needed to kill. Maim. Rip the world apart until he felt normal again.

She grabbed his elbow and hung on.

“Marlena.” Goddamn, she needed to let go. “Mar. Enough.”

“You need to. You have to. You’re going insane. I see it.”

“So the hell what?” he roared.

She needed to back off, but he looked at her, and she hadn’t flinched. Blood rushed in his veins. Energy, anxiety, and anticipation were making him stupid. He couldn’t handle this. It was too much, and he didn’t know why he thought any of this... except he wanted to hold her. Kiss her. Fuck her until exhausted and smell sugar all over himself.

“Trace.” Her voice was quiet but not little. It was confident and coaxing. “If that’s what you need... You and me, in this bed, until you feel better.”

“Why?” His chest was tight, his head shaking.

“If you won’t share why, at least let me help you this way.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Why?” Tight chested, he pulled away from her, needing to punch the wall. “Just, no. You’re making this too much. This is fun. We’re fun. That’s it.”

Sweat pricked his shoulder blades, and finally, Marlena’s face fell. He’d said what he needed to in order to stop the conversation.

“I’m sorry for whatever hurt you.”

“Don’t say that.” His head dropped. Too bad that was all it took. An apology. “My brother.” God, it hurt to say out loud. He tried to swallow and couldn’t. The burn in his eyes was awful. “Mytwinbrother was killed by insurgents. Nothing much left of his body. It burned, but slow. He probably suffered.” Trace choked on the thought, wishing it were him, not Michael. “Afterward, no one found his tags. He wasn’t on mission. They were transporting between—” He sucked a breath and closed his eyes. “I want them back.”

He fell back on the pillow. Feeling better wasn’t the issue. That’d never happen. But saying it out loud... He shook his head. Saying it out loud did nothing. He wouldn’t let it.

“When you find them, what will you do?”

Trace turned his head. “What?”

She shrugged a naked shoulder. “What will you do with them?”

Laughing deeply and sarcastically, he burrowed into a pillow. “Shouldn’t you explain

to me that there's a million miles of desert to sift through, and I'm never going to find those tags?"

Her head tilted. "Is that what people say?"

"More or less." Because if people didn't say it out loud, he could tell they were thinking it.

Marlena took his hand in hers and kissed his palm. The same palm that spanked her until she came. Her tongue ran along the lines in his skin and skipped over to his fingers. She rolled his hand into a fist, kissing his knuckles. "You're a strong man, and I think sharing the hurt will make it less, maybe, one day."

No, no, no. That wasn't what he wanted to hear.

Pulling away, he didn't get far. Her lips pressed to his, her bare breasts swaying and teasing across his chest. Her lips were lazy and slow. His mouth opened and let their tongues tangle. Marlena straddled his thighs. She cupped his face in her hands, rocking her hips as she intensified the kiss.

"Mar. No." This got too real. He needed out.

"Shut up, Trace." Her hand stole away from his cheek then pushed the condom packet he'd ditched on the mattress into his hold.

He nodded, shutting up, and with a quick tear and roll, he'd sheathed himself. He watched her rise above him and hover on the head of his cock, teasing him. He lay in agony as her sweet pussy took him in.

"Fuck me, Marlena." Because he couldn't think.

Laughing, she rocked her hips. “That was the plan.”

Tight and wet. That was all he could focus on. Her eyes sank shut when she swayed. Her full breasts moved with her motion, tight nipples hypnotizing him until he couldn’t stand it anymore. He sucked the cherry tips into his mouth, tasting heaven and sugar.

Her hands snaked into his hair, pulling at the roots, making his scalp sting while she rode him long and deep. It was a contradiction. She was a walking, talking, fucking contradiction. Brassy, ballsy, and ready to submit to him. Pushy and knowing exactly what it took to make him tell his secrets, but sweetly screwing the pain away.

Hell, he could fall for a girl like this. If that was the kind of man he was.

“Trace,” she moaned.

And he loved it, how she said his name. How a fire started at the base of his cock, making his balls tighten, pushing him to come, calling her name, pulling her close to him. His hands found her hips. She rocked harder, faster, deeper. Marlena begged and pleaded for relief, and he thrust hard, making her come on his cock. The woman became fireworks on display—shoulders back, breasts bouncing, mouth open and calling him a god. Trace came with her, groaning his own satisfaction and pulling her tight into his arms.

They stayed interlocked forever. Serenity painted his mind. Her heartbeat thumped against him while the ever-present guilt he tried to live with gave him a breather.

She kissed him chastely then abandoned him without a word. After he heard the bathroom door shut down the hall, he rolled into a pillow, ready to bury his head and find all the angry emotion he had clung to. But the scent of sugar teased him from the pillowcase. He breathed in deeply. Anger stayed at bay.

Marlena was what he needed to survive Delta's downtime... He shut his eyes and thought about how her touch soothed him.

He opened his eyes when he heard her at the door. What?

She stood there. Dressed. All the way down to her shoes on and purse on her shoulder. "I should get going."

He was dumbstruck. Then dumbstruck again for the harsh blast of disappointment burning in his chest. She was bailing on him. Again. Granted, this time he knew about it, but it still didn't sit right. "Alright."

Turning on her heel, she waved over her shoulder and left him all alone. Trace dropped back to bed, face hitting a sugar-scented pillow. Everything hit him again, but this time, it hurt worse.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

The gas pedal was pushed down as far as Marlena could stand it. Flooring it down the interstate didn't help the knots in her stomach, and staring at the broken white line was going to make her dizzy if she didn't stop soon. What the hell happened back there? Too many things to count. She'd gone all psychiatrist on the poor guy, practically pushing him into an emotional tailspin. Then she practically made love to him, wanting to pick up all his broken pieces and weld them back together.

But even before that, when he demanded she obey... she did. And she liked it. Loved it. A hot blast of desire flooded her. It'd been incredible to give up control to a man that knew how to take it. And he'd enjoyed it. It'd been all for her benefit, and it was liberating. Confidence had soared in her mind.

Trace had done her a favor. She pulsed between her legs, thinking about how she had come, and what she'd been doing.

But... then she ran. Every thought she had, every minute of enjoyment was paused so she could get home. He'd made her feel wanted, so she ran. Science and engineering she understood, but relationships? Feelings? She sucked at them. How could she trust her feelings when the nice guys never turned out to be the nice guys?

Well, hell. Trace wasn't nice. He was ruined, in a way. Rough. Tough. A badass tattooed man. He was everything she could ever dream of, a hero who'd saved her. Then there was the insane, mind-melding sex.

Not that he was asking for a relationship. It'd been the exact opposite, actually, but in



her heart, she was falling for him, knowing that as lost a cause as he claimed to be, she was the one not good enough for him.

Stop!

Mar took a breath, trying to avoid a downward spiral. Her phone rang, and she dug it out while steering onto the interstate. She gave a quick glance at the caller ID. She should've guessed it. There was no way would Trace have let her run out on him.

“What? Do you have a fairy godmother calling the shots, Cinderella? You have to run home at a certain time?”

She cringed. “No.”

“You turn into a pumpkin? Poof into some kind of troll?”

“Does this line of questioning work on most girls, or is this something new you’re trying out on me?”

He growled. “Why do you keep leaving?”

“What’s it matter?”

He remained silent as she passed a mile marker. “I’d guess for the same reason that you wanted to know what haunts me.”

She never should have done that. “I don’t know why I pushed you. I’m sorry.”

“You apologize a lot.”

“I don’t—”

“Ha.”

He was right. “I think I only apologize to you.”

“Tell me why Romatar took you, or tell me why you run from me.” Trace blew into the phone. “Tell me anything.”

Didn’t he know that the more he talked, the more she fell for him? “If I tell you, I’d have to kill you.”

Trace’s low rumble of laughter tickled her ear. “Give it a shot. I’d like to see you try.”

God, so would she. It’d give her a good excuse to crawl all over his body again.

“I’m waiting.”

“Tell you anything...” She sighed. “I never had a one-night stand before you.”

“You’ve had some after me?”

“God, no!” She laughed, feeling somewhat better. “You’re awful.”

“So, why did you? And the name thing? I don’t get it. I don’t get anything about you. I’ve never met anyone... so complicated.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Complicated?” She groaned into the phone and would’ve hit her head on the steering wheel, if it hadn’t meant she’d run off the road and die in a fiery crash.

“Alright, complicated is wrong. How about... complex?”

“Um—”

“Okay, wrong again. Maybe that doesn’t sound any better. Shit. I want to know about you. You don’t make sense, and I’m dying to find out why.”

“Okay.” She exited the highway. “I’d been told a million times that I’d get myself into trouble. That the security clearances didn’t do crap to protect me, and that they were using me for cheap, smart labor. My job scares me, school’s overwhelming me because I can’t catch up, and my dad makes me... uneasy.”

“Clarifyuneasy, Cinderella.” His voice growled low.

She pushed her head back into the headrest as she moved into a turning lane for her neighborhood. “He’s a dick. His name is Brian. He hates that I was smart. My mom died in a car crash, and he blamed me. I don’t know why. But somewhere along the line he started telling me everything I did was wrong, and somewhere along the line, I started believing him.”

“Brian sounds like a fuck.”

She smiled. “He is.”

“You know that whatever he says is bullshit, right? Weak people need others to take down so they don’t feel so low and lonely at the bottom of their shit pile.”

“I’m a broken person to begin with. Not as strong as I want to be.”

“Nothing I’ve seen about you is broken. I promise you, Mar.”

She laughed sadly. “I don’t think you’ve seen the real me.”

“Wrong. I think I’m the only person who has seen the real you.”

God, he was right. It hurt to admit it. And he wasn’t going to be around. He had promised her that. But each passing second, she was more sucked into feelings she couldn’t run from. Marlena pulled into her driveway. “Trace?”

“Yeah, babe?”

Even the casualness in his voice hurt her. “We can’t do this. I can’t show up unannounced, and you can’t drive me to scream your name.” Tears slipped down her cheeks. Fake confidence, self-preservation? Who knew what this was? But it was needed. “I can’t do it, and I’m sorry.”

“What?” Anger poured through the phone.

“I’m falling for you. Like seriously can’t breathe for wanting you to kiss me. Hold me.” She couldn’t believe she’d said that out loud. “And neither of us needs that burden. I’m sorry, Trace.”

She hung up and let the tears pour.

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What the fuck? Was there anything more irritating than Marlana McCloud? She was falling for him? No way. First, how could anyone fall for a man who refused to live a normal life? Second, what the fuck did she just do? Break off their little... partnership, after running off on him again?

The walls closed in on him just as they did before she arrived. Delta thought he was one round of bad news away from cracking up, and maybe they were right. He'd been booted from his SEAL team. The way his head spun at that moment, Delta would be next, and then he'd have no way or resources to find Michael's tag.

No. Screw that. Trace wanted blood. He needed it. That was what would get him over Michael, over the ache of losing his SEAL team and over the discomfort that put a pang in his chest, knowing that Marlana wouldn't be around while he was home.

No, not home. Grounded. Because as soon as he had the green light, he'd be gone, and he wasn't looking back. No way. Sugar-scented sheets couldn't pull him back.

Except they could. Damn it. He scrubbed his face. Dog tags. Focus on the tags. His twin was dead, and he was alive. They'd had a funeral. The symbolism and the honor had all been there. But those tags were still overseas, still in the hands of terrorists, and that disrespect made him rage.

Retribution. Retaliation. Those were the only possible courses of action.

But alone, in the claustrophobic confines of his temporary house, he knew the truth. As long as he was stuck in a house, there was no way those tags were ever coming home. And until he got them, he would be in a perpetual state of panic. The tags were symbolic, and if he found them, the deep-rooted guilt would lessen.

Would Michael have joined up if Trace hadn't? Maybe they shouldn't have gone after Special Forces. But he'd known his brother would be a great soldier. Probably a

better one than Trace.

Now he held his cell phone in his hand, just hung up on by a crazy woman, and he had a gnawing, gut-churning burn that he couldn't explain. It curled through him as profoundly as the knowledge that Michael should've done something else to pay homage to the country they both loved more than their own lives.

But he had no knowledge that would help explain Marlana. The only thing he knew was that the third time wasn't the charm. She'd ditched him, walked out on him, and then hung up. He was done.

Except his thumb hit redial. It went to voicemail.

Hell no. That wasn't going to happen. Two more times, she let him go to voicemail again. That was just enough time for him to get the keys to his car and pull out onto the road. If she wanted to say some BS like she was falling for him, she could say it to his face, and he could explain every reason why that was a bad idea. Miles passed as he floored it on the highway. Less than five minutes later, he arrived at her place, and he still hadn't come up with a reason she should stay away from him. Damn it.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

The easiest thing to do was to leave her phone in her car. That way the temptation to answer Trace's calls would be less. She shed her clothes while walking toward the bathroom and turned the water on as hot as she could stand it. She grabbed her iPod and stuck it in the dock, letting music fill the bathroom.

The protective cocoon of water enveloped her. The shower speakers swirled music in with the steam. Sinking down, she sat on the floor and let it pour overhead. Marlena flipped the knob on the tub and let the water start to fill it.

Trace wasn't the only reason she was glad her phone was in the car. Since she had a working cell again, friends had been calling, asking her to go out. Without thinking, the automatic answer had been no. Every time. Her abduction had turned her into a homebody. Home was comfortable. Safe. No parking lot for her to be easy pickings for kidnappers. The four walls were almost reassuring.

She turned off the water, content to sit in the bath. Sighing, she opened her eyes.

Trace was there, in her bathroom—she could see him through the semi-sheer shower curtain. He had a T-shirt, jeans, and a body that turned her on in an instant.

“Hey!” She covered her breasts with her hands, which was absurd because he'd seen every inch of her naked body. Hell, he'd kissed it too. “What are you—?”

“No way, Cinderella. No way can you say something like that and hang up.”

She shrugged, watching him take off his shirt. The heat in her body intensified.  
“Trace—”

“You’re falling for me?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t backtrack now.”

“Then, yes. Which is why you should leave.” Because if he didn’t, she was going to pull him into the bath. Then she’d fall harder.

“That’s not very smart.”

“Tell me about it.” She grabbed a pink loofah puff and threw it at him.

He’d turned her music off and was pulling off his belt. “I have my own issues.”

“This bath isn’t big enough for us both. You should keep your clothes on.”

“You can barely breathe right now.” He dropped the belt on the ground. “And I can’t stay away.”

She shrugged. “So we have good sex.”

“Great sex.”

“Great sex.” Her clit throbbed, knowing how close he was. “Doesn’t change the fact that it’s a small tub.”

He dropped his pants and stood in front of her, fully erect, long solid shaft palmed in



his strong hand. His gorgeous physique towered so close she shuddered. His thighs were ripped. How was that even a sexy part of the body? All that muscle made him a powerhouse. He could drive and thrust. Her legs could wrap around his hard body and feel as though they were meant to be there.

Trace grabbed her out of the tub, making her feel light as the towel wrapped around her. His rough hands dried her haphazardly, feeling her up, massaging her body more than they wicked away water.

“Sexiest thing I’ve ever touched,” he growled in her ear as the towel fell to the floor.

He grabbed his wallet, found a condom, and rolled it on. Again, lifting her as if she were air in the steamy bathroom, he had her pinned against the door. Towels hung behind her, Trace stood in front of her, and her arms locked around his neck. His cock pressed at her entrance. Tenderness made her hurt but still crave more than just a tease, reminding her he’d just been in her, making her moan and come.

“Mar, you’re the only thing that clears my head.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

Her lips found his neck, and she rocked her hips. Trace pushed into her, thrusting, and her mind stilled. Every sore muscle remembered how he felt inside her. She hooked her legs behind him and bit his shoulder, meeting each push into her.

“Goddamn, girl.”

“Harder. Please.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

He slammed into her, deep and destructive. Orgasm built while she clung to his body. His name moaned out of her mouth. The sound of flesh slapping flesh in the humid bathroom, mixed with the intensity of his body pushing into hers, pushed her over the edge. She came hard, climaxing and feeling the ripple of her internal muscles coaxing him to come with her.

He did, straining. Groaning. Pinning her to the wall, calling her name into her ear, catching her earlobe between his teeth.

Their labored breaths tangled into a lip-lock. She went lax, and he held her off the ground, letting her stay in his protective hold.

“You should know.” His face inched away. “I’ve fallen for you too.”

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Trace pinched his eyes closed, loving the weight of her body in his arms. “But I’m a lost cause.”

Her face fell, and he wanted to kick himself. But it was the truth. Doing right by her meant not leading her on.

“I really am sorry, Mar. It’s just... I’m damaged goods.”

She laughed. The sarcastic bite echoed in the bathroom. “Unreal.”

“What?”

Pushing out of his arms, she wrapped herself in a purple robe that looked as soft as she did. “If it’s not one extreme, it’s the other. My dad always said no one would stoop to the level of being with me. That I’m not worthy. I’m really sick of people defining me, making my decisions for me.”

“I’m not making a decision for you.”

“No. You’re just telling me what’s not an option. Same difference.”

He dropped his head back, staring at the ceiling and feeling like a dick. “Look...”

“I’m looking.” She brushed her hair and stared at him in a misty mirror. The nonchalance killed him. “Let me tell you about me. I made up a fake name because I was working on a classified project, and I had no idea what else to do to keep myself safe.” She shrugged. “I mean, I could walk around with a gun.”

“You own a gun?”

“No.”

“I don’t get it.”

She slumped against the sink. “I wrote a paper on biological weapons that was picked up by a journal. Some super special government person saw it and sweet-talked me into working with them. Made me feel so... smart. They capitalized on it. On me. The whole thing scares me. Before I was taken, I could see how I was vulnerable. They didn’t care. No one cared. Except my stupid father, who laughed and said my intelligence would kill me. He said that I was weak.”

A boulder cropped up in his throat. “I’d never call you weak.”

“But you do call me fairy-tale names because I—”

He shook his head. “Because you leave me when I least want you to.”

She shrank in on herself. “I don’t believe you.”

“That’s your problem.”

She scowled at him in the mirror.

He continued, “I think you’re trying so hard to fix what your dad thought about you, to convince yourself that you’re strong, that you failed to realize you kick ass.”

Marlena scoffed. “Now who’s crazy?”

“Why did you go to my hotel room in Germany?”

Her brow furrowed. “Because you’re hot.”

That made him smile, but it wasn’t the truth. At least, not the whole truth. “Tell me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

She fussed with her hair, tying it, smoothing it, and taking it out again.

“Marlena?”

“I just...” She rolled her eyes. “Wanted to feel desired. Wanted to know if I was so awful.”

“What did you figure out?”

She turned and looked up through her eyelashes. “Not so awful, I guess.”

“Woman, you came alive like nothing I’d ever seen before.” He shook his head, still buck-ass naked, and his cock twitched thinking about that night. “If anyone could make me want normal, it’d be you. I don’t think I’ve ever been more of myself than I am when inside you.”

“Damn it, Trace.” She snagged a towel and tossed it on him. “Don’t say that. Stop saying the reasons why we work and then saying no. I already walked away. You’re the one who’s hurting me. You’re the one fucking with me. It’s selfish. Got it? Get your head out of your butt or get out.”

She stormed out, slamming the door. It bounced off the wall, leaving him standing in her bathroom holding her towel. He wrapped the towel around his waist and trailed after her, a man on a mission. “Mar.”

There was no answer, even though he could hear her slamming through her closet.

“Mar.”

“What?” She slammed both hands against his bare chest, and he caught them. “What do you have to say?”

Good question. What could he possibly offer that wasn’t a joke?

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Let go of me. You should go.”

“No.”

She pulled back, and he released her wrists. His heart fell, knowing he let go of more than just her hands. She spun, purple housecoat billowing out, giving him a glance at what he wanted all over again. “It’s just—damn, never mind.”

Storming back over, she slammed her balled fist into his chest. “You are driving me insane! I’m so done with this. Go the hell away.”

“Have dinner with me?”

Her eyes looked as though they were a breath away from popping out of her head. “Excuse me?”

Where the hell had that beauty come from? “Dinner. Food. Walking around or whatever people do on dates.”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever said.”

“Damn, Mar. I can’t win with you.”

“I’m really not that hard to figure out.” She pushed her shoulders back, retied her robe, and stormed the three feet it took to get back to her closet. “Go away.”

“I’ll be back here at seven.”

“Not interested.”

“See you then, Cinderella.” He walked over and kissed her cheek, completely mind-fucked and unsure why the hell he was feeling like a rock star.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Trace cracked his neck as he closed his car door. He hadn't been on a date since high school, and those weren't so much dates, but more like ways to get a girl alone. A date. What to do? He could hit up a restaurant, but that wasn't necessarily his style, and dinner seemed predictable. Paintball? Maybe not her style, though he remembered her training that assault rifle at him in the jungle, and she had a pretty solid aim. If they went to a movie, he couldn't talk to her. Or... Man, he was overthinking this date thing.

His phone rang, and he sighed, answering it. "Hey, man."

"What are you up to?" Javier had to be at a bar and more than a couple deep.

"Heading toward you." Trace turned the engine over and pulled out of Marlana's driveway. "Pour House?"

"Yup—hey!" Whoever Javier was talking to, it wasn't Trace. The call ended.

The Pour House was becoming their temporary stomping grounds while they were stuck stateside. The place worked for him. The crowd was right. They brewed their own ale, and the kitchen could do more than deep-fry a basket of chicken.

When he pulled in, there were the other Titan-loaned vehicles lined up there. They were blacked-out chargers and SUVs. Javier, Ryder, and Brock were somewhere in the dark barroom, playing pool probably. So that was how they kicked it when they were between jobs. How'd Titan's main team do? Brock had told him something



about cookouts and time spent at Jared's wife's gun range, aptly named GUNS. They were older. Delta was a much younger crew. Almost all of the men were his age and holding on to their own issues. Delta jived together. The more time they spent together, the more they operated like a well-oiled team. And no one had a girl.

Except Brock.

Rumor had it that he had a wife and family and had no problem going home between assignments. But even with that, he didn't seem overly burdened. Trace's chest felt tight thinking about it. But a different feeling curled around his stomach. When Delta was given the go-ahead to roam, he'd be on the next flight to hell's backyard to find his brother's tags in between jobs... and Mar would be in the United States.

The Pour House's sign loomed overhead, beckoning him into a smoky oasis. Trace pushed the glass door open and walked into the dimly lit, rowdy crowd. He nodded to a couple of guys who he'd seen before, and he found his way to the back. Just as he'd guessed, Brock and Javier were shooting pool. Ryder wasn't too far away, with what had to be a waitress sitting on his knee. Crazy fucking Aussie.

The waitress popped off Ryder's lap and headed over. "Thirsty, honey?"

"Something dark in a long neck."

"Sure thing." She flitted off with a wave to Ryder.

"Jesus, dude."

He laughed. "I like America. America likes me. What can I say?"

Javier shook his head. "Like the country ever mattered."

“True enough.”

“I need some help.” Trace walked over and leaned against the wall. “I’ve got a date.”

Javier missed his shot, and the cue ball jumped off the table. “What?”

Brock crossed his arms over his chest, remaining silent but looking amused with a down-turned grin.

“So how’d you get suckered into something like that?” Javier drained his beer while Brock took his turn clearing the table. “Son of a bitch, Gamble.”

“I’ve got next.” Trace wanted to play Brock. It’d be good to get a read on the guy. Even if he liked him, there was still a lot to learn. “I did the asking, so no sucker here.”

Ryder laughed. “Well, that’s cute.”

Brock nodded to him after he finished up with Javier. “What do you have planned?”

“That’s my problem.”

“You’re talking about that girl, aren’t you? The college kid?”

“Yeah, her.”

“Kinda young, isn’t she?” Ryder asked.

“A couple years younger than me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

His buddy shook his head. “Man, war will age you.”

A couple of them nodded. Trace felt double his age sometimes, mostly when thinking about Michael and all the fun they’d had before they joined up and ended up on two separate SEAL teams. Life had been a party until then. They’d killed it in high school. Shit, that was just a few years ago... but it felt like decades.

Javier whistled. “Girl’s smokin’ hot, bro.”

“Don’t I know it.” Trace cleared his head from the walk down memory lane. He wasn’t sure he liked Mar’s hotness quotient to be up for discussion. “Dates aren’t really my thing.”

“Stability isn’t really your thing.” Ryder walked over to the table. “Dates are for stable, sane people.”

“You should talk.”

Ryder shrugged. “I’m not taking a pretty sorority girl on a date.”

“She’s not in a sorority.”

“And that’s not the point, my friend.”

No shit. He scrubbed his face. “God, I’m getting caught up in this girl.”

The waitress arrived with his beer, and Trace stepped up to the pool table. Brock

broke, ran the table, and left him with a couple of crap angles when it was his turn. Brock had a knack for staying in tune with their conversation and keeping his focus on the game. Trace sank his shot, missed the eight ball, and finished off his beer. Funny how something so boring could relax him. So, burying himself in Marlena wasn't the only option, after all.

He nodded to the guys as the waitress cleared off the tables. "Alright, I'm out."

"What's the final verdict?" Ryder asked. "Where are you taking her?"

"Shit if I know."

With a tray full of bottles, the waitress walked by, smiling. "Screen on the Green opened on campus this weekend."

He turned to her. "Screen on the what?"

"Didn't think you boys were from around here. Screen on the Green. They set up a big silver screen, and you watch a movie while sitting on the grass."

All of them stood there, stupid.

The waitress smiled. "It's great, I swear."

"Like a picnic, sweetheart?" Ryder didn't look convinced, but at least he'd come up with something to say.

"Something like that." She shifted the tray. "Crazy fun, I promise."

"Right. Thanks." Okay, Screen on the Green. He might never live down the ribbing after doing something like that. But maybe it was worth thinking about.

Javier sidled up to Trace, calling over his shoulder, “Back in a minute, guys. Need to talk to my boy.”

“What?”

Javier paused then let out a slow breath. “Is this about your brother?”

The question hit like a throat punch. “No.”

“Look, we all know your birthday’s coming up.” Javier followed Trace to the front of the bar. “You’ve been a little all over the place since you joined Delta. Being that we’re stuck stateside, I think we’re all just worried about you.”

He knocked the door open, and sunlight burned his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Spending time with the chick—”

“Marlena.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Javier nodded. “With Marlana. That’s nice and all, but—”

“But what?” he growled.

“It’s not you.”

Trace stopped. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“And a date? I mean, if you’re going to crack up, give a dude a little warning. Okay?”

His temples pounded; his throat squeezed tight. “What if...”

What the fuck was he even saying?

Javier’s face pinched. “What if what?”

He shrugged, temples still pounding. “I like her.”

“I get it. She seems like a cool girl. You two obviously have some history together, small world and all that.”

“I have a good vibe with her.” His heart started to race, his thoughts jumping in for good measure. “She’s funny, a little broken. So am I. Completely fucked in the head and...”

“And?” Javier crossed his arms.

Trace sucked in a long breath, dropping his head back to stare into the sun. “I’m never going to find those dog tags.”

Javier’s eyes hardened. Seconds ticked by. “We know.”

Deep in his chest, anger turned into a growl. Trace ran his hands through his hair. He’d seen the pictures from the improvised explosion that took out Michael’s armored vehicle. He’d seen how the wreckage had been torn apart by fucking nomads. The tags were gone, along with everything else. Fuck. He wanted them back. It was his only goal in life. His sole focus, getting him thrown off SEALs, getting him... “Fuck!”

“Trace, buddy, take a breath.”

He bent over, ducking his head between his knees. “I like the girl.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good thing or not. I’m worried you might hop from one obsession to the next. I’m worried that, until you deal with Michael’s death, like really handle your shit, you’ll always chase what you can’t really have.”

“The tags.”

“And the girl.” Javier gave him a sad smile. “We get the green light, and we’re gone. No more happy college-girl fuck buddies.”

Trace paced the sidewalk, his stomach knotted, his mind dry heaving incoherent thoughts.

“Hit up your Screen on the Green. Hang with her. Have a good time.” Javier sighed. “And give yourself a break, Trace. Your brother’s with the good guys—tags or not.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, Trace had no idea why one beer and losing a game of pool would make him reevaluate the direction of his life or give him an insight that everyone else, apparently, already had. He nodded a good-bye to Javier and headed toward his car. Michael. Dog tags. Marlena. Fucking Screen on the Green. So much shit rambled through his brain.

He clicked the Charger unlocked and closed himself off from the world in the front seat. With a turn of the key, Trace revved the engine and hung on to the steering wheel, trying to take his mind off it all. He couldn't. His mind wandered, leading him to pick up his phone and search "Screen on the Green," confused about why he had focused on a stupid gathering. Maybe Marlena had something to do with all of it.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There were picnic blankets everywhere on the rolling hill. Marlena hadn't done that event since she was a freshman. Not that she hadn't wanted to go to the movies over the last two years, but she didn't have time because the biological engineering program was an ass-kicker, and she didn't have someone to snuggle up with on a blanket. Not many guys stood in line to play boyfriend to a girl who took harder classes than they did, which was funny, because she had such a self-esteem issue.

But there she was, on Trace's arm, carrying a giant blanket from her closet. He'd shown up with a bag of food and drinks, looking slightly unsteady about what he was offering. The man was a tatted-up warrior. He'd seen death and destruction, he was avenging the death of his brother, but walking onto school grounds with a picnic looked like it might kill him.

It was also Marlena's first major public outing since Delta had rescued her. She hadn't returned any phone calls, and while she walked through the crowd with Trace, more than a couple of people said, "Hey"—both people she'd avoided calling, and others who were interested in the guy who held her close.

God, did he have to do that? And did she have to go with him?

Because with every footstep, she was falling harder.

He towered over her. Even when he wasn't dressed as though he should be in an action movie, he still carried that air about him. No guns strapped to him—that she could see—but his attitude begged someone to screw with him. Marlena's gaze

skipped over the crowd, and—deep breath in—she’d never felt safer.

“Why ya grinning, Cinderella?”

“This is really fun.”

With a sideways glance, he snagged her around the waist and kept them moving. “We haven’t done anything yet.”

“But still having fun.”

His smile didn’t show up often, but when it did, it stole her breath. He gave a quick nod and maneuvered her to the corner of the farthest section.

“We won’t be able to see the movie very well.” Maybe that was the point, if he wanted to get a little wild where no one could see them.

He paused and scanned the crowded hills. “It’s the best strategic, defensive position.”

“Just lost a couple of romance points.”

Trace laughed. “Not very date-ish, huh?”

She smiled, shrugged, and leaned into him. “I don’t think we’re much of what anything should be like.”

“True enough, Cinderella.”

Music came on, and the screen lit up. “Here’s fine. Let’s hurry.” She had the blanket out and food on paper plates before the opening credits finished.

The crowd laughed as the movie rolled on. Marlana and Trace finished the sandwiches and sodas, and she lay against him. The casualness of it was oddly comforting. “I wanted to apologize. I’m not a twelve-year-old. I shouldn’t run off every time I freak out.”

His fingers traced her arm. “I’m sorry you think you have to run.”

“I want to ask you a question.”

He nodded. “All ears.”

“Why do you think you’re a lost cause?”

He sighed but didn’t stop sliding his hand on her skin. “I don’t know that answer anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...” He rolled onto his back, tucking her next to him. “I’m a SEAL. Once a SEAL, always a SEAL. But I screwed up. I lost that, and it meant the world. Now I’m Titan. Delta. And I’ll always be my brother’s keeper. Both in arms and in blood.”

She didn’t say anything, but he hadn’t really answered her many questions.

“Those dog tags I told you about?” His low voice was hard to hear over the movie.

“Yes.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Trace let out the longest, saddest sigh. “I’m not going to find them.”

She bit her lip, uncertain of what to say.

The sky was turning purple, and the movie’s laugh track played along with the laughter from the crowd.

“But.” He cleared his throat. “They brought me to you. I was in Germany because someone saw something, and I wanted to know if it was the missing link to what I needed. Those tags have dragged me all over the damn world. And they dropped me off in front of you.”

Her throat felt tight. “If you want to find them, then find them, Trace.”

“That’s mission impossible. Two pieces of metal in a million square miles of sand. But it was my only focus in between jobs. At least, until I was benched and met you.” His gaze fell over her shoulders; his eyes tightening. Very slowly he sat up as his fingers tightened around her forearm. His eyes continued to dart purposefully. “Before, when you mentioned that the loose ends on your project were tied up, what did that mean?”

“I meant I left. I was done. There was a clause that let me out of the contract, and I took advantage of it.”

“Fuck.”

“What?”

He untucked a gun she hadn't noticed from the back of his belt, laying it between their paper plates, then let go of her to grab his cell. He dialed and held it against his ear. "Brock, I've got tangoes."

His eyes searched.

She tried to turn around, but Trace caught her eye and barely shook his head. Her heart raced. They were coming for her again. Sweat tickled her temples, her neck. Her lungs stuttered, making her feel as if she couldn't breathe.

"I've got a four count in direct view. No telling behind me."

Another long pause, and she would've killed to hear what Brock was saying. Two large men approached Trace from behind.

"Behind you. Twenty feet away," she whispered. They were outnumbered. She didn't know how many bullets were in a gun, but a shootout at Screen on the Green would endanger lives.

He nodded to her, calm as the setting-sun sky. "Whatever you do, follow my directions."

Her hands were shaking, teeth chattering. "Okay."

"Take a breath, Mar. This will be a piece of cake."

The two men were a few feet away, and Trace swiftly tucked the gun back under his shirt.

"If we get separated, do what they say."

Mouth bone dry, she nodded again, her eyes unintentionally locking with a man standing directly above Trace.

“Let’s not make a scene.” The man beckoned to her in with a familiar exotic accent. “You’re surrounded.”

Trace stood between her and the man. “This won’t end well for you.”

“Come with her or not, I don’t care. But we leave now.”

“If you’re after intelligence, it can be bought.”

She knew that was a lie, that Trace wouldn’t sell anything against his country. So he was buying time?

“Why buy the milk when you can get the cow for free. Isn’t that the saying?” The man laughed.

“Hey!” she growled at him.

Trace shook his head. “That was uncalled for.” His fist connected with the man’s face before she had time to process what he was about to do. Seconds later, two other men were on him, punches flying, grunts echoing in the air, as nearby moviegoers screamed and scampered away.

A hand slapped over her mouth and yanked her up. As if Trace had an eye on her, he stopped, hands flying up. “Alright, alright, we go.”

He wiped blood off his lip. The man next to him chuckled, saying something quietly to Trace. Again, Trace’s fist flew. The guy went down.

“For real this time, I’m done.” He reached for her hand, eyeing the guy whose hand was clapped over her mouth.

Campus security officers had arrived on their bikes and were making their way through the crowded hill. Maybe they could help. But didn’t they just carry mace or something? Oh. Her stomach dropped. It was a disaster.

“Let’s go before these morons start a shootout and kill everyone here.”

The hand over her mouth released, and someone said, in a thick South American accent, “You’re making a smart decision.” Marlana, Trace, and the group of men stepped over the man Trace had punched—who was still facedown on the ground.

Marlana’s hand found Trace’s, and he gave it a squeeze. “Smile, Cinderella. Instead of a fairy godmother, we’ve got a team of whoop-ass coming our way.”

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Trace smiled through all the pushing and shoving that their captors dished out. Marlana's stomach was in knots, and the only thing that kept her from sliding down a miserable, self-pitying slope was the fact that he seemed to enjoy the fighting much more than Screen on the Green.

She held her breath as Trace mopped the slowing trickle of blood on his face and baited the men. He was about a dozen yards away and unarmed, making light of their warehouse dungeon. As soon as their entourage had left campus, the abductors had given both of them a thorough pat down. So thorough that Trace threatened life and limb should their eager-beaver hands stray too far.

"Doing okay over there?" he asked.

She nodded, biting her lip. What other answer was she supposed to volunteer? They'd been gagged and tossed into the back of a windowless van. The entire time, as she tried not to hyperventilate, he'd studied the vehicle and the men. As soon as they arrived at a deserted warehouse park, they said they'd cut the gags off with knives the length of her forearm. Talk about overkill. Untying them would've done just fine, but nope, not for those guys.

They spoke in Spanish, and she didn't recognize any of them from when she was abducted a few weeks ago. Was it a different organization wanting to use the technology that she'd created? Same group, different guys? Why had she ever thought that she could create a biological weapon—or at least the plans for it—and not ruin her life? Even if the project was still in beta testing and had serious kinks to



work out, the potential was beyond comprehension.

Trace cleared his throat. “If it’s all the same to you guys, I’m going to walk over there and talk to my girl.” He didn’t wait for an answer as though they didn’t have guns everywhere.

A few guys muttered but ignored them. She wasn’t sure if that was a really bad thing. Either they didn’t care because they were going to kill them, or they had some manners, like the Romatar people.

He sat down on the floor next to her. “Not how I thought I’d see you gagged.”

Instant heat lit her cheeks. “You’re insane.”

“Maybe.” He knocked his shoulder into hers. “But you’re too important to hurt, and they haven’t figured out who I am.”

“And who are you?”

“The asshole who’s gonna kill everyone in this room if a hair on your head gets hurt.”

Somehow, she believed that. “Who do they think you are?”

“I don’t know. A picnic-going boyfriend? A douche who wanted to watch a chick flick in the grass?”

She laughed quietly. “You’re a freakin’ trip.”

“And you’re VIP to a lot of people.” He leaned back against the wall. “We, Delta—or any ops team, for that matter—only ask questions on a need-to-know basis. When Titan sent Delta to bring you home, we did it. That was the contract, and it was done.

I never asked why. Never needed to know.” He tilted his head. “Things have changed.”

“You want to know what they want to know?”

“Yup.”

“And that will help us?”

“Maybe.”

“Why?”

His eyes narrowed. “Because then I know if they’ll really kill for what you know and to what extremes they’ll go through to keep you alive. Right now, they think I’m some gun-totin’ boyfriend who walks around yelling ‘Merica’ and punching strangers.”

“Then what are you? Because we’ve glossed over that a few times.”

“SEAL for life. Delta right now. I’m a contract killer for the good guys. An assassin when needed. A fucking machine. Other than that, I’m a guy trapped with a girl who has made him question everything. That about explains me.”

“Oh, that’s all, huh?”

“I like that you’re scared to death and sarcastic to boot.”

She smiled. “None of that sounds like a lost cause to me.”

He leaned forward, hanging his head and staring at her with empty eyes. “I never

really left the war zone.”

“Because of your brother?”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

A sad sigh passed his lips. “Yeah. Anyway, enough of me. Time to let me in on why you’re such a hot commodity. Other than the obvious.” He smiled.

“That’s an awful line.”

“Awful circumstances.”

She rolled her eyes, but her trembling hands had stilled, and her heart had slowed to normal. “I was the lead on a project that, in very basic terms, could weaponize the common cold. Something very easy to manipulate and virtually impossible to track. I was testing variations and mapping out possible consequences.”

“So... give me an example.”

“Ok. Bacterial pneumonia needs an antibiotic. You hit a city—”

His forehead bunched. “It’s incapacitated within days.”

“Yes. Pharmacies can’t stock enough meds. Doctors can’t see enough patients. Everyone goes down and commerce stops. As does law enforcement, first responders. Strategic epidemics could render a region useless.”

“Christ, Marlana.”

She hung her head then peeked at him. “I feel like I created a nuke that people can get their hands on.”

Anger flexed in his jaw. “There’s no way you’ve had enough protection.”

“I know.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“We can blame that on a mixture of denial, tenaciousness, and stupidity.”

He laughed harshly. “Hell...”

“What?”

“We’re two of a kind. You know that? I travel all over the damn world blowing shit up.” He shook his head. “But here you are, all covert projects and trying to take on the world by yourself, wanting to fix something you can’t.”

“Shut up,” a man called from across the room.

Trace grumbled. “They’re still convinced I’m your meathead boyfriend.”

“You’re not?”

He laughed. “I’m a lost cause, remember?”

“You’re full of it—”

“Shut up!” the man barked again.

Trace looked at him—she could have sworn he growled—then back at her. “That fucker’s going down soon enough.”

“So?” she asked. “Meathead boyfriend?”

“Are you kidding me? We’re being held at gunpoint. You want to define our relationship?”

“Yeah. If I’m going to die, I’d like to know if I have a boyfriend. Meathead or not.”

He shook his head, smiling. “I like you.”

She smiled too, scooting over an inch. “I knew that.”

“No. You knew I liked you in bed.”

“Same thing.”

“Bullshit, Cinderella.”

“I know. Just teasing you.”

He nudged her with his shoulder again. “Glad to know you’ve adjusted well to being held captive.”

“Enough!” The man walked toward them. “One more time—”

She put her hands up. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Leave the girl alone.” That time there was a definite growl in his voice.

The man stood above them, and when her hand dropped, Trace’s grazed hers, sending reassuring shivers up her arm.

“She is the one we need. You, we don’t. Let’s talk, boyfriend.”

“See? Meathead boyfriend.” Trace leaned over to her and let his lips dangle against her earlobe. “No matter what you hear, I’m alright.”

The man above them clapped. “None of that. Up, let’s go.”

“Let’s go with boyfriend. Works for me.” Trace gave her a wink. “Adios for now.”

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Trace walked away, Marlana's stomach swirled with anxiety... and excitement. It was the complete wrong time to be caught up in him. But watching him walk away, muscled up, the colorful tattoos on his arms and the just-try-me-pendejo attitude, she skipped all the way down to really falling for the guy.

Confidence was an aphrodisiac. Right? So was adrenaline? Which made sense. Except it felt deeper than that, as if their connection was meant to be. As if there was a reason they'd ended up going all over the world together.

If she was going to fall in love with someone, she never in a million years thought it would be a fallen Navy SEAL with an unachievable vendetta. But... she had. "Trace!"

He looked over his shoulder right before turning a corner with a quick chin lift. There wasn't anything she could say, so she gave a wave. A tiny smile flashed on his hardened face, and that was good enough for now.

A different man came over to her. "Mr. Romatar said you weren't finished with your work."

So these were Mr. Romatar's men. Okay. They knew she was smart, and they had never hurt her before. Their goal was to make a weapon, probably so they could sell it. They didn't seem like the mass-destruction-type people, just the kind who profited from it. She drew in a deep breath. "I wasn't. Yet."



“We’ve brought everything to you, no time to waste in transport.”

“Um, okay.” She glanced down at her shaking hands. “I need a minute.”

“No. Time to get up.”

Damn it. She scooted off her butt and followed the man around the warehouse until they reached a temporary laboratory setup. The men she’d worked with in Romatar’s compound were there, and all of her work was laid out, in a somewhat completed fashion.

The man who guided her in made a grand sweeping gesture with his hand. When his arm came back down, he took his gun out of its holster. “Mr. Romatar wasn’t so sure you worked your hardest before. He intends you to finish immediately. If you want to live, you finish the job. Today.”

“Today?” Shock strangled anything else coherent she wanted to say.

The man nodded.

“But...” It wasn’t done. She hadn’t figured it all out. That, and the fact that she didn’t want to create this and turn it over to criminals.

“But nothing.” He pointed to a man standing by the makeshift lab table. “If he isn’t suitably impressed, then your boyfriend goes first. If that incentive doesn’t work, and you don’t produce what we need, then you’re expendable also.”

Hands still shaking, she sat on the stool next to the table and the man she needed to impress, then tried to organize her thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” whispered the other man. “But you need to do this correctly. You can

call me Ross.”

She wanted to slap him. “Correctly?”

Even quieter, Ross mumbled, “I know you held back before. They know too, but they don’t know how much you held back. They have my children. This is a no-win for everyone.”

Grabbing the plans, she set to work, ready to fill in the intentional blanks she’d left before. Trace would save her before she finished, or Delta would show up as they did before. Hours passed. The Romatar men brought her a sandwich, coffee, soda, all without her asking, because food was fuel, and it kept her going. And then she had to go.

“Excuse me.”

Ross turned from the latest project she had given him. “Yes?”

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

He looked over at the bossy guy who’d brought her in there. The man jutted his chin. “The project is progressing?”

“Yes.”

The man nodded. “How much longer?”

Ross turned his head to her.

She shrugged. “A couple hours, maybe?”

“Not good enough.” Stepping forward, he brandished his gun as though it would make her not have to pee. Exact opposite, really. “Two more hours. Tops.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Her stomach turned. “I don’t know if—”

The man shook his head and shouted down the hallway. Another shout sounded in response, all in Spanish, and she had no idea what they were saying. The bossy guy’s phone rang, and he grabbed it, chattering fast. He hung up with a glare.

In the background, a gunshot rang out, and all the blood rushed from her head. She was dizzy. Nauseated. Ready to pass out.

“Go to the bathroom, but finish in two hours.” The man’s harsh glare almost blinded her.

Tears ran down her face. Did they shoot Trace? Did they kill him? Was he hurt? “What happened?”

“That was your incentive to work faster.”

Her insides hurt. Her mind was spinning, and she could barely walk. “Did you kill him?”

“No. Not yet. I suggest you hurry and finish.”

She looked at Ross, who pointed her to the bathroom.

Hurrying in and out, she was back at her lab table, and the tears hadn’t stopped yet. She could hardly see the work in front of her for all the tears. “Please. Can you tell me that he’s okay?”

“Work!”

Sniffling, her breathing was labored and too fast. “I can’t. Please. Just—”

“He’s alive. Work faster, and you can save him.”

She nodded. Work faster. She could do that. “And he’ll be okay?”

The man nodded. “Finish.”

Ross whispered, “I can get them to drop him at the hospital. We’ll be on a plane out of here before you get through the front door. Just finish. I have to save my kids.”

Ross’s kids and her boyfriend. What evil bastards. “They’ll save him?”

“It’s your only chance.”

She could do it. Saving Trace was the only thing that mattered. They weren’t that far from a hospital. Marlena closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then worked like hell. So what if she made a weapon? They weren’t going to use it today. They were going to sell it, right? So Titan or the military or someone could go find it.

An hour later, she stood up. “Done! Take him to the hospital. Please.”

The man nodded to Ross, who nodded back. “It looks like it will work.”

“We test, then we’ll see.”

“What!” she shrieked. “No! If he’s hurt, he needs a doctor. You said—”

The man walked toward the hall. “Test it. I’ll be back.”

Tears were back in her eyes. Her stomach hurt. It could take hours to test it. And even if Trace was still alive... she hadn't heard sounds of pain. What if they just killed him and—

A loud explosion rocked the building. The vibrations shook her off her feet and scattered the work on the table. Eyes wide, she watched Ross hunker onto the ground then jump up, grabbing all their work and running out the door.

“Wait! Ross! No.” He wasn't supposed to be the guy who wanted it. He just wanted to keep his family alive. He was a victim, as she was. Except he had just stolen what she had worked on. Shit.

And what was that blast?

The others in the room had scattered. She was alone, scared, not knowing which way to go or why things were exploding.

Trace limped into the room, blood dripping down his arm. His jeans were red and his face angry. “Mar. You okay?”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

She nodded, running to him. “God, what happened?”

“Let’s go.” He put a small gun in her hand. “Point and shoot. Just don’t shoot me.”

It felt cold and heavy. Looking at him, she couldn’t shut up. “I thought they hurt you.”

“They did. Assholes.”

“I thought they killed you.”

“Takes a tougher motherfucker than that to kill me, Cinderella.”

Oh... “I finished it. They have it.”

Trace grumbled but didn’t slow down. “That complicates shit.”

“What was the noise? The explosions?”

“I assumed it was—”

Two men crept into the corner, big guns pointed at her and Trace. She screamed, aiming the point-and-shoot gun at them. Trace grabbed her hand, pulling it down. “Stand down.” He put his arm around her, dragging her to the men with guns. “We have a problem.”

“Hello to you too, buddy.” A familiar Australian accent came from one of the

gunmen.

“Took you long enough.” Trace groaned through clenched teeth. “Where’s everybody?”

They were Trace’s teammates. Delta. Thank God. “Tell them you’re hurt.”

Instead, he scurried her against the wall. “Marlena, what does the weapon look like? They left with it, what are we looking for?”

“Oh. Um. Like a small cylinder within a box. Silver colored. Six inches by six inches. Really heavy.”

The two other men ran off, and Trace maneuvered around the corner then slid her away from her perch against the wall. “Nice and easy.”

Blood ran down his arm, coloring his pants a darker red. The stench from the explosion permeated the air, and sudden gunfire exploded and echoed somewhere in the warehouse. She flinched then froze.

“No time for that,” he scooped her into his arms and kept moving.

Finally, they were out the front door of the warehouse. Trace headed toward an SUV. He put her down and reached for the back door, moving her to the seat. Everything was a blur. Someone in the shadows of the warehouse appeared, gun raised, pointing at her. No. Pointing at Trace.

“No!” Screaming, she pushed him, catching him off balance as he turned to close her door. They landed on the asphalt, and he cursed. Probably because they’d landed on whatever part of his body had been shot and was bleeding all over the place. Marlena rolled, feeling fire in her arm. She looked down. Blood. A hole in her arm. Blood.



Lots of blood.Oh God.

“What the fuck,” Trace yelled, rolling on top of her, gun drawn.

He fired over and over again, screaming obscenities. Then he pulled her close and threw them into the still-opened back door.

“You’re insane.” His hands searched over her until he found her wounded arm. “Damn it, Marlana. You fucking took a bullet for me.”

She nodded. Thinking back, if the trajectory had been right, given how she jumped at him and where the bullet hit her... that would’ve been a head shot.

Trace opened the center console and grabbed something. He pushed it into his ear and talked into what had to be a tiny microphone. “HVT’s hit.”

“I’m fine.” Though she felt woozy. It was only in her arm.Oh God. Only a gunshot wound in her arm. She’d been shot. Her whole body began to shake. And what about him? “Trace.”

He crawled into the front seat, telling someone, “Roger that.” Trace turned the ignition over. The engine revved, and he screamed out of the parking toward a fence.

She didn’t see a gate. Looking around—but he wasn’t looking. She screamed as he ran through the fence. “What the hell?”

Easing onto an access road, he relaxed into the driver seat. “Cannot believe you took a bullet for me.” Shaking his head, he turned and looked at her, the corners of his eyes tight and crinkled. “You fucking rock.”

Arm throbbing in pain, it was her cheeks heating in a full-out blush that she felt at

that moment. “It just kinda happened.”

With a quick tug, he pulled his shirt over his head. “Put this on your arm. Make it tight.”

His chest was covered in blood. He had a gunshot next to his collar. “You need a doctor worse than I do,” she said.

He laughed as he turned onto the highway. “Seems like the only thing I need any more is you.”

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Half-asleep on his couch, Trace was numb and drifting in and out of a painkiller haze. It'd been time to change his bandage, and that hurt like a mother bear. So he doubled up the dose on the painkiller and drifted off to la-la land after Ryder dropped him off at home. But he was coming down from his Percocet-coated high when the doorbell rang.

An instant hope that Marlena was on the other side brought him to fully awake. After the surgeon had pulled the bullet out of his shoulder, he said, "Thanks for the work" to Titan's docs and high-tailed out of there to find Marlena. But he found out from a nurse that her father had checked her out. The thought made him both angry as all hell and jealous he couldn't be there to take her home. He called her cell phone but it was off. Or maybe gone, like her last cell phone.

Before he could get up and to the door, it cracked open, and she popped her head inside. "Hey, you. Can I come in?"

Absolutely, she could do whatever she wanted. His chest felt warm, and he could finally breathe. He realized that he hadn't been able to breathe since he'd left her side at the hospital. Trace wrapped his arms around her, and even when she tried to pull back from his wound, he hugged her tight, enjoying the fierce bite of pain. "I missed you, Cinderella."

"You just saw me yesterday."

"Lots happened." Damn, he wished she'd spent the night with him after the hospital

run. “How are you feeling? I tried your cell and your home phone.”

“I didn’t go home.” She sighed, slumping. “I ended up at Brian’s.”

His fists bunched. “Brian.”

“My father.”

Through the painkiller haze, that made more sense, but it was still shitty news.

“Yeah. Sucks. As it turns out, when you’re still on the college health-care plan, and you get shot, they place a call to an emergency contact. The fucker doesn’t even pay my tuition. I have no idea how that works. But he’s had a turn of luck lately, living large. Says my going missing is his good luck charm. Asshole.”

“Prick.”

She shrugged. “I told him he didn’t need to pick me up if he didn’t give a hoot about me. I have no idea why he’d volunteer to pull the father card. I even told him that, and he found the whole thing hysterical.”

“Guess that conversation didn’t go well.”

“The usual. I’m so smart, I’m stupid. Waste of space. No one would ever love me. Same stuff, different day.”

Trace’s heart beat faster. Listening to someone belittle her. He said she was unlovable? That was insane. If anyone was deserving of love... it’d be her. Fuck.

“Something about him was different. It’s right in front of me but I can’t...”  
Confusion erased from her face and her eyes narrowed. “Trace? You okay?”

Deserving of love...?“I need to sit down.”

“You look like you’re going to be sick.” She grabbed onto his arm as he staggered toward the couch. “Seriously, what’s with the look?”

He put his head between his knees. “Fuck.”

“Do you need a doctor? I mean, I can drive, and you look—”

Going upright so fast his head spun, Trace grabbed her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers. After she kissed him back to reality, he opened his eyes to see a very confused, hot-and-bothered Marlana. “I’m a total lost cause.”

She gave him a half smile. “So you say.”

“Mar.”

The half smile on her face made him want to kiss her again. “Trace.”

“This is ridiculous.”

She laughed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The TV was too loud. The AC blew too hard. Everything irritated him to the point of insanity at that moment. He jumped off the couch and paced the length of the living room. “Neither do I.”

“What?” Her cute face was scrunched.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“I’m in love with you.” There. He said it. What the fuck was he supposed to do next? Because a week ago he was running from a normal life like his dick was on fire.

Marlena’s mouth hung open. “What.”

It wasn’t a question. The word just kind of hung there between them.

“Shit.” He rubbed his face. “I’d say sorry, but I’m not.”

“I’m not sorry either.”

He stared at her sideways. “You’re not?”

She shook her head.

“What does that mean?”

“I fell in love with you too. Did a while back.”

He stalked back over to the couch and sat down next to her. “That was probably the most unromantic thing you’ve ever heard.”

Nodding, she tried to hide her grin. “Maybe.”

Locking his good arm under her non-bandaged one, he scooted her off the couch and toward the door.

“What are you doing?”

“Starting the hell over. What do you think I’m doing?” He turned her around, taking two big steps back. “Hey, you’re here.”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“Maybe, but still. Come in. I need to tell you something.”

Marlena sat on the couch, shaking her head. “Tell me.”

“I fell in love with you. I can’t get you out of my head. You’re the only thing that keeps me sane, that balances me out.”

She held her hand out. “Sit down.”

A second later, his arms were around her, unable to keep his mouth to himself either.

“I’ve had a lot of ups and downs,” she said. “This morning, when I woke up, Brian was running his mouth. And you know what? I told him to go to hell. For years, I’ve listened to his crap. Internalized it, felt like less than I should be. But not today, and it had everything to do with how I know who I am. How, over the past weeks, I’ve realized that I’m good with me.”

“And I love you.”

“Good thing I love you too. Freakin’ lost cause.”

He put his hands up. “Not saying I don’t have an internal fight.”

“I know. I want you to wage it. I hope you do. It’s just... we work well together. So, I

think I'll keep my meathead boyfriend around, if you're good with it."

"Shit, honey. You're spending the night. No questions asked."

"Good. I knew there was a benefit to stopping by," she said.

"Sounds like a challenge issued."

He had her up and in his arms before she could say, "Watch the gunshot wound."

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Trace crawled over her on his bed, and he smelled perfect. She lay on a pile of pillows, and his muscles loomed around her, caging her. His hands roamed her body, stopping at the snap of her jeans.

“The things I want to do to you.” Slowly, he undid it and made the zipper crawl down.

It took forever for the zipper to slide. Intentional torture. “I’m game. I swear.”

Trace’s teeth raked her stomach, and his hands pinned her in place. He bit her hip bone and tugged off her panties. “So confident.”

“Told you.”

“You’ve always been,” he said. His body found its place between her legs, broad shoulders holding her open.

“Maybe. Just for you.”

The warmth of his lips hovered over her clit. Strong fingers teased her folds. “This is just for me, Mar.”

“Yes.” The words came out breathless. Hell, she needed more than just a tease. “You own me.”

He wasn’t careful when he spread her for his kiss. The slash of his tongue sent shivers crawling to the corners of her body. The dance of his fingers across her

aroused skin stole her mind. He kissed and sucked with such intensity that the room swirled away. Thoughts fell away. Rough hands and tongue pushed her toward a climax, then his fingers pushed inside her, pumping and stroking.

Marlena struggled to move her legs, to walk her heels up the bed or wrap her legs around his broad chest. But somehow, he had her pinned. For every struggle, he held her down, pushing her to orgasm under his tongue. She shifted, and he moved with her. Marlena's fingers grabbed at the sheets, clenching them in her hand. Heat rushed through her body, her core tightening and her throat moaning. Everything about it was insane and delicious.

“Come for me, Mar.” His fingers and his mouth fucked her furiously.

She bucked, arching her back and clawing at the bed. Trace held her body still. Her orgasm spiraled her high to the heavens where fireworks and the stars collided. Mar gasped for breath as his weight rolled away. She heard the foil of a condom wrapper, but her body was too lax to even open her eyes—until he was back on top of her. Then her eyes opened and met his.

“I love you,” he growled, pushing his cock against her entrance. “And you’re the only thing that can save me.”

“Good.” Because she wanted to be his savior. His everything.

Thrusting deep into her, his eyes sank closed, and she bit his lip when he kissed her. That was their thing. Nothing sweet, just pure, driven emotion, hard and harsh. Her legs crawled around him, her arms gripping him. She embraced the flare of pain from her bandaged arm. He gritted his teeth, and sweat dampened his brow. They molded themselves to each other, their connection profound.

Marlena arched back, tearing her nails down his back, moaning and crying out as she

came. Her muscles rippled around his shaft, and her mind went numb. Trace's body rocked over her, the piston motion forcing her to a point of destruction that only he could handle.

He came, groaning as he thrust. "Goddamn, Marlana."

Then he collapsed on her. His rasping breath burned in her ear, his weight pressing her into the blankets.

With his body covering her, Marlana's mind cleared. Cleared the crap that'd blurred her past, all the belittling lies she'd been told most her life. But in that clarity was a realization, crystal clear in its obviousness. Her stomach plummeted, while anger bubbled in her veins. She swallowed. She'd been blind, until she realized at that moment that she could love and be loved. How about that for a what-the-hell moment?

"I needed that." The whisper of his voice promised that she could tell him anything, that he would understand, because no matter how different their circumstances were, they both had a dark weight haunting them. Hers had been her damn father.

She nodded. "But you know what I need even more?"

His head lifted on her chest. "More?"

Brian had screwed her. He'd sold her and her secrets. That was the only way he had the money. The man couldn't stay away from an opportunity to hurt her, especially if he could make big bucks in the process. Screw him. Just screw him all the way to hell. "I need payback."

Faster than she expected, Trace rolled over, pulling her with him. "Say again."

"Retribution."

His eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Brian—”

“Your dad?”

She nodded, the anger transforming into cold calmness. “Brian took me home from the hospital in a new car. We didn’t go home to where I grew up. We went somewhere new. Nicer. He was so busy insulting me, pulling me down to the ground, that it didn’t click in my painkiller haze. I don’t know how he did it. I don’t know where he met—”

“Romatar?”

She nodded again. “He did this to me.”

Trace’s jaw flexed. Lines strained in his neck. “Your father?”

“Brian. The sperm contributor that I was stuck with after my mother died.”

They stared in silence, communicating clearly. His eyes darkened, lips flattening. The swell of aggression in her heart lightened when he squeezed her.

“I need a second.” Trace rolled out of bed, throwing the covers around her, and grabbed his pants and phone.

She hadn’t connected the dots until a minute ago but had never been surer of anything. Her piece-of-shit father had sold her out for a paycheck.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You know, it’s a little early on to call in a favor,” Brock said on the phone.

It didn’t matter. Trace wanted answers. If Marlana’s dick of a father had traded what he knew about her work and her location, then that piece of shit was done in Trace’s book. Proving it required a little more than assumptions, though. That’s where Brock came in, and where Trace was hoping Titan would step in and live up to everything he’d heard.

“Someone at Titan can connect the dots between Brian McCloud and Romatar. They have the resources.”

“Don’t forget, Trace. You are Titan. There’s no they about it.”

“Fine, whatever. Titan has the resources.”

“I’m not going to give you intel so you can go rogue and off your girl’s old man. Not going to happen.”

“Didn’t say that was my plan.”

Brock huffed. “So what’s your plan, kid?”

Well, that was the plan. How he would do it, he didn’t know exactly. But it seemed logical. All the anger coursing through his system made it feel right.

“Trace? Goddamn it. I didn’t bring you here to—”

“How about this for a plan...”

“Five seconds to make a case.”

“I connect this to Romatar, deal with her old man without killing the fucker. There’s a biological weapon with its dick flapping in the wind. Every agency in the US must be after it. I find it. I bring it home. Titan and Delta get another a gold star from Uncle Sam.”

Brock chuckled. “Not sure we’re after gold stars.”

“Give me the intel and the go-ahead.” He sucked a breath. “Look, if I can’t make shit up for Michael, at least let me do good by this girl.”

“So it’s like that, huh?”

“Yeah, buddy. It is.”

“Never in a million years did I think you’d be the one on the team to pull this shit.”

Trace paced the hallway. “Heard you have a girl at home.”

“Yeah. A wife at home. But I’m a decade older than you.”

Well, shit. They were in two different places in life. Brock was older, a family guy—in the tatted-up, warrior-dude kind of way.

Brock let out a long breath. “But fuck. I met her right after college too. Dude, that’s a hard line to go down, if that’s what you want. And you don’t know her.”

“I know what I need to know about her.”

The team leader laughed harshly. “Yeah, and what’s that?”

“She’s the only one who can tame my demons.”

The line hung silent. Finally, Brock sighed. “I’ll send you what you need. If there’s a connection between McCloud and Romatar, you don’t kill him. If you can track intel on that stolen weapon, I’ll take a big shiny star.”

Relief washed over him. “Thanks, man.”

“Don’t thank me yet. If the rumor mill is correct, you’re going to wish you hadn’t asked for this.”

The line went dead, and he leaned against the wall. A possessive fire stoked him from the inside out. When he turned around, Marlana was leaning against the bedroom doorjamb.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“What do you have planned?” she asked.

“I’m going to fix everything.”

“You mean, together we’re going to fix everything? Because I’m done rolling over and walking away.”

“You’re talking crazy.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m talking like you.”

Then that was bad, because most times he felt crazy. The only time he didn’t was when he was with her. “Mar—”

The smile on her face said she wasn’t going to back down. “Trace.”

“Will you let me take care of you? Of this?”

Her red hair swayed when she shook her head. “I’ve been building my whole life for this moment. To tell him what I think. To tell him where to go.”

“Alright then, Cinderella. Put some clothes on, and let’s give your old man a shout.”

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It took Marlena a few minutes to remember exactly how to get back to Brian’s new house. But she recognized the flashy car in the driveway and knew her semi-guessed

directions were right. She glanced over her shoulder a dozen times and didn't see anyone.

Trace laughed. "Don't worry, they're right behind me."

"Not worried. Just..." She bit her lip. "This is the right move. Right?"

"If the guy hasn't done anything wrong, then this will just be a shitty day for him. Given what I know about him, I don't care too much about him having a shitty day."

And there was Brian's big, new house. "Pull in there."

Trace turned into the driveway and parked. "Porsche? What was he driving before?"

"A rust-bucket of a Jeep."

"Nice upgrade." He nodded to the house. "Didn't grow up in a place like this?"

She snorted her laugh. "Not a chance. Let's go say hi."

A broad grin covered Trace's face. "With pleasure."

The front door opened, and there stood Brian. He looked like a weasel. Even more than that, he looked guilty and wary as his eyes traveled from her to Trace.

"Brian, meet Trace."

Her boyfriend ambled up, shook Brian's hand until he winced, and said, "Yeah. Meet me. We have business to discuss. But—" He let go, and Brian took a visible breath, shaking out his hand. "First, Marlena has a few things to say to you."

Brian stopped shaking out his hand. A laugh slipped from his lips. “I see. Then come in. This should be good.”

Frustration tickled her mind. It’d be so easy to scream and cry. To kick the bastard and let out the years of pent-up hurt. Instead, she squared her shoulders. “It will be. Trust me.”

They walked through the front door into the living room. There were new chairs and a couch and department-store bags full of things Brian shouldn’t have been able to afford.

“Marlena.” He sat on the couch and leaned back. He pointed to Trace then to her, with condescension dripping off his smug face. “I thought you’d met a real man. But I was wrong. Just like I always said, you can’t do anything right.”

The tension pouring off of Trace was palpable, except Brian didn’t seem to notice. She took Trace’s hand and smiled. “If I so much as sigh funny, he’ll probably kill you. Tread lightly, Brian.”

“Dad.” Brian scoffed.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“Never called you that before, and I won’t start now.” She sucked in a deep breath. It was a long shot. But her gut feeling said he’d sold her out to Romatar, and that was why they were sitting on a fancy new couch. There was nothing to go on but instinct and Brian’s propensity to feed off of her. “I know what you did.”

Brian’s greasy smile grew. “And what did I do, pumpkin?”

Pumpkin? Her stomach soured. “You knew what I was working on. I told you too much, and you sold that information.”

“Not a chance. But I did always say your job would get you killed. Two close calls? Proves my point.”

“You did that to me. That’s where the new car and house came from.”

“Nope.” Brian shook his head. “Legitimate business dealings.”

“Bull! You can’t even hold down a job. I’ve supported you my whole life.” Even when she didn’t want to, he stole from her. Or siphoned money from her, stealing anything her mom had left or that she foolishly trusted the bank to hold while she was a minor.

Brian chuckled. “You didn’t support your old man that well, either.” He stood and turned his attention to Trace. “If you’re looking for a woman worth a damn, I’d keep looking.”

It happened before she could consider if she wanted to say no. Trace hit Brian,

sending him onto the couch in a heap. But seeing her asshole of a father on his butt, scuttling back from Trace... that was what she had wanted. Retribution. Retaliation. Even if she couldn't prove that he was the one who'd tipped off Romatar, he'd screwed with her for years. "Thanks, honey."

Trace laughed. "No problem, dear."

She walked over to Brian. "This is the thing. You could've had me killed. You are profiting off something that will kill others. It's wrong. And even if I want to hurt you, that wouldn't be the worst that could happen."

Brian wiped at his mouth, smearing a trickle of blood. "And what is?"

The disdain in his words made her want to ball her fists and copy Trace. But instead, her newfound confidence shook that off. "This..."

She stepped to Trace. He nodded, picking up his phone. "Come on in, boys."

The door opened. Armed homeland security agents marched inside. They wore full tactical gear, at Trace's request, even though they were only going to bring Brian in for questioning. The look on her father's face was priceless—100 percent pureoh-my-fucking-God.

Marlena nodded to the agents. "I might not be what you dreamed of, Brian. But you sure weren't what a dad was supposed to be either. Good riddance."

The men had him up and cuffed and were dragging him toward the door with little problem. Brian's shocked face morphed into anger.

"You'll pay for this, you little cunt."

Trace tucked her under his arm. It only took a few seconds before they were alone in the huge house. “Think I enjoyed that too much?”

“What, having your dad interrogated for selling national security secrets and risking your life? I don’t think you enjoyed it enough.”

She sighed into him. “So now what?”

“Now, I go find the weapon you built.” A grimace flashed across his face.

“Why do you look sick?”

“Not sick—” His phone rang. After answering it, he turned away and listened. “Hooyah.”

Trace pocketed his phone with a blank stare.

“What was that all about?”

A smile fought through the grim edges hanging on his face. “Project Cinderella.”

“Excuse me?”

He laughed, but his heart didn’t sound into it. “I volunteered a name for the job.”

“My biological weapon? That Romatar’s going to sell?”

“Ten-four, pretty girl.”

“Don’t sweet-talk me when I think you’re holding back.”

A half grin hitched on his face. “I’ll be gone a few days.”

“Gone where?”

Trace sighed. “Back to hell. Where Michael was killed.”

Wow, that weapon had traveled the globe. South America, the United States, the Middle East? Her stomach dropped at the thought of Trace leaving soon but... he wanted to go. “I thought you wanted back over there.”

“I did. But not necessarily in this way.”

“What way is that?” she asked.

He hooked an arm around her, and they made their way toward the front door. “The only way to go through this particular gate of hell—with my SEAL team and the CO who wants me in the brig.”

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Insurgent attacks were a given at that particular corner of the Khyber Pass. It was one of the oldest routes in history, with stories of bloodshed over centuries to prove it. Michael had died, along with others on his SEAL team, while on a transport job. They hadn't been on an operation. They hadn't been targeting a cell. At least, not at that moment. They were doing the most basic of good things for nomadic tribes in the area: helping NATO forces disperse food.

Just thinking about it made anger blossom in Trace's chest. He knew the land, knew the exact spot where Michael's armored vehicle had been blown sky-high. The most upsetting part was that, at that moment, he'd been there making a gesture of goodwill.

Trace could barely swallow as they approached the unmarked spot. Nomads had torn the vehicle apart, and he still hadn't gotten over it. Why they had to scavenge and take the dog tags from the bodies, Trace would never understand.

But on that route, that day, there was no gesture of goodwill planned—nothing that said, “Here's an olive branch.” No, today, they had tracked down the weapon Romatar had sold to a Pakistani militant who was moving into Afghanistan. Today was the day that they would take home the weapon that Marlana had designed, and none of their forces would be harmed. So help him God, no one else he knew would die at that spot.

“Reeves,” his CO growled in his earpiece. “No!in team, asshole. You follow the job; you do as you're told. Do you read me, soldier?”



He took in the familiar faces of the men who thought he'd abandoned them. "Ten-four."

No one had said anything when he was helicoptered in. Not a "Hey, hello, where the fuck have you been?" Nothing—and that hurt. But fuck it; he deserved to have the team give him the middle finger as a screw-you, welcome-home gesture.

In his earpiece, he heard the strike go into action. "Scout, we have a confirmation?"

"That's affirmative."

They'd been scattered and hidden in the rocky cliffs on both sides of the road. When the Pakistani vehicle passed, they'd intercept it. First stopping the vehicle by sniper fire then swarming from all sides. There was no telling how fragile the weapon was, and everyone was uneasy.

"Half a click. Two vehicles. Four tangoes, armed in the lead pickup. The second vehicle is a covered truck. No man count."

Time ticked by. The harsh sun had melted behind the cliffs, exposing the men to biting cold winds.

"Fifty yards."

Trace could hear the trucks. The sounds of engines roaring down the road in the dark night echoed in his ears.

"Three, two, one."

Two snipers blew out the vehicle tires. The team on foot went into action. They hit the targets, subdued the drivers, disarmed the terrorists, and disposed of the threats.

Trace growled through the action, fighting his way to search for the weapon. Praying they had it—

A hand snagged his barely healed shoulder, and white pain shot through his arm, spinning him. Hand-to-hand fighting wasn't what he expected, but that was fine. Blow for blow, Trace battled, needing to reach for his sidearm and end it. They tumbled over a rocky edge. His attacker held tight, and they rolled down the black abyss and landed on jagged rocks, dirt crunching around them. He took a breath and focused on his attacker. A knife glinted off the moonlight as the man dove for Trace's chest.

"Not today, fucker." With a quick catch of his arm, the knife clattered to the ground, and Trace wrapped his arm around the man's neck, twisting and dropping the body. "Thanks for playing."

Bent over, he breathed hard, swallowing away the dirt and blood in his mouth and wondering how far down he'd fallen. Operation Cinderella played out in his earpiece.

And then he noticed a tiny hut a dozen yards down. The slightest bit of candlelight lit the inside of the shabby building, and quiet taps and clinks sounded in the wind. His eyes squinted. Moonlight and stars caught on something swaying in the wind. Trace was drawn to it, slipping farther away as the SEAL team he'd abandoned ended the fight above.

"Reeves, report."

He edged closer to the hut, not mumbling a damn word.

"Goddamn it, Reeves. You better be dead," his CO shouted into his earpiece.

Ignoring the guy wasn't the right move. Former teammates checked in and recounted

what they thought had happened. “He went over the edge.”

“Reeves went hand to hand.”

“Where the hell is Reeves?”

Calls for him to check in were ignored. Damn it to hell. He was doing wrong by them again, but there was something to that shack.

He took a breath. “Reeves here. Alive.” Not that they cared, he was sure. “Coming up in two.”

But he kept going down. On the front of the hut, cola cans and pieces of armored vehicles were strung up like dream catchers on tinsel wire. Finally at the front of the hut, Trace kept one hand on his sidearm and knocked with the other, unable to stop himself. Two boys—young teenagers, most likely, but so malnourished he couldn’t tell—opened the door, with their own rusted weapons pointed at him.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

Working in that part of the country with his SEAL team, he'd learned more than enough of the local tribal languages to get by. In broken phrases, he offered that he meant no harm, that he was US Special Forces, and could he look at their decorations?

The kids didn't lower their weapons but did shed more candlelight on the dream catchers that hung at the door and windows. Dog tags dangled beside broken headlight glass and shards of metal. Trace couldn't stop himself. He took out his flashlight and ran his fingers over them. United States military identification and tags from other countries too. His fingers touched them, and he turned to the boys, pointing to the tags hanging around the hut. "I need these."

Without waiting for an answer, with his flashlight in his mouth, he started to take apart the elaborate designs, reading them as he put them in a bag.

Reeves, Michael A.

His heart stopped, and he could read no more. He didn't need to see the rest of the identifying details to know. Shivers ran down his back, and tears welled in his eyes.

As though the boys in the hut knew, still brandishing their weapons, they nodded and stepped back inside when he clutched the metal to his chest. With a deep breath, he wrapped it around his fist, turned out the mag light, and slipped his night-vision goggles back on. He climbed the rocks and edges until he found the team waiting for him.

They must've heard him speaking to the boys in their earpieces, and they all stood

watching him. No one made a noise. No one stepped forward because they probably didn't trust his ass. But he lifted his fist, Michael's tag barely visible in hand, and one by one, a "Hooyah" went up, and the men gave him pats on the back. A quick word from their CO, and they moved as a unit to the rendezvous location for a helo pickup.

"Reeves," his CO barked.

No telling what the guy would say. He deserved the worst of it, no doubt. "Sir."

There was a long silence, and then his CO nodded his head. "Job well done, son."

Everything surrounding Operation Cinderella was then complete.

### EPILOGUE

Three semesters later...

Trace stood and stared. It'd been hours since Delta had landed back on US soil. He had places to go, things to do—majorthings to do—today. But he couldn't. Not until he drove over to Arlington and stood amongst the sea of white tombstones.

His throat was tight, his eyes blurry. God, he hadn't been back here in... well, it'd been too long. The cemetery wasn't where he'd felt his brother, and until today, he hadn't needed to be there.

"I think you would've liked her, bro." He narrowed his eyes at Michael's grave. "Cool chick and all, but she's a good one."

The whisper of a breeze teased over his skin. He was a solid hour's drive away from Marlana's campus, and he should've left already, but it just wasn't happening. Instead, he sat on the grass and cracked open a beer.

"Thing about her... I just need her. She makes it better. Makes you better. And, since you've been gone—"Fuck, blurry eyes and all. "Time passes slower without you, except when she's there. And when she is, I can breathe."

After a few slow swigs of beer, he gazed into the sky. "She's my family, the only one I've got. Funny, I'm hers too. And she wouldn't think I'm crazy for talking to a headstone."

Trace stood up. “So, I guess since you’re up there and all, you might know my next move. But I just needed to run things by you. I love you, man.” He looked at his watch. “About that time. Well, past that time. I guess I’m late.” He tucked the remaining cans from the six-pack next to a tiny American flag and patted the white stone twice. “Wish me luck.”

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“Marlena McCloud.” The announcer’s voice echoed over the PA system as she stepped forward. “Graduating with honors with a joint bachelor’s and master’s degree in biological engineering.”

She walked across the stage, took her diploma, and shook the hand of the dean of the engineering school. “Congratulations.”

As she stepped offstage, she scanned the crowd... Trace! He’d sworn he’d be back before she graduated. She had no idea where he’d been, but he’d made a promise and kept it. Even if he was standing in the aisle, wearing tactical pants and a dark T-shirt, he was there. With her mother looking down—proudly, Marlena was sure—from heaven, and her father definitely grumbling her successes from a jail cell, Trace was the only person who’d be there to cheer on her graduation. The guy never let her down.

Instead of following the classmate in front of her, she skipped out of line and beelined it for Trace. “Hi, baby.”

“Hey.”

She had his brother’s dog tags in her pocket. Trace had sworn that it was his most prized possession and that she should keep them with her for good luck on her big day.

Filled with confidence and holding her diploma up, she said, “Proves I’m a smarty-pants.”

“Already knew that.” He kissed her lips, making her stomach flip as it always did when he held her close. “But if you were looking for proof, I’d say that gig contracting for the military screams ‘beauty and brains.’”

“Nothing about that job says ‘beauty.’”

He laughed against her lips. “Good thing you have me to remind you.”

She kissed him again. “How was work? When’d you get back? Exciting stuff?”

“Got back a little bit ago. Had to talk to someone.” He shrugged, tucking her against his side. “The job was more exciting than this graduation ceremony. Let’s go somewhere.”

“Where are we headed?” They filed out, and she unzipped the black gown and hat, dumping them in the rental-return box as they passed the doors.

“Doesn’t matter.”

The sun beamed overhead. Parents and guests milled around the school grounds. She and Trace walked across the grassy field where Screen on the Green had been more than a year ago.

“Don’t forget this.” She took Michael’s dog tags and pressed them into his hand. “I’d die if I misplaced them.”

He clasped her hand in his, locking the tags in their grip. “Nah, you wouldn’t lose them.”



“I know, but still.”

“But still, my ass.” Swinging her around in front of him, he smiled more than normal.

“Trade you for them.”

“Ha. Like there’s anything on earth more important than those tags.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:23 am*

“How about...” He pulled a black box out of his pocket. “You try again, Cinderella.”

Holy moly. That was a ring box. “Are you kidding me?”

Trace shook his head. “What do you think?”

“What do I think? I think you’re crazy.”

“You already knew that.” His laugh warmed her from the inside out.

“Then I think you’re...”

“That I’m what? In love with you? Found my place, my calm in you? Because that’s all true. But I lost myself and found myself, all because of you, Mar. I don’t have anybody else. I don’t want anyone else. But you, you get me. I get you. We’re screwed in the head and balance out perfect.”

“And that’s okay.” She nodded because it was who they were, and it was true. “You think we’ve got a shot at forever?”

He squeezed her into a hug. “I know we do. You saved me, and nothing can take us down. Think you can handle a Delta ghost?”

“Hell, yes.” She curled into his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck before he could make her focus on the box again.

“Good.” Trace kissed her. “Because there’s no one in the world who can love you

like I do.”

“That’s the truth.” She kissed him quiet and hugged him close. “Hooyah.”

THE END