



Hearts Under Fire

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Behind enemy lines, their lives aren't the only things at risk—so are their hearts

Get ready for a steamy sapphic military romance with a Happily Ever After! Dive into my new Honor Bound Series with a bang!

Kate Cross, a no-nonsense medic, is haunted by the loss of her partner in combat. She's built walls around her heart and has no time for romance—especially with Alexis Cole, the irresistible Combat Rescue Officer with a reputation for breaking hearts.

But when they're forced to work together on a high-stakes mission, the sparks between them are impossible to ignore.

As the mission spirals out of control and they end up trapped behind enemy lines, survival depends on trusting each other—both on the battlefield and in their hearts.

Can Kate take a chance on love, or will their dangerous world tear them apart?

Hearts Under Fire delivers thrilling rescues, intense action, steamy scenes, and a love that won't quit—even in the face of danger.

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Chapter 1

Kate

The ceaseless tapping of Lieutenant Kate Cross's fingers on the pristine wood desk betrayed her otherwise calm, collected, and unaffected demeanor. A shrill ringing cut in, and Kate whipped out her phone to hush the obnoxious ringtone.

The Barbie Girl theme song played loudly, and Kate answered with annoyance, "I'm changing your ringtone and, I'm never leaving you alone with my phone again, Izzy."

Lucious, rich laughter filled Kate's ears as Izzy ignored her ire.

"Don't lie to me. You love me and you're never changing that ringtone. Even if you do, I'll just change it back. You sound pissy today. What's going on?"

Kate glanced around the nurses' station, grateful she was alone. Usually the medical ward was flooded with patients, officers, distinguished visitors, and foreign allies. On this occasion, they'd just transferred out the only patient the night before, and a medical transport flight with new patients wouldn't be arriving until the next day. Normally, Kate wouldn't talk on her personal phone at her station, but the floor was silent, and no one was around. She spoke quietly, in calm, measured tones.

"I don't want to talk about it. How's Korea? Are you enjoying Kunsan?"

Kate could practically hear Izzy's eyes roll at the deflection.

“It’s wonderful. I love it. Great. Now that we’ve covered that, tell me what's bothering you.”

A groan accompanied Kate’s scowl. It was difficult hiding things from your best friend, especially if they were as emotionally intelligent as Izzy was. Kate gave in, knowing Izzy wouldn’t let it go.

“I was assigned a new partner.”

The silence was palpable. Izzy knew Kate didn’t talk about her last partner.

A dull rumbling began and Kate sighed. “Hold that thought.”

Palstein Air Base in Germany was known to many of the world's military members as a hub for overseas missions. The base was constantly bustling with activity—training missions, C-130’s coming in every couple of hours to take the next round of willing boots headed to the sandbox for deployment, F-18’s running exercises, practice bombing runs, and so much more. There was never a dull moment, and one always had to be prepared to lose the ability to hear and speak for a few minutes at the drop of a dime.

As the aircraft drew closer, Kate resisted the urge to jam her fingers into her ears. Soft rumbles turned into the loud roaring of the turboprop engines announcing the safe return of another platoon from deployment. As much as Kate hated that the medical ward was next to the flight line, hearing each aircraft land safely and bring more soldiers home always made her feel grateful.

It was only too easy to lose soldiers, friends, partners out there- as Kate knew only too well, so each one safely home was a relief to her.

The thrum of the engines finally died out, and Izzy’s laughter came through the

speaker of Kate's phone once again.

"Ah, gotta love base life. So. Tell me who this new partner is. Have you met them yet?"

Kate's unease lingered, but she answered anyway. "No. I haven't met her yet. The brief they sent just gave me her name and record. Give me a sec."

Kate tucked the phone into her shoulder with her chin and began thumbing through the folders on her desk. Finding the right one, she flipped to the first page.

"Lieutenant Alexis Cole. Combat rescue officer with a distinguished record. No known reprimands on file and has several commendations and exemplary physical test scores."

Izzy let out a sharp whistle. "Oh, Kate. I'm so deeply jealous of you."

Kate coughed a gruff laugh. "What the hell are you talking about? Do you know her?"

Izzy gasped. "Alexis Cole, are you kidding? You've never heard of her? Lieutenant love 'em and leave 'em. This is wonderful. I'm not ruining this for you. I'll let you go into this blind, but I will tell you I've met her, and I've heard of her long and skilled reputation."

Kate frowned. Concern filled her gut like lead. "You have to give me more than that."

"I know a girl with whom she went on a few dates. Apparently, this woman is so talented with her tongue and fingers that--"

"Hey! That's not what I meant," Kate barked, interrupting. Her voice echoed through

the empty hall, bouncing off the tiles.

“I don’t need to know that. She’s my partner forwork,” Kate emphasized, her voice breaking at the last moment.

Izzy tried to speak again, but Kate continued. “We just got a mission assignment, and we’ll be deploying any day. I have literally zero intention of becoming involved with anyone, least of all, some rescue officer who enjoys fucking half the platoon. She can be a lesbian Casanova on someone else’s time. We’ll have to focus, and distractions can get people killed.”

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“I know. I know. She is dreamy though, I must warn you,” Izzy sighed and groaned. “Anyway, you’re no fun, but you are the best damn combat certified nurse I know, so I guess I’ll have to give you a pass.”

Relaxing back into her seat, Kate laughed softly. “Thank you. I’ll take the compliment. What’s your deal, anyway? Have you not gotten laid yet over there? You’ve been there for how many weeks now?”

A frustrated groan morphed into a shout. “No! I’ve been here five weeks.” Izzy’s distress was apparent, and Kate rolled her eyes.

“You’ll be fine.”

“I know,” Izzy said, then paused. “You will be, too. It may take some time, but I think you should consider getting back out there, too. It’s been a really long time for you Kate. What happened was just beyond heartbreaking. You deserve to be happy, and who knows. Maybe going a round or two with Lieutenant love ‘em and leave ‘em might just be exactly what you need.”

Crisp, sterile air filled Kate’s lungs, and she lowered her forehead to the desk and clenched her eyes shut. She pushed away the painful thoughts and memories of her last partner. Acid filled her mouth, and the rush of feelings choked her.

“Let’s not do this right now, Izz. Please.”

“Okay, then what do you want to talk about?”

“Talk to me about Kunsan. You like it?”

Given the chance to wax poetic about how much she'd been enjoying Korea, Izzy filled the previously uncomfortable silence with her vivacious hunger for life. Kate listened attentively, grateful for the change of subject. She hated talking about her late partner, even with her best friend or in therapy, and only spoke about her when she was forced to.

Their conversation was cut short by an email announcing Kate had a mission brief to get to. Izzy secured a promise that Kate would call again before deploying out for the upcoming mission and hung up after shouting, “Good luck.”

Clear hallways greeted the patter of her footsteps. The entire building was empty. Kate's mind skipped a beat before she remembered. It was a holiday weekend. Most people were off base or already enjoying their time off even though it was technically Friday. She grunted softly in realization, nervously flicked a stray golden strand of her hair out of her eyes and smoothed it back into place. The linoleum reflected fluorescent lights, casting shadows on rows of photographs that lined sterile white walls. She took the stairs, heading for the mission briefing room in the basement. Nerves bubbled up in Kate's stomach as she neared the room.

As the door swung into view at the bottom of the stairwell, Kate steeled her spine, paused, and took several deep breaths. Rolling her shoulders, she cracked her knuckles and reached for the handle, ready to do battle.

The second before the handle was in reach, the door swung open, and Kate was greeted by a tall, muscular woman with dark chestnut hair and piercing blue eyes. Her sleeves were rolled up haphazardly, revealing rich, olive forearms covered in inky black tattoos. The name printed on her left breast read COLE in big, dark letters.

Kate understood at once why Izzy hadn't wanted to spoil it for her. Everything about

Lieutenant Alexis Cole broadcasted sexy, irreverent charm, and Kate sucked in a breath, stunned at Alexis's unique masculine beauty.

Electricity crackled down the back of Kate's neck and she clenched her jaw. Her eyes didn't know where to start, so she flitted her gaze to the back of the room, where a familiar face jumped out at her. Relief spread through her limbs, and she sidestepped Lieutenant Cole. Colonel Williams, a tall, lean, striking black woman, stood amongst the controlled chaos of the mission briefing room. Maps, plans, diagrams, and files littered the entire space, covering the massive wooden conference table and walls, which surrounded the fierce woman like a cocoon.

Kate approached, grateful to escape the heat at her back that announced Lieutenant Cole had not left but rather had turned around and loomed behind her.

"Colonel Williams. It's good to see you, ma'am. Have we been assigned a mission?"

The colonel didn't respond verbally or acknowledge her with a glance, just waved Kate over with a slice of her tiny hand. She then motioned to her ear where an earbud rested. Kate's eyebrows shot up. The colonel was on the phone, and clearly, Lieutenant Cole had intended to leave to give her privacy but had abandoned the notion when Kate had arrived.

Crisp, commanding, and as clear as day, Colonel Williams spoke. "And I'm telling you, Commander, I don't give a good goddamn who you have to wake up. I want you to get my people the supplies I need before they're ready to leave, or I swear I will make things difficult for you in the future."

Silence descended, and a shiver rolled down Kate's spine just as goosebumps broke out on her forearms. Colonel Williams was the nicest woman Kate knew, but she could be terrifying when she wanted to be.

Kate swallowed the lump in her throat and assumed the position of parade rest, tucking her hands behind her back and standing with her feet shoulder-width apart. Whatever they'd been assigned for was happening soon, and it had the colonel's hackles up. It took a lot to agitate the woman, and Kate's curiosity burned away at her resolve. She inched closer, hoping to overhear what the recipient of the ass chewing was promising to fulfill.

The heat at her back moved with her, and Kate froze, trying to ignore the warmth that spread through her limbs. Air whispered on the nape of her neck, and she swallowed down a gasp as Lieutenant Cole whispered next to her right ear, "God she's awesome. Is she always like this?"

The lieutenant's warm breath tickled the soft, fine hairs on Kate's neck, and she bit down hard on her lip and fought the urge to groan. Cole's voice was rich and melodic, a pure alto that dripped like honey over chocolate. Kate took a small step forward and nodded with a jerk of her chin. Lieutenant Cole followed, stepping closer, her piercing blue eyes locked on Colonel Williams.

"When she needs to be," Kate forced out between stubbornly clenched teeth.

A deep groan paired with a grunt had Kate practically breaking her neck to turn around and see Lt. Cole biting her lip, her eyes closed, her hands clutched over her chest, and her knees bent, giving the illusion she was being knocked over.

"What a woman. I want to be her when I grow up."

The temperature rose a few degrees, and Kate forcibly tore her gaze from where Lt. Cole was biting her lip. The inane thought intruded that she wished her own lip was pinned between Lieutenant Cole's teeth.

Even though it seemed dramatic, Kate had to agree with Lt. Cole. Colonel Williams

was amazing, and she couldn't blame Cole for having stars in her eyes.

Colonel Williams' voice silenced Kate's thoughts. "Good. See to it that the medical supplies are on the tarmac and ready to be loaded by 0400 tomorrow. My team will be on site and ready to take off at 0600."

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The threat went unsaid, but everyone in the room heard it. Don't be late. Colonel Williams snapped the phone shut and directed Lt. Cross and Lt. Cole toward the conference table with a stab of her fingers.

"Sit. We don't have a lot of time to go over this as quickly and efficiently as possible. You've got gear to collect, your kit to pack, and very little time to prepare for what is basically a shitshow."

They sat, and Kate put an extra chair between her and Lieutenant Cole for safe measure.

"I understand you two haven't been introduced and that sending you on a mission of this importance without field testing you as partners isn't ideal. However, I have no choice. Lieutenant Cross, you're my best nurse, and you're combat trained and ready. Your new partner happens to have a long and distinguished record of successful retrievals."

Digesting that information, Kate nodded and recalled that Lt. Cole's file had been impressive and extensive. She'd successfully completed several missions on record, and Kate assumed there were even more impressive feats in her off-the-record file. There had been a two year stint she'd spent with special forces assigned to Afghanistan. Kate had looked for more specifics within the file but none had been forthcoming. That was an answer in and of itself, and Kate hadn't bothered looking any further into it.

Continuing in her usual no-nonsense fashion, Colonel Williams pinned them in place with a fierce gaze. "You two are my best, and we have a serious situation to remedy."

She grabbed a remote off the table from atop some maps and clicked a button that brought a projector screen down from the ceiling.

The screen came to life, and they stared at a map of the border between Syria and Iraq.

“Thirty six hours ago, one of our supply convoys began its regular route. It was ambushed near this area.” Colonel Williams tapped an area on the map with a perfectly manicured and closely-cut nail before Lieutenant Cole’s voice chimed in, making Kate jump at her proximity. Lt. Cole must have moved closer to inspect the map that sat in front of Kate and was hovering over her shoulder.

“Is this a desert valley surrounded on all sides by rocky outcroppings and cliffs?” Lt. Cole’s voice expressed some of the concern Kate felt at the prospect of having to go through a valley literally surrounded on all sides by enemies.

The colonel shook her head. “Not exactly. Check out these photos and the topographical maps.”

Kate and Lt. Cole leaned forward to see what they’d be dealing with. Photos covered the screen depicting a dry, barren desert with rolling hills and sharp perilous cliffs that were likely impassable. Any attempt at climbing would likely result in serious injury.

“Those rocky outcroppings are really non-traversable vertical cliffs with the occasional cave. Intelligence says there may be multiple caves and tunnels in the area, but they aren’t tracking anything large enough to be of suspicion.”

Williams clicked through a few more slides, confirming that the ambush happened toward the northern side of the valley. They studied the photos and maps, trying to connect the dots on where the survivors were most likely holed up.

“Once in the valley, it’s a wide open space of over a hundred acres. There’s very little cover, and it’s all desert. As you know, there are only two ways out of the valley—the north and south exits. If you take the northern exit, you’ll be forced to hike around to a safe extraction point. This area has been buzzing with activity. We have Syrian rebels, Syrian military, Iraqi rebels, civilians, and our own boots mixed in. We’ve got several reports of injuries ranging from minor to severe, but no word on any casualties. Six of our own went into the ambush, but there are still a few of our soldiers unaccounted for.”

The reality of what they were facing sank in, and Kate let her eyes fall on Lt. Alexis Cole. No matter how the woman made her feel, she’d have to put it aside. Kate wouldn’t allow her partner to distract her on such a critical mission. She’d have to find a way to put her trust in Lt. Cole despite her reputation and casually flirtatious nature. As long as Cole didn’t expect to get anything out of Kate, they’d work together just fine.

“You’ll need to plan your entry and exit and follow my template for drop and pick up zones as close as you can. I’ve marked off all the best places we know of to get in and out undetected. Once on the ground, you two and your team are basically on your own. You’ll have to get in, find our boys, patch them up, get them out, and don’t die in the process. We leave tomorrow at 0600. Any questions for me, or are you ready to stick your heads together and make this happen?”

Lt. Cole stood, her face grim. “Ma’am, can I get our supply inventory, records of all available personnel for the team from which to choose, copies of these maps, and the file on our troops who are trapped?”

Williams turned on her heel and gathered two large folders. She held one out to Lt. Cole and one out to Kate. “These are the copies of everything you should need.”

Kate didn’t ask how Colonel Williams had accurately guessed which documents they

would prefer, but one look at her own folder proved nothing important had been left out. The woman had an odd knack for knowing things.

Lt. Cole excused herself and stalked off to complete the monumental task set before her. Kate didn't envy her.

“Lt. Cross, let me know if you need anything that isn't on the list. Pack light. There's a good chance you'll be walking most of the way, and you'll need to be able to carry most of your medical supplies on your own. Lt. Cole can provide you with a medic and possibly spare one of the rescue ops soldiers to be a pack mule for you. In your dossier there's a list of all known injuries. I've had the supply guys gather everything I could think you'd need for those specific injuries.”

Flipping open the file again, Kate found a section with cauterization tools, and she glanced at Colonel Williams in awe.

“How did you get your hands on this? These aren't even available commercially until next year.” Kate breathed out in excitement and shock.

A triumphant smirk painted Colonel Williams' face, transforming the severe facade into a beautiful, sharp profile worthy of canvas.

“That's the phone call you walked in on. The portable cauterization tool is ungodly expensive, but I have a friend in R&D who managed to ship me two for the price of one. One has been used before, so use that one to practice with tomorrow on the flight. Then prep the new one for use in the field. I'll leave you to get everything together.”

Kate's head swam as she checked the reported injury list. There were several minor injuries that would be easy to address and some more severe reports that concerned her. Patient mobility would be difficult to coordinate in such a hostile environment.

“I’m heading back to my computer. Call me at my desk if you need me, Colonel.”

The only response was a dismissive wave off, and Kate hurried back up the stairs to her office, taking the steps two at a time. The dossier clutched in her left hand felt radioactive. She was itching to get moving and save who she could. Adrenaline surged through her as she mentally cataloged the procedures she’d need to complete in a deployed setting. An ongoing checklist of all the equipment she needed to gather got longer and, determined to finish preparing and get a minimum of six hours sleep before departure, Kate pushed herself to walk faster as the medical ward’s door came into her line of sight.

Chapter 2

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Alexis

Despite the fact that a new, dangerous, and intriguing mission lay ahead, Alexis Cole's mind occasionally kept stubbornly straying to the feisty, fit, blonde Lieutenant Kate Cross. The woman was temptation wrapped up in a uniform and shrouded in icy defenses. Alexis' breath had escaped from her lungs in a quiet, startled gasp when she'd opened that door and come face to face with Lt. Kate Cross. Chocolatey brown eyes staring into her soul, intriguing Alexis and pinning her into place at the same time.

Alexis had struggled to pay attention to Colonel Williams's phone conversation as she'd picked up the scent of roses on Kate as she'd brushed past her. Unable to resist, she'd inched closer, almost folding herself protectively around Lt. Cross's body, trying to locate the elusive scent again. Before she'd had the chance, Colonel Williams had started their meeting.

After listening to Colonel Williams' brief, Alexis had to push Lieutenant Cross from her mind in order to focus on the task at hand. There was a team to be assembled, gear to obtain, and a mission to be planned. There were six soldiers counting on her, and she had no intention of letting them down.

Picking a team hadn't been difficult. Palstein was a prime location filled with many different units all specializing in something. Getting the required equipment, however, proved to be slightly more difficult.

Alexis needed to coordinate with Lt. Cross, and time was running low. She fished out her phone, deciding delegation was the only way things were going to get done. After

two rings, the call connected.

“Alexis, it’s been a minute.”

“Yes, Staff Sergeant, it’s been a while. While I’d love to shoot the shit with you, unfortunately I’m calling on business.”

Staff Sergeant Maloy, a long-time friend of hers, could clearly hear the seriousness in her tone and immediately switched gears.

“What can I do for you, Lieutenant Cole?”

“I’ve got your file. You’re available for a trip to the sandbox with me and a team for a rescue. I need to finish some of the finer details, so head over to the Rescue Ops office and start reaching out to the chosen team members. We’re only taking a handful of people, and some of my chosen ops guys are already located on our Forward Operating Base. (FOB) Find out what we need to do to have the two we need released to us for the duration of the mission. Then coordinate a pickup for our equipment and have it delivered to the flight line. The equipment and supply folks were sending mixed signals about our access to ammunition. Clear that up. We can’t go into hostile territory without proper ammo. We leave at 0600 tomorrow, and we have no time to spare.”

Silence reigned for a few beats before Maloy responded. “Copy, Lieutenant. I’ll take care of it.”

Adrenaline and excitement coursed through her.

“Thank you, Maloy. I’m glad I can count on you,” she said in a serious tone before hanging up.

She had a cute nurse to make plans with and some soldiers to rescue.

Alexis mulled over her reaction to Lt. Cross on her walk back to the mission briefing room. The woman was stunning. All lean, sinewy muscle, flowing golden honey-colored hair, huge brown eyes, and a fierce glare that would scare a weaker woman. What Alexis hadn't expected was the very visceral reaction she'd had to Kate Cross. Her heart had pounded, her breath had caught, and a lump had risen in her throat, nearly choking her. She'd felt electricity zip through her and had the urge to run her fingers through Cross's hair to see if it felt as soft as it looked.

Alexis shook her head to clear the thought. There was plenty of time to think about that later, perhaps on the eight-hour flight to the desert. She was a bit irked to find that Cross wasn't in the Colonel's office, but Colonel Williams was quick to give her directions to Lieutenant Cross's office.

"Her office is in the back of the medical ward, two floors up. Take the hallway all the way down, then make a left. There's a sign, so you can't miss it. She usually sits at the nurses' station, but she may be in her office doing prep work for the mission."

Alexis took off for the med ward, her boots filling the silent stairwell as she took the steps two at a time. The building was eerily quiet for a weekday, but Alexis didn't mind. It'd be easier to prepare for the mission with most of the base personnel elsewhere. Following Colonel Williams's directions exactly, it wasn't long before Alexis found herself strolling down the crisp, sterile hallway of Palstein's medical ward.

The unit smelled like a hospital, clean and foreign. The white walls were lined with photos of men and women in scrubs, white lab coats, and some in uniform. Fluorescent lights lined the ceiling, leading the way down a long stretch of hallway and illuminating the nurses station.

The nurses station was a large, clean, meticulously organized semi-circular desk. Each folder, binder, and paper was properly labeled, filed, and arranged in perfect lines. Alexis was pretty sure she could eat off the floor and be no worse off. The idea created the image of Lt. Cross with her nose scrunched up adorably in indignation at the thought of someone eating off the hospital floor.

With her thoughts once again centered on Cross, Alexis peered around in search of the back office. A door tucked in the back on the left stood open, a light on inside filtering out in a beam of soft gold light in direct contrast from the fluorescent lights that illuminated the rest of the building. Drawn toward the light, Alexis silently approached the office door and peered in.

Lieutenant Cross sat behind a large metal desk. Like the nurses station, Cross's desk was organized within an inch of its life. Not a single paper was out of place, and every pen was tidily placed inside a metal cup. All the lights were off save one old lamp that cast warm golden light toward Lt. Cross. Two massive windows occupied the wall behind where Cross sat, and Alexis could see a dark, gray overcast day with clouds threatening snow.

Lieutenant Cross sat as still as marble, her only movement her fingers across the keyboard and her eyes across her computer screen. The soft light illuminated her, casting a glow on her skin and giving her blonde hair an ethereal halo. Alexis swallowed hard, her heartbeat picking up into a sprint, and she tried to push down the mix of panic and attraction choking her.

A small crease appeared in Lt. Cross's brow, and Alexis couldn't bear lurking in the doorway any longer. She cleared her throat and stepped in, causing Cross's gaze to snap to hers. Silent electricity charged between them, making the air feel heavy in Alexis's lungs.

Alexis launched her most charming smile. "Just came to talk plans with you."

Cross's gaze narrowed slightly, and her right eyebrow rose in suspicion, conveying annoyance and distrust. Some unnamed emotion appeared on Lt. Cross's face, then her expression cleared and her professional mask reappeared.

When Kate spoke, Alexis listened, enraptured by her voice. "The colonel said you could assign me a medic and possibly have one of your rescue ops personnel carry a medical pack. I could definitely use a medic as an assistant. I can make do without a pack mule, but if you have an extra set of hands to give, I'd be able to bring an extra trauma pack that may make all the difference in the wounds we can treat."

Her previous thoughts of anything but the mission evaporated, and Alexis switched into work mode. She was a combat rescue officer (CRO), and she lived for missions like these.

"I can definitely assign someone to carry supplies for you. One of the pieces of intel we got was a radio report that their backstock is running low, including food and medical supplies. If you think an extra med pack is necessary or even just strategically advantageous, then we'll bring it. Equipment for this region is pretty light. There's only so much we can do with extremely hot temperatures during the day and the low temps at night."

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Lt. Cross nodded in agreement. “If we can add an extra personal trauma pack to each individual team member's supply, that would be helpful, as well. We don't need full-sized first aid packs. The pocket SABC first aid kits will do. Other than that, I have a few pieces of equipment we can't afford to lose or break, and they're going to be vital in saving as many of the injured as we can.”

Alexis hummed in thought. “Tell me what the injury list looks like.”

A frown marred Lt. Cross's face. “One amputation for sure as well as a few minor cuts, so we can expect some infections and possible broken bones. The report's sketchy. Could be an arm, or maybe an ankle. Not entirely sure. I also have reports of possible gunshot wounds.” She trailed off into silence.

“Dear god, listen to this: Possible gunshot wounds and/or internal/external hemorrhaging.”

Alexis grimaced. “Sounds like a tough guy is trying to avoid saying he got shot, it hurts like hell, and he's scared he's gonna bleed out.”

Lt. Cross let out a startled laugh, and Alexis grinned at her.

Kate shook her head in disapproval. “I expect there's more than one hard case who will deny injury until they're ready to pass out from blood loss. I see it a lot. I just hope we make it in time.”

“Okay, so we need to prioritize blood loss, which means time is certainly a factor. We shouldn't go the long way around, but we can't take the most direct approach, either.

If we go in hot in a convoy straight through the valley we'll attract unwanted attention to us and those we're rescuing."

Alexis tapped her fingers on her chin and stared off into the dreary afternoon out the back window. She pondered aloud, "We could take the southern entrance by helicopter and have them drop us in the most secluded section of the valley. We'll have to ruck through the night, avoiding multiple enemies from any direction. But if we do it that way, we may get in and out undetected and retrieve our people."

Silence reigned. Alexis smiled at Lt. Cross when she didn't automatically give her thoughts on the plan.

"So, how do you feel about the idea? Is there an obstacle I'm not seeing?"

Lt. Cross's perfect blonde brows skyrocketed into her hairline. "Oh. Well, this works for me. My med packs aren't terribly heavy, so it shouldn't be an issue to ruck through the night with them. The approach seems sensible, as the valley will be crawling with enemies during the day. Also, we'll be much easier to spot during the day, and the heat may be an issue. If we can have our transport team drop us as close to the last known location of our troops, we should have ample time to reach any survivors who are still holding on and do any treatments necessary. How do you want to exfil?"

Alexis shook her head. "Not many good options. We'll have to have multiple plans in place, just in case the first one or two extraction points aren't possible to maintain. I'm thinking, in the ideal scenario, we just ruck back to where we were infilled by the helo, and they can return and pick us up with our extra cargo."

A wry smile lifted Lt. Cross's lips. "What's the likelihood that the ideal scenario will actually happen?"

Alexis shrugged and frowned. “Honestly, I’ve only had two or three missions go ideally. Otherwise, we usually move to option three or four before we find a safe, successful exfil. But that’s why we make Plans B, C, and D.”

“Okay, so Plan B would be a different pickup location, still in a remote, relatively unpopulated area. In Plans C and D, we’ll need to hike up and out the northern exit and exfil either on the northern side, which increases the danger for our pilots tenfold, or we have to hike through the north exit only to swing around the mountain range and hike several days through the desert with wounded.”

Alexis nodded, impressed with Lt. Cross’s ability to fully grasp the situation. Colonel Williams hadn’t been wrong when she’d said it was shit storm. The location of their injured was incredibly inconvenient and inhospitable. There were insurgents around every corner, and Alexis wasn’t sure if there was a good approach.

“We’ll have a satphone, and they’ll have GPS monitoring for us so they can track and monitor the mission from the TOC. We can attempt to do the southern exit and deal with the pickup location after that, but if the southern exit becomes impassable, we’re fucked. We’ll have to take the northern exit. There’s sure to be someone maintaining a presence at the northern exit route, so we’ll have to be extremely careful of another ambush if forced to make that exfil.”

Lt. Cross surveyed the maps again and hummed. Alexis watched, silent and transfixed, as she slid her slender fingers over the map of the valley. Cross spoke, not to Alexis, but aloud to herself.

“If it were me, and I’d been ambushed in the northern section of the valley,” she trailed off, her eyes narrowing. “Probably, I’d look for cover. But this location has none to speak of, unless they could find a cave or a well-hidden riverbed. This area is known for its dry riverbeds.” She pointed at the map, indicating a section of valley surrounded on the northern edge by cliffs.

Cross turned to Alexis, her eyes wide and questioning. “What do you think? Did they have any medical personnel with them, or would they have taken a different route?”

Alexis answered after searching through the pile of personnel files. “They had a medic. Normally I’d say the commanding officer or whomever was highest ranking would have taken charge in the event of an ambush, but the only person I know for certain who made it out alive is the combat medic. I know him personally, and he has more experience in hostile zones than the rest of his team.”

Finding the file for their medic, Alexis offered it to Lt. Cross. Without looking up, Cross reached out to take the file and missed. Instead, Alexis felt Cross grasp her hand and she heard a soft gasp escape Kate’s lips.

Their gazes collided, and Alexis realized how close they’d gotten. Their breaths mingled, and she could smell roses in Cross’s hair again. The thought derailed her. Her mind blank, she leaned down toward Cross, their hands still grasped together, and her eyes locked on Lt. Cross’s lips. She was curious if they tasted like roses, too.

“I think you should call me Alexis.” She exhaled softly, leaning closer.

It was as if she’d dumped a bucket of water over Lt. Cross’s head. Her eyes widened in surprise, her jaw clenched, and her nostrils flared. She took a step back out of Alexis’ reach and yanked the file out of her hand.

“You’ll call me Lt. Cross, and I’ll address you as Lieutenant or Lt. Cole.” Her voice rang out with an edge of steel, but Alexis heard the tiny break at the end.

She’d unnerved the unflappable Kate Cross! The thought made her giddy, and excitement bubbled in Alexis’s chest. This was turning out to be interesting, and Alexis was more than just curious. The sensation was akin to having just taken a drug for the first time. She didn’t want to consider what it would be like to get addicted to

that woman.

A lopsided grin stretched across her face and Alexis put her legendary charm on. Despite the fact that Cross was only a few inches shorter than her own six feet, Alexis felt as if she was arguing with a tiny, adorable pixie.

“Well it looks like we’ve got a live one. See you later, Little Lieutenant. Call or text me if you need me. My info’s in the file.”

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Kate's blue eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

With that, Alexis turned on her heel and left the medical wing. She tried to convince herself she wasn't attempting to escape as she walked briskly toward the exit, desperate for a breath of fresh air.

Chapter 3

Kate

The droning of engines lulled Kate into comfort, and she dozed lightly. She sat with three others on a C-130 on the tarmac, waiting to take off. She'd been early. It had occurred to her that if she were in place and asleep before the plane took off, she wouldn't have to endure any idle flirtations from Lt. Cole, so she'd gotten up long before she'd needed to and had been the first non-flight-crew member to arrive. She'd spent the last hour snoozing off and on to the rhythmic rumbling of the airfield.

Kate had spent the rest of the previous day packing, prepping, and going over the maps. She knew if she committed the maps to memory it could save their lives. She'd texted Lt. Cole a few times to arrange an equipment pickup and had request the final mission plans electronically so she could review and memorize those, too. Kate believed in being prepared.

Trauma nurses spent a lot of time thinking about the next patient. Kate was no exception. She'd spent the last hours before going to bed flipping through her trauma notecards and going through her triage material. She knew backward and forward, but practicing and preparing helped her recall important details in the heat of the moment.

Kate wanted every advantage going into the scenario with limited information on the status of her patients.

She'd dozed off amongst a meadow of flashcards that covered her bed. The rest of her room was otherwise spotless. Kate frowned to herself, recalling waking up with notecards stuck to her forehead and several crumpled beneath her.

Sudden heat bathed Kate's left side, pulling her out of her reveries. Her eyes sprang open. Lieutenant Cole occupied the bench seat next to her, her eyes closed, and her belt-harness already fashioned. Kate stared at her, consuming Alexis's profile with abandon. The cocky, flirtatious arrogance was gone, and a serene, tired mask darkened her expression. She had dark brown hair in a low fade, with it grown out carelessly long on top. Kate was certain it was out of regs but doubted Alexis cared.

The uniform hugged Alexis's body in a way that Kate tried to ignore, but she couldn't help but appreciate her tan forearms covered in swirled black ink tucked across her chest. Her gaze drifted up to Lt. Cole's mouth, and she snapped her eyes shut. Alexis's plump lips were turned up in a cocky grin, as if she knew Kate had been looking.

Kate jolted awake sometime later, feeling the plane jerk down slightly due to turbulence. Pain radiated through her neck, and Kate groaned. She'd slept with her neck bent and now her muscles were protesting. She worked out the knot with her thumb and opened her eyes.

Lieutenant Cole had fallen asleep at some point and had leaned over the cable net between them. Her head was tilted to the side and was resting atop Kate's. Quickly surveying the others, Kate found that everyone else in the cargo area was also asleep, despite the roaring of the Hercules engines. Rivera and Huang were in a similar position. The two large men's heads were tilted together, Sergeant Rivera's temple resting on top of Master Sergeant Huang's shaved head. Kate was tempted to

take a photo. The two men bickered like old hens when they were awake.

Even though she wanted to pull away from Alexis, Kate stopped herself. The flight was long, and most of them hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before. If Kate woke up Alexis and their team leader didn't get enough sleep because of her, she'd feel responsible. She reluctantly closed her eyes and sighed. She'd forgotten how good it felt to be close to someone else, and the warmth that spread from Alexis into Kate's side was intoxicating. The woman was a furnace, and the C-130 was colder than usual. Kate resisted the urge to snuggle in closer and bask in her presence.

Alexis sighed and nuzzled the top of Kate's head, and she blushed. Alexis's voice was groggy and rough, as if she were still asleep.

"Go back to sleep, Little Lieutenant. Still got four hours," Alexis whispered, her voice soft and low. It wasn't a question but a command. Kate found herself complying without even thinking of arguing. This time, she fell asleep and remained that way until they touched down on the tarmac. Her dreams were filled with piercing blue eyes and tan skin covered in inky black tattoos.

Kate knew they'd landed in the desert by the scorching heat. Night was ready to fall, but as the sun was still up, the temperature persisted. Sweat dripped down her neck and back, her normally spotless appearance marred by the heat. It didn't matter. They were headed deeper into the desert soon, and they'd all be cold or overheated and covered in a layer of dust and sand. The risk of infection worried Kate, but she kept her mind on the present as they went through their gear.

The atmosphere had turned electric. Kate felt wary, knowing her job was to follow orders until she reached her patients. Huang and Rivera were already snipping at each other about something, and the rescue ops soldiers who worked directly under Lt. Cole were compulsively field stripping their weapons. Everyone was, double and triple checking that everything was shipshape.

Kate did the same, repeatedly taking inventory until Lt. Cole materialized at her side, bathing her hip in heat and lighting her ablaze with awareness. Kate finished the inventory, put all the supplies back into her pack, secured the cauterizer, and turned to see what Lt. Cole wanted.

She was surprised when Alexis offered her a pistol tucked into a leather shoulder holster. Kate shook her head nearly imperceptibly.

“I don’t usually carry a weapon, Lt. Cole. Didn’t Colonel Williams informed you of that?” she whispered, motioning Lt. Cole away from the others so they could speak privately.

Alexis jerked her head in a rough nod and followed, sticking close to Kate’s back. “I was made aware of the fact that you usually do not carry on your missions. This is not a normal mission, and we don’t know what we’re walking into. I wanted to strap you up with several different options for weaponry, but Colonel Williams insisted that you wouldn’t like that option. So in the spirit of...” Alexis trailed off, pausing to find the right word. “In the spirit of cooperation and compromise, I hope you’ll be willing to graciously accept this 9mm pistol along with a tactical knife.”

Lt. Cole held the pistol out to her with her right hand by its barrel, and a large knife by its sheath in her left. She’d successfully backed Kate into a corner. Technically, Lt. Cole could make her carry whatever weaponry she chose. It was only out of respect for Kate’s wishes that she had limited it to a pistol and a knife. By all accounts, Kate figured she was getting off easy when she saw some of the hardware the Combat Rescue Officers’s were packing around with them.

Alexis offered the pistol and strapping up to her and Kate was all planning to snap and snatch it from her and do it herself, but before she knew it, she had offered her arms up to Alexis and was allowing Alexis to strap it onto her.

What the fuck are you doing, Kate. Get a grip.

As Alexis' hands roamed freely over Kate's chest and back while she strapped her into the holster, she called over one of the CRO's Kate had seen handling a grenade launcher earlier.

“Maloy! Come give me a status report on the ammunition situation.”

Kate listened as Maloy rattled off an encounter with a particularly dense ammunition supply technician. When Alexis finished with the holster, she started to put Kate's gear on her piece by piece. Kate tried to focus on what Maloy was saying, and not on where Alexis' hands slipped Kevlar plates into the base layer vest.

“So this genius was like, ‘Yeah but the earliest I can have the ammo shipped to you is Monday morning.’ And I'm like, ‘Dude, our mission is tomorrow, and what are you talking about shipping? If you can't haul the ammunition to the flightline, we'll just sign out the equipment at the source and transport it to the freakin' C-130 ourselves.’”

Alexis's rough laughter made butterflies swarm in Kate's stomach.

Kate could clearly dress herself. Why on earth was she letting Alexis just do as she pleased? It wasn't standard practice. But then Kate figured, Alexis wasn't ever so hung up on standard practice. It seemed Alexis Cole just did whatever the hell she wanted.

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“So what was the final solution? Did he have them transported, or did you pick them up yourself?”

Maloy launched into an explanation that Kate couldn't focus on and didn't hear. Lt. Cole had spun her around and slipped the vest over Kate's head. Kate closed her eyes and froze as pain shot through her neck again.

Lt. Cole secured the vests' Velcro, then applied pressure with her thumb to the knot in Kate's neck. Her vision swam as darkness creeping in and stars exploding. She let out a soft yelp at the equally pleasurable and painful sting of the pressure from Alexis' hand. Alexis pushed into the knot and kneaded, causing Kate's brain to go haywire.

Suddenly, the knot released, and Kate gasped and stepped out of Lt. Cole's grasp.

Kate nodded and thanked her, then walked away to check her weapon to be sure the safety was on and there wasn't a round in the chamber. She triple-checked her supplies again and touched base with her medic, Sergeant Garcia. Before long, Lt. Cole was rounding everyone up and going over the mission plan again in earnest with all their team gathered together for the first time.

“I'm Combat Rescue Officer Lieutenant Cole. We have six possible victims and a handful of injuries and unknown conditions. The goal is to get Lt. Cross here to our boys.”

Lt. Cole motioned for Kate to join her at the head of the group.

“She and Garcia need to get to our wounded as fast as possible. As soon as we get eyes on the patients, Lt. Cross is in charge.”

Silence descended as everyone digested this. “She will best know which individuals need what, and we don’t have the time or the luxury for anyone to be questioning her expertise. Are we understood?”

A resounding “Yes, ma’am,” put Kate at ease.

Kate stepped forward. “Time is our biggest factor. We’re going to have to move quickly, and there are only so many of us. The status of our wounded may prevent us from moving them without extensive treatment first. We may need to split our exfils into two groups. All possible scenarios are in your binders, but I assure you, I’ll lead you and give you direction as new situations arise. I’ll need all of you if we’re going to get as many of our people home as we can.”

Smiles greeted her, and Kate felt she’d won a few of the CRO’s over.

Lt. Cole finished covering mission basics, and when the darkness fell, they loaded up into the helicopters and headed out of Iraq and into Syria toward the site of the ambush. The helo ride felt short, but Kate knew it was over twenty minutes. As they lowered to the ground and touched down, they quickly filed off the helicopter, their boots sinking into the sand as they moved forward as a unit.

Kate and Garcia were surrounded in moments, the team tactfully cocooning them from danger. The darkness of nightfall was offset by the luminescent moon and dappling of stars that illuminated the desert before them. It was cold, the temperature biting in contrast to the extreme heat of the day, and Kate shrugged her shoulders to generate some warmth.

The unit moved forward as one, and the helicopter rose behind them, hovered for a

moment, then turned around and returned the way they'd come. Kate padded along next to them in silence with her pistol drawn. The mission plan said they'd need to cover more than five miles, which would take them over an hour with all the possible obstacles. They'd have to maintain speed and stay out of sight of possible enemy combatants.

Kate was hoping to get to the wounded and get out of Syria as fast as possible without any encounters with the locals. Lt. Cole's detailed navigation plan had impressed her, and Kate realized just how much time and conflict they'd saved due to Alexis's careful planning.

They rucked for an hour, alternating walking and jogging as they constantly surveyed their surroundings. The terrain was rougher than Kate had expected, even though she'd seen the photos of the cliffs. Craggy peaks jutted into the sky on the far sides of the valley, a warning to any who'd attempt to stray too close. The ground was made up of sand, sandstone, and rock, and Kate tried her best to maintain her footing. The others didn't seem to be struggling with the sand, but then, they'd spent time in the desert, while she'd mostly spent her time in hospitals. This mission was certainly within her expertise but also completely out of her comfort zone.

As they approached the northern end of the valley, Lt. Cole drew them to a slow trot before they came to a complete stop, tucked away out of sight in the basin of a dried riverbed.

The others were surveying the area for enemies, but Kate's eyes were immediately drawn to a tiny ray of light coming from what appeared to be a riverbed. Kate wondered if it was a cave. She reached out and tapped Alexis's shoulder. Lt. Cole turned and Kate drew her attention to the light, pointing out the possible cave.

Kate was apprehensive. She could be leading them to an enemy encampment in a cave system. Then again, she might be leading them to their wounded soldiers.

Lt. Cole approached the light, determined to make out whether its source was friend or foe.

Following behind, still encapsulated by her guardians, they approached from the riverbed, easing toward the light. As they drew closer, it became clear that it was a well-hidden cave near the bend in a dried riverbed, an ideal hiding place.

Lt. Cole led them forward and into the mouth of the cave. The light grew brighter, and they turned a corner into a larger cavern. Kate let out a breath of relief when Lt. Cole called out, "Clear!"

The wall of military muscle separated, and Kate peered out to assess the situation. The medic, Bowie Krantz, knelt next to a man with a bloody stump for a left arm that had been amputated above the elbow. He tended to the wound. Kate saw at least two others lying down in her peripherals, but they weren't moving.

Kate wasn't sure if it was because they were sleeping or if they were casualties.

"Sergeant Krantz. It's good to see you, I'm Lieutenant Kate Cross. We've met before, actually. You came through when we did the skills rodeo last fall."

Krantz's eyes flitted to Kate, and a small smile of recognition lit up his handsome face. He spoke in a thick southern accent.

"It is good to see you again, Lieutenant."

"Can I get a status report on personnel?"

Krantz swallowed hard, and Kate pulled a pair of gloves from her pocket, tugged them on and began fishing out the supplies to debride and clean the amputation wound.

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“Rodriguez, Smith, and Mallory are dead. They were killed during the ambush, and their bodies are over there.” He jerked his head over to the unmoving forms Kate had seen earlier.

Kate swallowed. She hated this. Losing comrades never got easier. She didn’t know them but it still hurt her deeply.

“Cassidy has injuries he won’t let me look at. Andrews has this amputation and probably a TBI. Smacked the shit out of his head. I’m pretty sure I have at least minor injuries, but I haven’t stopped to assess them. I’m trying to keep Andrews’s wound clean and keep him from bleeding out.”

Kate could hear the strain in his voice, and she rested her hand on top of one of his.

“You’ve done everything right up to this point, Bowie. Now, you let go of Andrews for me, and I’ll take over from here. I want you to go eat a full meal pack here and get some water on board, and then take a nap while we treat some of these other guys first.”

Nodding incoherently, Bowie stood and his huge, cornfed frame lumbered away led by Cole and Maloy.

Garcia appeared at Kate’s side with the medical packs open and ready to go.

“Tell me what you need,” he said, voice calm and even.

Kate grabbed some gauze and started belting out orders. “I need sterile water now,

and I need one of you to confirm the status of those three bodies. Cole, I need you to find Cassidy and make him talk. I need to know what's wrong with him, and we don't have time for his macho big-boy bullshit. The rest of you, if you have steady hands and you're not squeamish, come over here, grab a pair of gloves and get ready to help me dress wounds."

Everyone leapt into action, and Kate continued cleaning Andrew's wound, firing off questions one after the other about his condition. The amputation had been nearly two days ago, but he hadn't gone into shock. Kate was astounded at his fortitude. She couldn't imagine how incredibly painful this injury must be for him.

"What do you want to do for pain medication?"

Andrews blinked at her as if he didn't understand. "You can't give me narcotics, doc. If you do that, I won't be able to ruck out of here."

Kate reeled back. "Aren't you in pain? Why would you turn down the meds? A bunch of hard asses!"

Someone behind her grumbled something about being manly and she growled in exasperation. Kate had heard enough.

"You have an amputation from above the elbow. If you go into shock while we're transporting for exfil, we'll have to stop and stabilize you. I'm giving you the damned morphine, and I don't want to hear anything about it. Is that understood?"

Andrews's jaw was clenched in pain and sweat glimmered on his brow. He nodded his agreement, and Kate turned to Garcia.

"Get me IV access on the other arm, at least an 18-gauge, and if you can't get good access then go for an IO."

Having heard Kate's no-nonsense attitude, Sgt. Krantz and Sgt. Cassidy shuffled over and sat quietly near her, waiting for their turn to be examined and patched up. Garcia and Kate worked in tandem, and she secured the dressing as Garcia finished taping the IV line down, immobilizing it to Andrews's arm and bicep.

They finished up with Andrews, and Kate surveyed the other two injured. "I want one of you to monitor Lt. Andrews. The morphine's going to make him tired and loopy, but he should still be able to walk. Make sure he doesn't sleep too much. I'm pretty sure he's got a concussion. Talk to him and keep him engaged."

Huang rose and took Kate's place, assuming vigil over Lt. Andrews. Kate looked over Cassidy and Krantz, assessing what little she could see. They'd been through a lot already, and she didn't want to add to it.

"Sgts Garcia, we have at least two gunshot wounds that seem to be through and through, one in each of our patients. Lookslike Cassidy's wound has stopped bleeding, but it needs to be cleaned and dressed. Take care of him while I try to stop the bleeding from Bowie's shoulder. Lt. Cole, I could use another set of hands if you have time to spare."

Alexis materialized at her side, her innate heat sinking into Kate's tightly clenched muscles. Lt. Cole's voice was calm and reassuring in Kate's ear.

"I'm here. What do you need?"

Kate ignored the wrenching in her chest at Alexis' words and focused on Bowie.

"Wound needs to be cauterized. He's got a slow bleed that won't stop. Hand me supplies as I call for them and talk to me about our status."

Equipment set out and ready, Kate set to work on Krantz, giving him an IV and

cleaning the wound. Apologizing softly to the man for the pain, Kate focused on her task and Lt. Cole's voice.

“Krantz was correct. We have three bodies. Looks as if they took enemy fire and were the first three to go. Their commanding officer was Major Smith, who died leaving Krantz in charge as we suspected. The immediate area is secure. This cave is well hidden. We can stay for another hour or so, but any longer and we risk getting caught in the daylight for the exfil. As far as I can tell, there aren't any enemy combatants in the immediate area, and they're unaware of our location.”

Kate was especially grateful they'd come in under the cloak of nightfall. If they'd arrived during the day, they could have alerted any nearby enemies to the location of their injured.

Alexis's voice held concern. “How much longer do you think we'll need to remain here, and what's the travel status of these three?”

Humming in thought, Kate responded while she focused in, pulling out the cauterization tool and setting to work on the now-half-conscious Bowie's shoulder wound. The tough son of a bitch had held out through the cleaning process, but the narcotics had finally taken effect, and he'd zoned out, blissfully unaware of Kate searing his flesh to staunch the blood flow.

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“I’ll be done with him soon. I suspect Cassidy has a broken wrist, but I’m letting Garcia deal with his bullet wound for now and check him over. Once I’ve stabilized the issue with Cassidy, these two,” Kate pointed at Krantz and Andrews before returning to the wound and continued, “should be ready to go within the next thirty to sixty minutes. The meds will only dull their pain, not keep them out. All three should be able to walk to the exfil. The amputation is serious, but we have it contained for now, and as long as Andrews doesn’t slip into shock, we should be able to get them out of here relatively soon.”

The smell of burning flesh wafted up from where Kate worked, and she heard a small gag next to her. She quickly glanced at Alexis, hoping the other woman wasn’t going to be sick.

“If it’s too much, swap out with Sgt. Rivera. There’s no shame in it.”

From the corner of her eye, Kate saw Lt. Cole shake her head.

“No, no. I’m okay. I’m sensitive to smell, and I wasn’t expecting it.”

Kate finished cauterizing the wound and accepted the dressing from Lt. Cole’s outstretched hand. Securing it over the wound on the front, Kate and Alexis repositioned Bowie so she could apply another dressing to the exit wound, as well. They lowered him gently to the floor, and Bowie curled up on his side, a smile covering his face.

“He’s all set. I’d say we give these two another fifteen minutes to sleep off some of the drugs. I should be able to get Sgt. Cassidy sorted out in the meantime. Get the

team ready to leave, call our ride, and let them know our ETA.”

Alexis rose to complete her requests, and Kate joined Garcia in attending to Sgt. Cassidy. Turned out he'd dislocated his left shoulder and broken his left wrist. Kate was just glad his dominant hand was uninjured.

They set his bones and popped his shoulder back into place, ignoring Cassidy's yowling cry of pain. They'd already given him what pain medication they could, and there was nothing more they could do for him but work quickly. When they were finished, Kate patted Cassidy on the right shoulder.

“You did well. I'm not going to immobilize your shoulder yet. We can secure it on the helo. I want you to continue to use full range of motion if you can. It's going to hurt, but it'll keep your muscles from locking up and we may avoid another dislocation.”

Kate rose and scanned their faces in search of Lt. Cole. She was stationed at the cave entrance, keeping watch.

“We're ready. Can we make the southern extraction point before sun up?”

Alexis turned, unaware of how close Kate had gotten. Their chests nearly touched, noses mere inches apart. Checking to make sure no one was watching, a small grin tucked into the corners of her mouth as Alexis reached out to ruffle Kate's hair. Kate felt thrown by the intimacy of it.

“Yep. Good work, Little Lieutenant. You managed to patch them all up in record time.”

Kate thought to snap and correct the nickname, but felt the magnetic pull between them as Lt. Cole leaned in closer, studying her face.

“How are you doing? You look tired.”

Kate shrugged. “It’s been a long two days.”

Alexis grunted her agreement and Kate stared into her eyes, unable to pull away as she leaned in closer, her eyes locked on Kate’s lips.

Behind them, Bowie coughed and stirred, waking from his morphine-induced nap. Kate stepped back immediately, glad for the cold bucket of water he’d dumped over her head. Her unease multiplied at her growing inability to hold the dreamy Alexis Cole at a distance.

Lt. Cole cleared her throat and rounded up the team in preparation to depart as if nothing had happened between them. Kate frowned. It seemed Alexis wasn’t as affected by their proximity as she was. Kate tossed the thought out and focused on getting her patients up and moving.

The ruck out was far slower and more grueling than their hike in. Bowie shuffled along in front of Kate, no outward sign of distress evident, but she could hear his rasping breaths and the gasps emanating from him. The journey was hard on his wound, and Kate grew concerned that her cauterization work might come undone. If he threw a clot, they were fucked. Unease skittered through her. Kate liked Bowie. He reminded her of a cousin she’d once met but didn’t know well. While some men were intimidated or even openly hostile toward women in charge in the military, Bowie had clearly immediately taken a liking to Kate, and the feeling was mutual.

Kate dropped back slightly to walk next to Alexis.

“We have to increase our pace and get Bowie out of here. Andrews and Cassidy are stable, but if Bowie’s clot bursts, he won’t be.”

Alexis's eyes flitted over the men. "We're not splitting up. We'll have to increase our speed."

Kate hadn't wanted to split up either, but she chose not to examine her motives too closely.

Alexis trotted to the front, and Kate heard her soft, lilting voice giving orders before the group picked up speed. The fastest runners shifted in place, taking up the rear and positioning themselves behind the wounded.

Sergeant Rivera murmured to each of their patients, "Go at the briskest pace you can maintain for a longer period of time. If you're ready to fall out, throw up a hand, and we'll carry you."

Kate monitored from behind as Lt. Cole led the way up front. Surveying their surroundings, Kate's neck prickled in awareness. The hills and rocky crags took on familiar shapes, and she recognized the area from her maps and their arrival. They were closing in on the extraction point and were making good time. Kate's awareness spiked abruptly, and she glanced around again. Fear skittered down her spine and she instinctively knew they were being watched. It had all gone too well up to that point, and Kate wondered if this was when trouble arose.

"Alexis", Kate called in a subdued tone, just loud enough for Lt. Cole to hear.

The use of her first name alerted Lt. Cole that something was wrong. She held up a fist to signal them to stop and they took cover behind the crumbling ruin of a building.

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Kate crouched next to Lt. Cole. “Someone’s watching us. I can feel it. How far is exfil?”

Alexis narrowed her gaze and pointed toward a clearing to the south. Kate hadn’t noticed on their arrival that the clearing stood amongst the ruins of a crumbling city. Not a single building had withstood what must have been a bombing run, and their skeletons jutted into the night, shrouded in darkness that cast shadows in the moonlight. Visibility was low here, as the ruins made it impossible to know if they were being watched by unseen enemies hidden amongst the rubble.

They sat in eerie silence and waited for the helo. Kate checked over each patient, taking vitals and making sure that Bowie and Lt. Andrews didn’t go into decline. Sergeant Cassidy was grimacing in pain and rubbing his shoulder but was otherwise silent, and his vitals were still steady.

Kate felt adrenaline pumping through her.

Loud, rhythmic thumping came from the distance, and Alexis motioned for everyone to freeze and be silent. The deep whooping of the helicopter blades drew closer, and Kate breathed a sigh of relief. The sky was just beginning to lighten in the east, and she knew they didn’t have much time before the sun rose for the day. The temperature was beginning to climb as well, and a cold sweat broke out on Kate’s brow as she waited impatiently for the helo.

Kate whispered to Alexis, “I need your two strongest to escort Bowie and Lt. Andrews on the helo first with Sgt. Garcia, flanked by the others. We’ll follow at the rear.”

Alexis nodded and gave whispered directions to her men, and they peered around the edge of the building toward the clearing. The helo came into view through the valley's southern exit, and Kate grew antsy but was frozen in place out of habit. If she could hear and see the helicopter, then anyone in the immediate area could, as well.

The whirring of blades grew louder, and Kate's pulse roared in her ears. The only other thing she could hear over the sound of the helicopter's approach. The others rose from their crouched positions and prepared to make the sprint to the helo. They'd barely be able to fit them all, and they had to act fast. If there were any enemy combatants in the area, it was about to get froggy.

The Blackhawk helicopter touched down, and the first wave consisting of Huang and Rivera, weapons held at the ready, moved forward with Andrews and Krantz secured between them. Maloy and the other officer, a hulking but silent combat rescue officer whom Kate hadn't been introduced to, followed with Cassidy between them, providing cover for the first group.

Kate and Alexis drew up at the rear, their weapons drawn and ready for anything. Her heart pounded as they drew close to the helo, and Kate swiveled to her right as something caught her eye. The barrel of a rifle protruded from the otherwise empty window of a collapsed building. Kate screamed a warning that Alexis barely heard.

“Enemy combatant! Six o'clock!”

Alexis spun, leveled her rifle, took sight, and located the enemy. In the next moment, everything happened at once. Gunfire rang out, piercing Kate's eardrums, and the early morning darkness exploded into activity. Enemy combatants fired upon them, and the others broke into a sprint toward the helo. Kate and Alexis were still over twenty yards out, and they were taking heavy fire.

Bullets whizzed past Kate's head, almost nicking her helmet, and she dropped to the

ground for cover. Alexis had dropped with her, both realizing if they pushed through to the helicopter, they'd just be bullet meat.

They crawled to a nearby ruin and took cover behind the parts of its frame that still stood. Alexis's hand went to her shoulder where her radio was tucked.

"Bulldog One, this is Sniper Alpha, come in."

The radio crackled imperceptibly, but Kate couldn't hear the response.

"Extraction site is compromised. I repeat. Our extraction site is compromised. Get out of here," Alexis responded. "We're pinned down. Take the wounded and get them home. Lt. Cross and I are reverting to Plan W."

Kate's mind whirled. She'd only memorized the possible extractions up to Plan D. Her anxiety must have shown in her eyes, and Alexis squeezed her shoulder. The helo rose and took off, rounds of gunfire piercing the air as the door gunner gave them cover. Alexis rose and took off at a run, staying low among the rubble of the buildings.

Kate followed, her weapon drawn and heart pounding so hard she thought it would break out of her chest. Alexis led her to the outskirts of the city's ruins, and they crouched in the cover of a building. The sounds of gunfire still popped in the distance, as if the enemy combatants had lost sight of them and had followed the helicopter instead.

Alexis fixed her gaze with those piercing blue eyes. She felt Alexis's grip on her forearm.

"Kate- Look at me. Try to stay calm. We are ok. This is my expertise- trust me. First, we need to get the hell out of here. This is a shooting gallery, and the extraction site is

compromised. We need to get as far west as we can, then see if we can ruck through the southern entrance. If we have to go north we'll be flying blind. We're on our own, and the hike could take us weeks through enemy territory."

Kate nodded, knowing that this is what Alexis did, what she lived for, and she was damned good at it. The only thing she could do was put her trust into Alexis and hope they stayed off the enemy's radar. The sun was going to rise over the valley soon, and then movement during the day would be impossible. The heat would dehydrate them and would be deadly, not to mention they'd be far too visible.

"We need to run now. We have maybe fifteen minutes before the sun comes over the eastern ridge, and we need to be as far away from here as possible when it does."

Kate nodded in determination. "Lead the way. I've got your six. I can keep up."

Alexis flashed her a smile, then took off. "That's my girl," she exclaimed.

Ignoring the butterflies that swarmed in her stomach, Kate ran after her, determined not to fall behind.

Chapter 4

Alexis

Sprinting through the desert while the temperature climbed ever higher was now on Alexis's list of the shittiest moments she'd ever experienced. As if that wasn't bad enough, she'd taken a bullet in the shoulder during the crossfire at the clearing. She couldn't be sure if it was a through and through or if she still had the bullet lodged in her but she didn't want to stress Kate by telling her until they were good and out of there. Luckily, it had been in the shoulder, and it hadn't seemed to have damaged anything too important. She tried to ignore the fear that if it had been two or three

inches to the right, she'd be dead. It hurt like a bitch, and every step forward caused a searing jolt of pain that Alexis ignored. Hot, wet blood ran down her shoulder and over her side.

They didn't have time for pain or to stop and check the wound. They had to get as far from the clearing as they could and find cover before the sun came out fully. She pushed herself forward, unwilling to let a little bullet hole keep her from protecting Kate. The pain was nothing compared to what it would be like if she wasn't able to get Kate to safety.

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The sand sifted beneath them as they ran, the cold wind biting. Alexis kept the rising sun at their backs and scanned their surroundings for any good cover. The terrain was slowly becoming visible in the morning light, the sky painted yellow and orange. The area didn't have many good options to choose from, and they only had minutes before their head start wouldn't do them any good, and anyone with a good vantage point and a pair of binoculars could spot them. It wouldn't take long before a sniper with even the most basic of skills would pick them both off without trying very hard.

To their right was the crumbling remains of a city, either ancient or destroyed by bombings, Alexis couldn't tell. There wasn't much cover, and it would be one of the first places searched by patrols. And they didn't have time to search for a good hiding place among the rubble.

They pushed on, running hard and looking for anywhere safe to hide, fear, adrenaline, and anxiety rising with the sun.

Suddenly, she spotted a dried riverbed that sloped down into a holloway. It must have been used as a road at some point after the river dried up, because she could see old wagon tracks and tire prints. It reminded Alexis of the entrance to the cave in which they'd found Sgt. Krantz' crew. She turned straight for it. At least they could take cover in the riverbed. The downward slope would provide them some cover against prying eyes. It wasn't ideal, but intuition told her they'd find something better than a ditch at the end of the riverbed.

Heat bathed their backs, and Alexis cursed as the sun finally broke over the horizon. She slid down the riverbed embankment, sending dirt and sand into the air. She could hear Kate sprinting and sliding along a few steps behind her, keeping up without

much difficulty. At least her fitness was up to scratch. There was a small round opening at the bottom. It was only a few feet wide at most. She took the risk and slid down inside, freefalling for a few feet before her boots hit a cave floor.

Turning, she had a few seconds to glance up before Kate dropped down inside. She caught her around the waist before she could hit the floor, but the strain proved too much for Alexis's shoulder. Pain spread, stars danced in her gaze, and her knees went weak. She lowered Kate to the ground. A groan of pain escaped her as lightning shot through her shoulder.

Ignoring her injury, Alexis turned and surveyed their surroundings. They were in a small underground pocket about eight feet deep that couldn't be more than ten feet square. The floor was hardpacked dirt and rock, and the walls looked like stone, too. The entrance was on one side, and Alexis would bet it was due to erosion of the riverbed.

"Shit, I think this dried riverbed just saved our lives," she exclaimed with a chuckle, high on the adrenaline and disbelief that they'd found such a well-hidden shelter.

Alexis turned back, a massive smile beaming on her face, to find Kate stock still, her skin pale and hands shaking with tremors. Guilt surged through Alexis. She was attempting to bring levity to the situation, as she tended to approach danger with excitement and enjoyment the way many combat rescue officers did. Most people, Kate included, clearly didn't welcome danger the way she did.

"Oh babe, I'm sorry. Listen." Alexis paused and dropped to her knees next to Kate. She drew her trembling form into her arms. The urge to protect and shield her from the fear was overwhelming. Alexis's hand caressed Kate's back and arms and she murmured softly into Kate's ear. "As long as we weren't followed, we should be safe, at least until the sun goes down."

Kate nodded against Alexis's chest, and she drew back to meet her eyes. Fear swirled there, along with uncertainty and something else Alexis couldn't identify.

Alexis wanted to say something, anything that would make it better, make them safe. She knew there wasn't anything she could say to accomplish that, so she went with the only thing she could promise.

"I'll protect you, Kate. I'll do everything I can to get you home and keep you safe. This is what I do. I'm very very good at this. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Kate's face was inscrutable, but there was a slight quiver in her jaw. Alexis rubbed soothing circles into her arms with her thumbs. She had never felt the desperate need to soothe and calm someone before, and it was all-consuming.

Suddenly Kate's brown eyes narrowed, and she pushed Alexis back firmly and grabbed her by the arms, immobilizing her.

"Holy shit, you're bleeding. You're wounded," Kate accused. The tone of her voice betrayed her fear.

Alexis shrugged and winced as the movement pulled on her shoulder. A little V appeared between Kate's brows and her small, agile hands began removing Alexis's tactical vest and shirt to get a better look. Alexis wanted to kiss the small juncture between her brows, smooth away the stress there.

Kate removed the top carefully folding it in half and laid it across Alexis's lap, her hands skimming the tops of Alexis's thighs. Every touch and gentle graze sent electricity through Alexis, ramping her up a bit at a time. Alexis hadn't ever thought being treated for a gunshot wound would be a turn on, but Kate's exacting and precise movements were driving her crazy.

Now Alexis sat in only her sports bra- her shoulder injury bared to Kate's gaze, Kate whipped gloves out of her pocket and gasped. Blood smears spread from her shoulder down to her side indicated there'd been at least minor blood loss.

"When did this happen?" Kate asked, her tone procedural. The tender look in her eyes was gone as a distant professional glimmer took its place. Alexis hated the distance Kate had thrust between them, but she answered anyway, just to keep Kate talking to her.

"When I realized you and I wouldn't make it to the helo, I tried to drop to the ground as the enemy fired on us. I'm pretty sure I was hit then. I didn't notice it until we started running. It's not as if we could have stopped anyway. And besides, it's just my shoulder. This is minor."

One stern brow arched in disapproval, and Kate's words came out deceptively calm as she began to clean the wound.

"Minor? You aren't the medic here." Her tone gave Alexis the impression that Kate didn't agree with her.

Alexis sucked in a breath as Kate probed the wound with gauze. It seemed to Alexis that Kate was as distressed by Alexis's injury and the pain it caused as she was.

"I didn't restock my pack when we left the cave earlier. I don't have a lot of supplies. Luckily, the bullet was through and through. But Alexis..." Kate's voice faltered, almost a whimper.

The whimper tugged on Alexis's heart, and she wrapped her arms around Kate's shoulders, pulling her in closer.

Slapping some fresh gauze over the wound and securing it with tape, Kate cleared her

throat and continued, clearly attempting to put space between them. “The bullet almost nicked your artery. I genuinely don’t know how it missed. By all accounts, based on the trajectory of this wound,” Kate said, while pressing her hands over the entry and exit wounds, “the artery was in its path. With the running and exertion after the fact, it’s a miracle you didn’t bleed out.”

Silence descended upon them. The only thing Alexis could hear was the pounding of her own heart and Kate’s soft breaths tickling against the skin of her throat. The warmth from Kate’s hands seeped into Alexis, who had cooled from the brisk temperature. Kate’s words rang in her ears on repeat, and the very real fact that she’d almost died occurred to Alexis. Her insides turned to ice, and she tried to swallow the lump that had appeared in her throat.

“What?”

Kate shook her head, unwilling to repeat it out loud.

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“You’ll be okay. The pain will be a distraction, but this wound won’t keep us from moving on when the sun goes down.”

Kate’s voice was professional, but Alexis could hear the wavering sadness in her tone and see the tremble of her jaw. It had been close—obviously too close for Kate’s liking.

Alexis nodded, unable to speak. Normally, she kept herself pretty guarded, staying irreverent and keeping things fun. That way whenever she wanted to leave, or someone else wanted to leave her there was little to no pain involved. If you didn’t get attached, you didn’t get your feelings hurt.

But she could have died. And if Alexis had died there in the clearing, what would Kate have done? Would she have been able to get to the helo without taking fire? The idea of Kate having to traverse the valley and reach the next extraction point on her own had anxiety rolling through her.

The moment Alexis had opened the door to Colonel Williams's office and looked into Kate Cross’s eyes, she’d been yanked out of her comfort zone and dropped into unfamiliar territory. Her piercing brown eyes had looked through Alexis, sending an electric shock through her entire being. Her soft blonde hair had been pulled back into a severe bun, perfect, without a single hair out of place. Her lips had parted softly in surprise when her eyes had landed on Alexis instead of Colonel Williams. Alexis was brought back to her original fear of what it would be like to be addicted to Kate. She wondered if it would be worth it to be addicted to something so tempting.

Kate looked into her eyes, and Alexis leaned down, completely mesmerized, her gaze

locked on Kate's lips in the semi darkness. Adrenaline, fear, and visceral desire collided in Alexis, and she reached out to Kate to pull her into her arms, needing to hold her. Kate surprised her and leapt at her at the same time.

Arms thrown haphazardly around Alexis's neck, Kate latched on, wrapping her legs around Alexis's waist, and their heads leaned in together, finally closing the gap and letting their lips touch. Soft lips caressed and tongues slid together, and she moaned into Kate's mouth. Kate's hands skimmed along her neck, sending electricity skittering down Alexis's spine. A groan tore from her throat, and she instinctively bucked her hips against Kate. The lust was blinding, and Alexis just wanted to get her hands and mouth on Kate's skin.

A soft, lilting moan came from Kate, and Alexis felt her blood heat at the sound. They both needed this. After spending the last two days together taking fire, saving the crew, and her getting shot, the two of them needed some sort of release, and Alexis was determined they'd get it now.

Grabbing Kate by the back of her neck and securing her in her arms, Alexis rose to her feet. She took a few unsteady steps to the darkest corner of their hideaway and slid them down so that she was seated with Kate in her lap, her legs still wrapped around Alexis like vines.

Nearly frantic in her need, Kate sucked Alexis's lower lip into her mouth and caressed it with her tongue, urging her on. Alexis went to work on Kate's buttons, frantically trying to get her hands and mouth on her bare skin. The last button finally freed, Alexis pushed the uniform from Kate's shoulders and tugged the t-shirt from her beltline. Kate came to life, pulling the shirt over her head. She tossed it to the side, ripped off her bra, and went to take what was left of Alexis's uniform off, too. Alexis reached for Kate's hair, which was still pulled back from her face.

Alexis wanted to run her hands through the golden honey of Kate's hair, so she

tugged on the hair tie until the gold curtain fell. Her blonde tresses surrounded them, and Alexis dragged one hand into her hair and pinned Kate's hips against her own before lowering her head to Kate's newly exposed breasts.

The chill in the air had Kate's nipples hard, and Alexis lapped at the left one with her tongue before sucking it into her mouth and nipping it slightly with her teeth. Kate cried out, thrust her breast further into Alexis' mouth, and bucked her hips forward, grinding her pelvis directly into Alexis's. They both moaned at the friction, and Alexis released Kate's neck to pull off her belt and unbutton her cargo pants. She tugged at the buttons and yanked the pants down just far enough to get what she wanted. Alexis cupped her hand and gently kneaded her palm into Kate's pelvis. She could feel the damp patch in Kate's panties, and she had to have more. Pulling the panties roughly aside, Alexis's fingers delved into Kate's wetness.

"Alexis," Kate breathed, and Alexis froze. Her gaze snapped to meet Kate's.

"Do you want me to stop, baby?" It was the last thing she wanted to do, but she would if that's what Kate wanted.

A whimpering moan tore from Kate's throat. "Godno, don't you dare stop."

Lust burned through Alexis like wildfire at the pure desire in Kate's voice, and she resumed her mission worshipping Kate's breasts as her fingers slid and teased through Kate's labia. Luckily the wound was her left shoulder and she was right handed. Alexis's legendary sexual skills hadn't been harmed by her injury.

Thank God for that!

Kate bucked and moaned as Alexis' thumb began swirling in tantalizing rhythmic circles over Kate's clitoris.

“Oh god, Kate. You’re so wet for me,” Alexis groaned and kept up the pace. Kate bucked again and gasped, and Alexis slid her index finger inside her.

Kate whimpered. “Please,” she begged, writhing. “I want you so bad.”

The right breast, which had been neglected up until this point, was calling to Alexis. She released the left breast with a pop, causing Kate to cry out, and pulled the right nipple into her mouth, biting down softly. A shudder went through Kate, and Alexis used the moment to slide in a second finger while still swirling circles around her clitoris with her thumb. Kate tightened around her fingers like a vice and Alexis briefly wondered how long it had been for her. Kate’s sexual hunger was all encompassing.

“Oh, fuck,” Kate swore, her eyes closed in ecstasy, her face pinched in pleasure.

Kate ground her hips into Alexis’s hand, riding the rhythmic thrusts of her fingers, drunk on the swirl of Alexis’s thumb over her clit. Alexis knew her own pussy was wet- she was so turned on, and she ached to have Kate’s hands on her. Time was suspended around them, and Alexis wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep Kate on the edge.

An erratic thrust of Kate’s hips was the first warning that she was ready to come before she gasped out, “No. No, no, no. Not yet. I don’t want to come alone.”

One moment, Alexis was in control. Kate had practically rode her hand while seated in her lap. The next second, Kate had pushed her down to the floor and was yanking her belt off and undoing the buttons on Alexis’s cargo pants.

Electricity zinged through her as Kate right hand pushed its way into her underwear and slid immediately through her own wetness. Alexis cried out against Kate’s breast, and Kate zeroed on her clit almost immediately. Kate had skipped straight to the point

and began a punishing rhythm, nearly blinding in its intensity and threatening to send Alexis over the cliff. She was already dangerously close to orgasm from Kate's grinding needily on her fingers.

A whimper escaped Alexis's mouth, and she clamped back down on Kate's soft, perfect nipple and reached her right hand back between Kate's legs, pushing back inside her and resuming her rhythm. The more she swirled her thumb in time with her tongue, the faster Kate's fingers worked on her clit. Heat rose, and Alexis wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out.

Kate's hips thrust erratically into Alexis's hand, and she moaned. Kate inserted one finger, and then a second into Alexis's pussy seeking out her G spot and pressed the heel of her hand against Alexis's clitoris. The world exploded, stars filling Alexis' vision, and Kate ground her clit into her palm. Kate was whimpering and moaning incoherently and Alexis realized that she was too.

Mmmmm.

Having Kate sexually was better than Alexis had ever imagined. (And she had imagined it.)

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Kate's hunger, her eagerness was all consuming.

They came together, hard and fast, tremors running along their muscles, and Kate collapsed forwards onto Alexis's chest. Alexis was wrung emotionally dry after the day, and after she felt Kate come hard and then rest against her with both of their sweat slicked bare chests pressed together, she wanted to envelope Kate in her embrace and keep her safe, sated, and happy.

Silence filled the cavern, broken only by their ragged breathing. Alexis watched as Kate's eyes drooped and eventually drifted shut. Kate fell asleep on top of her, their naked chests still pressed together. She skimmed her fingers over Kate's naked back, dropped open-mouthed kisses at the junction of her shoulder and throat, and soaked in her presence.

It was clear to Alexis now that Kate had been actively avoiding getting near her, and Alexis wondered if there was a specific reason Kate was keeping her distance. She suspected trauma, the ghosts of someone from her past, were haunting Kate. Alexis wondered if she could free Kate from her demons.

They'd thrown caution to the wind, and Alexis had had her first dose of pure Lieutenant Kate Cross. Alexis's chest throbbed, breath whooshing out in a pained gasp, and she wondered if even just once with Kate was enough to get her hooked. Alexis ignored a second pang in her chest at the thought of losing her new lover. The reality of their situation was grim. Alexis's arms tightened and pulled her in closer. One thing she knew for certain—she couldn't let anything happen to Kate. At the least, she would protect her through the day so she could sleep peacefully, without a care in the world.

Alexis watched as Kate slept for a few hours. She stayed awake on guard duty, just in case they'd been followed or tracked. Alexis let her mind roam over all things Kate while she remained a silent, vigilant guardian. When Kate began to stir, Alexis let the darkness take over, and she fell into dreamless, exhausted sleep.

Chapter 5

Kate

A few hours of sleep had helped with Kate's nerves. It allowed her to push back some of the fear and anxiety that stemmed from lack of sleep and exhaustion. When she cracked her eyes open, she wasn't scared or anxious. Alexis had kept her safe while she'd slept. The first thing she saw was Alexis's sleeping face. The smooth lines and angular jaw broadcasted her Native American heritage, and Kate thought that her out of regulations, messy dark hair resembled a mohawk, and she understood why no one gave Alexis shit for it. She resembled a warrior goddess, and Kate blushed at the thought.

Her heart fluttered and confusion skittered through her. Kate had fallen asleep on top of Alexis, but Alexis hadn't tried to move her or reposition them. She pushed off Alexis, nervous about the shoulder wound, and also trying not to wake her. She wanted to check over her supplies, take inventory of their stock and their situation, and change the dressing on the wound.

Kate watched Alexis for a few more minutes, making certain that her breathing returned to a resting rate, and monitoring her for any other issues. When none presented and Alexis was sound asleep again, Kate turned to her pack.

The medical kit was lighter than Kate had expected it to be, and anxiety flared through her. She dug through it looking for gauze and tried not to think about how much was left. Alexis didn't stir at the noise, and Kate knew she needed as much rest

as possible before the sun set for the day, and they had to start moving again. Her supplies had dwindled, and she was down to a couple of wound dressings and an emergency pack with tourniquets, quick clot powder, and the cauterization tool she'd brought. She checked both of their canteens, finding them half empty. If they couldn't get to the next extraction site quickly, they'd run out of water.

Running out of water would be a serious problem, but not one they could do anything about in the bottom of a dried riverbed. Unless it started pouring rain, they were shit-out-of-luck on that front. Alexis probably had some knowledge of the best places to get water in this location, but Kate figured that she and Alexis were on the same page. They wouldn't need more water if they got out of there fast enough.

Peeling off the bandage, Kate inspected Alexis's wound for any surprises. The wound looked stable, just a small, neat little bullet hole with no signs of infection or a hemorrhage. The wound's edges were smooth, and it wasn't actively bleeding. Kate counted their blessings. It could have been a lot worse. She replaced the dressing with a fresh one and gently secured it in place so as not to wake Alexis.

The reality of their situation sank in as Kate slowly collected her clothes and put them back on as if in a trance. They were stuck in hostile territory, Alexis had a minor injury, and Kate was running low on medical supplies. Their water supply wouldn't last much longer, and they were in the desert. The only way they were going to make it out of there alive was if they made their next extraction point—and quickly.

Memorizing the maps had allowed Kate to figure out where they were before Alexis had led them into this hole. The terrain had confused her a bit, but the city rubble and surrounding rocky outcroppings had eventually clicked into place, and Kate had realized they'd nearly made it to the southern inlet of the valley. They'd need to traverse the valley's opening and get out via the southern border of Syria—if they could get across the border and into Iraq. She had no idea what that would entail, or how long it would take. It had to be at least a few hours of jogging, or less if they

could go faster. That didn't take into account if they came across patrols or enemy encampments.

A glance toward Alexis' sleeping form had Kate's anxiety rising again. She'd spent so long distancing herself from others so she wouldn't get hurt and need to rely on anyone. Somehow, Alexis Cole had snuck her way in without her knowing and without her permission. It had been reckless to let themselves get so distracted, but when she'd realized Alexis had a bullet wound, all good sense had fled from her. Two parts took over. The first was her medical training persona. This was her standard approach to anything that frightened her. Personality two: emotionally vulnerable Kate. When Alexis had first leaned down to kiss her, Kate had finally just let it all go and given herself over to the raw, all-consuming lust that Alexis had stoked in her.

Nothing irritated Kate more than being a weepy, lovestruck idiot, and she had wanted to avoid getting into an intense situation with Alexis. After she lost her last partner Lorelei, Kate had sworn off making attachments and dating in general. Lorelei had deployed with a combat unit into Libya. The platoon had gone in, but they'd never come out. Reports had been sketchy at best, but Kate had read between the lines. Lorelei's platoon had taken heavy fire. None had made it out alive. An entire covert base had been lost, and the casualties were unimaginable.

The mourning processes had nearly destroyed Kate, and she'd kept new relationships casual at most. Lorelei had planned their life out down to the colors they'd paint their house. Imagining having that with anyone else had been impossible.

Alexis's face flickered through Kate's mind and she jerked her head back around. She still slept, silent and peaceful. Alexis was so fucking beautiful. Handsome beautiful. Kate's heart pounded, her ears rang, and she tried to take a few deep breaths. She hadn't intentionally gotten attached to Alexis. It had just happened between one breath and the next. They could die and never make it home. She was only thirty

three, for Christ's sake! There was so much life she could still live, if only they got the hell out of here.

As her thoughts whirled, Kate repacked her supplies to keep her hands and mind busy. The beam of light slowly crawled up the cave of the wall as Kate stripped the pistol Alexis had given her, indicating that time was passing by. She checked her clip and ammo and made sure it was clean and functional. She repeated the processes to keep her mind busy. Her eyes grew heavy after a while, and Kate judged by the angle of the light beam that it was only mid-afternoon. They'd have to wait several more hours for the sun to go down, so Kate figured she could sleep for a few hours. She laid down next to Alexis, pressing her back against her side to share heat. The cave had been cooler than Kate expected, and they hadn't brought any cool weather gear, so Kate let herself bask in Alexis' warmth and let herself drift off into restless sleep for another few hours, ignoring the sense of safety that Alexis gave her just by being next to her.

Sometime later, Alexis tapped her shoulder and whispered into the semi-dark cave.

“Time to wake up. We'll need to get moving soon.”

Kate groaned and stretched her muscles, sore from sleeping on the ground. Darkness was creeping in, and Kate guessed the sun was going down. Kate's stomach growled as her hunger announced itself, but she ignored it, determined not to let her hunger bother her. Alexis tossed her a brown package, and Kate exclaimed quietly, happily surprised. It was an M.R.E. Meals Ready to Eat were widely known as some of the worst meals you could have in the military, but every now and then, there were a few MRE's that actually tasted good and had tasty snacks inside. Some had Gatorade, and if you were really lucky, you'd find one with coffee. Alexis gave Kate her favorite—beef stew.

It had been a long time since Kate had gone hungry, and she was grateful that Alexis

had MREs in her pack. Kate hadn't even thought about it. She tilted her head in thought while she tore into the package, ready to feast on the peanut butter and flat bread and then dive into the beef stew. The meal had never tasted so good, and she wondered if all surprise meals in the desert tasted this damned good.

“Did you guess my favorite flavor, or is this a coincidence?”

Alexis laughed softly. “Coincidence. But can it really be considered a coincidence when beef stew is really just the best choice? I'll only choose it and the?—”

“Beef lasagna,” they said together.

They laughed together, and Kate smiled at Alexis. “Great minds.”

Alexis stood near the entrance to their cavern, keeping watch for any patrols or search parties. They'd been lucky to find such a good hiding spot. Kate doubted they'd get so lucky again.

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Alexis spoke while Kate finished eating, and Kate kept her eyes closed and focused on the flavor of the food and the soft lilting of Alexis's voice.

“The rest of the journey will be either through or around the ruins of old cities. This area is war torn and weary. They kept rebuilding for a while, but their cities continued to be destroyed by falling mortar shells and enemy bomb runs. Eventually, most of the civilians left the area, realizing it wouldn't be worth it to rebuild within the valley where so much conflict thrived.”

Kate nodded, impressed with the scope of her knowledge. “So most of the people in the area will be enemy combatants.”

Alexis nodded. “This area is well known for its different dangers. There's Syrian militia, Iraqi rebels, Iraqi militia, sandstorms, and freezing cold nights. We have to be really careful we don't let a sandstorm sneak up on us at night. We need to keep low, but most importantly we need to be as quiet as possible. There will definitely be enemy patrols out, and we can't afford a run in with trouble.”

“Are we going to be able to get over the border without detection?”

Alexis shrugged. “That kind of depends on what their patrols are looking like. There's every chance they'll be patrolling the specific section where we need to cross, or they may be sixty miles down the borderline doing checks there. Since it's nighttime, we have the advantage. Any patrols will be visible. They'll have trucks with lights.”

Kate nodded her understanding but said nothing. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Alexis would lead them through this. She had no other choice but to trust her. The chance that patrols wouldn't be in this area were low, especially if the enemy was expecting any survivors to head south. If the ambush had control of the territory surrounding the border, it was likely they were going to hit. Not if, but when.

When the sun finally went down, Alexis poked her head out of their shelter to check for any nearby patrols. Agile and strong, as if she didn't even have a bullet hole in her shoulder, Alexis climbed out and Kate followed, slightly annoyed at her casual treatment of the wound. She took the hand Alexis offered her and pulled herself up out of the hole. Night had fallen, and the temperature had dropped rapidly again. The sand was cold, and the air was dry. Kate swallowed, her throat dry and scratchy. As Alexis took in her surroundings, she stretched her arms, neck, and legs.

"Stretch a bit," she whispered at Kate. "We'll be jogging for a while. I'll stop occasionally to rest and drink water, but if you feel weak or as if you're going to pass out, just say my name and I'll catch you before you hit the ground."

Kate nodded, stretched, and prepared herself for a long run. The desert was still cooling, and it would be a while before the temperature would really drop and night fully set in. They'd need water sooner or later, and Kate kept her eyes busy looking for any signs of danger or water. Alexis kept them at a run for over thirty minutes and then slowed to a fast walk. She shoved a canteen in Kate's hands and ordered her to take small sips.

"Don't throw it up. That's all the water we have."

She sipped slowly, unwilling to waste their water. The water, though air temperature, was refreshing on Kate's dry tongue.

I hate the desert.

“Me, too,” Alexis said, surprising Kate.

“Shit, did I say that out loud?”

Alexis chuckled at her between deep breaths. “Yes. Yes you did.”

After a few minutes of rest, Alexis took the canteen from her, stuffed it into her pack, and pushed them forward into a fast jog again, encouraging Kate to keep up.

“Come on, Little Lieutenant. We have a few more miles to cover. The quicker we go, the better our chances at avoiding a patrol.”

They pushed on, determined to make the best time possible. The sand scrunched under their feet, and Kate had to focus in order to move through it as smoothly as possible. Alexis moved seamlessly, having no apparent issue with the shifting ground and the darkness. Kate breathed in raggedly and tried to regulate her airflow, fully focusing on the task of running smoothly for at least twenty minutes at a time. Eventually the burning in her lungs and legs stopped and she could move forward with a runner’s high rather than gasping for breath.

In the distance, shadowy spires rose into the night, indicating they’d arrived at the southernmost ruins of the valley. They approached the crumbling city at a run. The village had clearly been under siege at some point but had not been bombed. Much of the city had damage, including holes in buildings from RPG’s and grenade or rocket launchers. If they were lucky, they could navigate their way through the mess and to its opposite side in order to make a run for the border through the valley’s southern inlet. The city stretched out for miles in all directions, and dread twisted Kate’s gut. She didn’t want to go in there, but she had the sinking feeling this shitty option was the best one they had.

Cover would be easier to find, but there was also a serious increased risk that they’d

run into a patrol, or that there was even a small encampment hiding within. Alexis trotted forward, steering them toward the ruins of the fallen city, obviously aware of the danger, but willing to brave it and face it head on. Kate tried to dig deep and find her backbone.

On approach, Alexis pointed out a few trucks parked three or four blocks in from the entrance to the city. They'd have to avoid that patrol, and Alexis veered off, changing their heading to the opposite direction. She didn't think it would affect their time, but Kate was worried about getting caught. There were definitely enemies within the city, but it was also their best chance at finding cover.

Alexis navigated through the rubble leading them into the city, turning immediately into an unlit block of buildings. Most had minor damage, crumbling walls or roofs. This area was bathed in darkness, allowing them to slowly jog through alleys. Piles of rock, rubble, trash, and abandoned vehicles littered the paths, making it difficult to traverse. The smell of garbage rose from the ground and made Kate's stomach feel sour. She fought down the nausea that rose, making her mouth taste like acid. Alexis seemed unaffected by the debris and the smell and jogged fluidly through the mess as if it weren't even there. Kate was impressed with Alexis. She'd demonstrated knowledge, intelligence, the ability to adapt at a moment's notice, and a cool head during conflict. She had nerves of steel. She appeared unaffected by the fear and danger that had been choking Kate. A sliver of hope returned to her. They might make it out of there with Alexis leading the way.

Kate's thoughts screeched to a halt as Alexis came to an abrupt stop. She nearly crashed into the back of her but managed to stop in time. They crouched and went silent. Kate's heart thrashed in her chest, her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She tried to remember not to hold her breath. She couldn't hear anything over her heartbeat, and the alleyways seemed clear, but Kate didn't dare move.

Down the next alley, a trickle of light jumped out at her, and Kate realized why

Alexis had stopped them. They'd practically run straight into a foot patrol. The beam came from a flashlight. Someone was walking through the alley a block ahead of them checking the areas behind the debris field for anyone that shouldn't be there. Great. They'd run into the most thorough bloody foot patrolman Kate had ever seen.

She rested her hand on Alexis's back, anxiety flaring through her, and she didn't know what to do. The fear was overwhelming, but Kate waited for some sort of signal from Alexis. She would know what they were supposed to do and how to act in this situation.

The figure moved slowly in the distance, and they crouched in the darkness behind some sort of crate. Their hearts pounded as they waited for him to make his way across the intersection and into their alley. Kate felt like she wasn't getting enough oxygen, her breaths coming too slow, shallow, and silent.

Alexis' muscles relaxed, and Kate raised her head to see the man turn down the alley to their left, his light flickering out of their view and his footfalls going quiet as he walked farther away. To be safe, Alexis made them wait at least ten minutes, and they moved forward at a turtle's pace until they were certain the man hadn't spotted them or turned around. Kate wanted to vomit from the tension of almost being discovered. They advanced through the night, trying to maintain a decent speed, but silence was their new priority.

After they'd advanced another few blocks, Alexis slowed them to a walk, and Kate wondered what she'd seen or heard.

"Something doesn't feel right," Alexis whispered. Dread filled Kate's gut, and she glanced around warily.

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“Just stay low, go slow, keep your eyes peeled, and make sure you turn off the safety on your pistol.”

With the safety clicked off and her weapon at the ready, Kate followed, staying vigilant. Though the stars and moon were out, visibility wasn't great due to the shadows cast by the buildings. She was sure Alexis was seeing something that she wasn't. She knew they were approaching the southernmost part of the city. It would usually be heavily patrolled. The area lay eerily silent, and there wasn't a patrol to be found. The small hairs on her neck prickled, and she felt a charge in the air.

Suddenly, Alexis dashed into a building, and Kate followed directly behind her. The building's upper floor was demolished, and a side wall of the first floor had crumbled into a pile. There was a staircase carved out in the dark gray stone and they ran down it. Alexis flicked on a flashlight atop her rifle, held it at the ready, and inspected the below ground area. It was a small basement, mostly empty, with a few clay pots and boxes stacked in a corner. The light flicked off, and Kate's eyes struggled to readjust to the darkness. She held a hand out and walked forward blindly until she found a wall. She slid down the wall and sat with her back against the cold, hard stone.

Alexis's footfalls announced she'd ascended the stairs partway and stood so she could see out the entrance. Silence descended again, and a quiet whistle came through the night. Alexis had gotten them into hiding right before a patrol went through. The voices were male, low and quiet, and one toward the front of their group was whistling. Kate couldn't make out the language, unsure if it was Kurdish or Arabic. Not that it mattered. Both groups would happily put a bullet into Alexis and her.

Her dark form retreated back down the stairs, and Alexis joined her in leaning against

the wall, rifle still trained on the top of the steps.

“There’s a sandstorm coming in.”

Of all the things Kate had expected Alexis to say, that wasn’t one of them.

“Come again?”

Alexis chuckled, and Kate couldn’t see her smile in the darkness, but she could hear it in her voice as she explained.

“I got a weird feeling about ten minutes ago. It was really dry, and the wind shifted in an odd way. This area is known for sandstorms. If you get caught in one, you have to hunker down and then basically dig yourself out. If you can find cover, you’re pretty much hidden until it goes away.”

Swallowing down the lump in her throat, Kate wrapped her mind around the idea of a sandstorm.

“How long do they last?” They’d only been on the move for a few hours. The night was still early, and Kate figured it probably wasn’t even one in the morning. She didn’t check her watch. She didn’t even want to know.

She felt Alexis shrug. “Depends on the season. It’s early in the sandstorm season. They can last days, but if I had to guess most likely around eight or ten hours?”

The lilt of her voice at the end suggested she wasn’t sure. Kate was just grateful they’d dodged the patrol in time to find shelter.

“I could see it coming in on the horizon from the steps, so it’ll probably be here in the next twenty to thirty minutes. The locals must know this. That’s probably why the

streets were so empty. They're about to huddle down for the rest of the night and through the day until the storm ends. They were likely doing a last sweep before they locked down. Patrols will be minimal, but there's no way we can travel during the storm."

They were stuck in a basement in the dark for what would likely be a while. The darkness was charged with the electricity between them. Fear crept into Kate's heart. She wasn't sure she could resist Alexis. She was even less sure that Alexis would be gentle with her heart.

Izzy's words were fresh in her mind.

Alexis Cole. Dreamy. They call her Lieutenant Love 'em and Leave 'em

Time hadn't healed Kate's own grief at losing her partner in combat. It only made her more wary and jaded. The thought wasn't a welcome one, and she wondered if she were seeing Alexis properly, or labeling her as heartbreak before she even had the chance to actually find out.

Emotionally and physically, Kate was run down. It had been a hellish three days, not to mention the chemistry flowing between her and Alexis, and the adrenaline and fear that had been coursing through her since they'd missed their extraction. Her nerves were raw, and she realized her hands were shaking, and her body was trembling.

"God, I didn't used to be such a fucking nutcase." Her voice broke at the end, and Kate choked down a quiet sob.

Alexis dropped her arm around Kate's shoulder and pulled her onto her lap.

"You're not a nutcase, Little Lieutenant. You've been through hell the last few days, and most people react the same way in these kinds of dangerous scenarios. It's totally

normal.”

Kate nodded and swiped at her face. “I just...” she froze, unable to go on.

“Just what, Kate?”

Hearing her name on Alexis’s tongue while being held in her lap was a jolt to her system. She wanted to tell her everything. She adopted a neutral tone, hoping to crush any more chance of tears.

“I’m scared.”

Alexis stroked in a soothing rhythm, her thumbs whirled in circles over her lower back. The movement and her silence encouraged Kate to go on.

“My last girlfriend deployed to Libya. Short version, she didn’t come back. Slightly longer version, it fucking broke me, Alexis.”

Her arms tightened around Kate as she pulled her in tighter, enveloping her completely, bringing them chest to chest and tucking her chin on top of Kate’s head.

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“Will you tell me her name?”

Kate nodded. “Lorelei.”

Alexis hummed in her ear. “That’s a beautiful name.”

“I can barely remember her face anymore. I’m terrified of losing anyone else and not being able to remember what they look like.”

Silence greeted her. Alexis said nothing. Kate pushed on in the silence.

“Not to be insensitive, but I’ve heard you have a reputation. Even a nickname.”

“Oh? And what nickname is that?” Alexis’s question came through the darkness. Kate didn’t feel a change in her muscles. She’d half expected Alexis to tense up and get defensive.

“Lieutenant Love em’ and Leave em’,” Kate said, her voice soft, the name both an accusation and a caress in the darkness.

Alexis braced one hand on the back of Kate’s hips, and cupped the back of her neck with the other. Her thumbs still swirled, massaging Kate’s neck with gentle pressure. The sensation had Kate clamping down on her lip in a punishing bite, hard enough to draw blood. She fought down a groan and tilted her head into Alexis’s strong, capable hand.

“Maybe,” Alexis said quietly. “Maybe my nickname isn’t the whole story.” Kate felt

Alexis take a deep breath.

“Everyone’s got trauma, Kate. I’m no stranger to loss.”

Guilt surged through her. Of course Alexis had lost someone. They all had. She stayed quiet, encouraging Alexis by remaining silent and willing putty in her hands.

“I lost my parents when I was ten. They died in a car crash, so I was raised by my aunt. She died of breast cancer fifteen years ago. I was an only child, and I don’t know if I even have cousins or other relatives. My family is mostly Native American, and once they moved off the res, they became isolated from therest of our people. I wasn’t born until later, so I never even got to see the reservation.”

Sadness coated her voice, and Alexis shook her head slightly, ruffling Kate’s hair with her chin. “So I joined the military at eighteen. A lot of Natives without a tribe join. I found friends. But like you, I was scared to let anyone in. I was lonely and young, so I figured, what the hell? Why not just enjoy myself and keep things casual. I guess I just hadn’t met anyone until now I wanted to change my single status and lifestyle for.”

What was unsaid rang through the air between them. Alexis hadn’t met anyone until Kate that she’d even considered monogamy for. It scared the shit out of Kate. Alexis had never even tried to have a serious relationship, although Kate couldn’t blame her. If she’d lost everyone she’d ever loved— Kate knew she’d be no match for the grief.

Amazed that she managed to date or be with anyone at all, Kate asked with genuine disbelief. “How do you manage not to get attached? Jesus, that must have been so difficult. I’m so sorry for all your loss.” Kate wound her arms around Alexis’s waist and hugged her tightly. She couldn’t imagine the anguish of such loss.

Alexis shrugged, her muscles stiffening beneath Kate’s hands. “Hasn’t been that

difficult. I'm always honest and upfront with them. But women like to think they can change me. But, I feel differently now. Today. With you."

She sucked in a soft gasp. "What did you just say?"

Clearing her throat, Alexis rephrased, going for the direct approach. "I didn't have any real interest in a serious relationship with anyone until I met you. You do things to my heart, Kate."

Kate didn't know what to say. She was scared and her heart pounded. This was a very extreme circumstance they were in. Could the feelings be real? Or just heightened by the circumstances? She felt as if she was falling in love, and that terrified her. So instead of thinking too much about it, she leaned in and captured Alexis's mouth with her own. Their lips met, and Kate was ravenous yet again for Alexis. The last time, she'd been unsure and had been running on adrenaline and lust. This time, Kate was invested in feeling and basking in every single moment with Alexis. If Kate was going to trust her, she may as well let her in.

Reaching for her, Kate cupped Alexis's jaw with one hand and wrapped the other around her back, snaking it up her spine to pull her in closer. Their tongues caressed, and Kate groaned at the feeling of Alexis's hands roaming over her back. She wanted the clothes between them gone, but she refused to release Alexis long enough to take anything off yet.

Instead, Kate roamed her hand down to Alexis's belt, undoing it with one hand and completely ignoring the buttons. Kate jerked the t-shirt out of Alexis's waistline and shoved her hand up the shirt and under her bra, finally getting her hand on one of her small, perfect breasts. Her nipple was hard and pebbled and Kate lightly pinched and rolled it between her index and thumb. Alexis let out a surprised moan that sounded to Kate like a whimper. Heat flooded deep between Kate's legs, and her pussy clenched at the sound of Alexis's moans and panting breaths.

Kate clamped the other hand over Alexis's mouth and pinched her nipple again lightly.

Alexis cried out again and thrust her breast into Kate's hand. She trailed open-mouthed kisses up Alexis's chest, then over collarbone to her neck. Kate lapped her tongue over Alexis's carotid, causing her to jerk, then clamped her earlobe between her teeth.

Alexis pushed at Kate's chest, separating them and going immediately for her shirt.

"Hold your horses, Little Lieutenant. I need these damned shirts off right now. I can't stand it anymore. I need to feel you against my skin."

Kate chuckled at the near desperate tone of her whisper. As Alexis's hands roamed over her body and started to pull her shirt off, Kate's ears picked up a new sound on the whistling of the wind coming from the base of the stairs.

The sandstorm had come. They were stuck here now, for who knew how long. Kate knew they were really alone now, and the likelihood of being discovered before the storm ended was almost zero.

That thought had Kate pulling Alexis's lip between her teeth. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and caressed it with her tongue before releasing it with a quiet pop. As she backed away, Alexis followed, resuming her pursuit to get them out of their uniforms. She yanked the buttons undone on Kate's cargo pants, then pinned Kate to her with one hand, her mouth clamped to her neck, her other hand untying the laces of her boots.

Once everything had been undone, unbuttoned, or untied, Alexis rose with Kate in her arms.

“Stand up for me, pretty girl.”

Kate whimpered and stood, feeling as if she was on fire. Alexis peeled her bra off, pushed her underwear down off her hips, and told her to sit down and take her boots off. While Kate complied, she watched, mesmerized as Alexis took off her clothes. The shirt came first, revealing the lean lines of Alexis’s body, and Kate wanted to groan. She was a unique meld of masculine and feminine beauty, all muscle and soft olive skin covered in tattoos. Her bra followed, and Kate wanted her hands on Alexis’s breasts again. She waited, however, as Alexis slid her pants down her hips and yanked them off over her boots.

Drifting to the floor, Alexis went to work on the laces of her own boots. Kate remembered she was supposed to be taking her own boots off, too. She ripped them off and practically chucked them away. Reaching for her socks, she was surprised to find Alexis already there, pushing her hands away. Boot socks were impractical and hot, especially in the desert. But you had to wear them, or your feet and ankles would be covered in blisters and sores.

Alexis didn’t seem to mind and rolled Kate’s socks down with an almost sexy slowness. She let her fingers trail down Kate’s calves, caressing her skin and sending electricity coursing through her at every touch. Moving to her other leg, she worked on the second sock, and Kate writhed a bit, feeling needy and impatient.

Somehow, Alexis had taken control again, and Kate wanted to reassert herself—give part of herself to Alexis. She skimmed her hand down Alexis’s bare front, just gently grazing her nipples before moving on, her hand trailed softly down her quivering abdomen to the edge of her panties. Alexis was panting, and Kate pushed her back

with one hand, urging her to lie down. Kate's other hand slid Alexis's panties down her thighs, letting her lift her feet in order to fully pull them off.

"Stay still for me," Kate ordered, her voice husky with the lust coursing through her.

Repositioning herself so she could loom over Alexis, Kate let one hand dance across the sensitive golden umber skin of Alexis's thighs. Kate trailed her mouth down the bare skin of Alexis's throat, flicking her tongue out to taste her skin and enjoying the small jerk and hitch of her breaths every time Kate did this.

Eventually, Kate reached what she wanted. She sucked the right nipple into her mouth, palmed her left breast with one hand, and brought her other hand to Alexis's hot, wet pussy. She came alive as if she'd been electrocuted, throwing a hand up to her mouth and biting down on her fist. A muffled, quiet scream tore from Alexis's throat and she pressed her breast further into Kate's mouth. She moaned around her breast, causing the vibrations to stimulate her nipple while also lapping at it with her tongue. Her salty flesh tasted like heaven, and Kate wanted to consume her. Kate circled her thumb over Alexis' clit until she was grinding her pelvis up into Kate's hand. Her moans were quiet, as if she were trying to stifle them, and Kate wanted to hear more of her intoxicating noises.

Keeping Alexis's left breast occupied with her hand, Kate released the right breast with a pop, gave it a final lick, then trailed her tongue downward to Alexis's abdomen. Her breathing hitched and she bucked upward, realizing what Kate was up to.

Kate's mouth joined her hand between Alexis's legs, and she gave a lick up her entrance before swirling her tongue around her clit, causing her to jerk underneath Kate's ruthless tongue. She sucked Alexis's clit into her mouth and grazed the small bud with her teeth. Alexis tasted earthy and sexy as all hell. They hadn't showered in a while but it didn't diminish any of Kate's enthusiasm to taste Alexis. As she licked

she felt like she was tasting the real Alexis. The very core of her. And she was delicious. As Alexis arched and moaned, Kate inserted one finger, then a second, and curled them upwards seeking her G spot and then began to pump in rhythm with her tongue on Alexis's clitoris.

Alexis was extremely reactive to Kate's every touch, and Kate momentarily wondered if people ever took control with her, or if she was allowing Kate to have control. The thought was haunting, and Kate wanted to protect what Alexis was offering her.

So she focused in, determined not to stop until Alexis's world shattered and her limbs quaked with pleasure.

She swirled her tongue and feasted on Alexis, her fingers pumping, grazing her G-spot, her other hand softly rolling and pinching her left nipple. It didn't take long before Kate felt Alexis tightening around her fingers.

“Yes, baby. I know you want to come. Give in for me. I want to taste your orgasm on my tongue.”

It was as if Kate had thrown a match at gasoline. She watched as Alexis jerked and fell apart. It was beautiful. Her face was screwed up in pleasure as her voice cried out, her body twitched, and legs quivered and clamped around Kate's head, securing her in place. But Kate wasn't planning on going anywhere.

Instead of stopping or slowing to give Alexis a chance to catch her breath, Kate latched her mouth onto the sensitive skin of Alexis's thigh and sucked hard—hard enough it would leave a big, dark hickey. Her thumb returned to Alexis's clit and circled faster. Kate pumped in rhythm, determined to push Alexis over the edge again, harder this time.

“Oh God, Kate!” Alexis whimpered, her thighs still quivering around Kate’s head, holding her a willing prisoner.

Hips bucking, Kate felt Alexis jerk, tumbling toward the edge, and she gave her clit a little pinch, released her thigh, and clamped her mouth over Alexis’s clit again.

Alexis cried out again, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Her body shook, tightening around Kate’s fingers. Her pussy was drenched, and Kate lapped at her while Alexis whimpered, twitched, and rode out that last all-consuming orgasm.

When she finally stopped shaking, Alexis sat up and lifted Kate into her arms. Before Kate knew what she was doing, Alexis had flipped her, repositioning Kate so that Alexis was lying on her back and Kate was straddling her face and leaning forward in 69 position. Kate was straddling Alexis's face, and she was wet in anticipation of what Alexis was going to do to her. Kate lowered her head and lapped gently at Alexis’s excited pussy as Alexis pulled aside Kate’s soaking panties.

“Your pussy is so beautiful, Kate,” Alexis whispered, and then Kate jumped as her tongue lapped at her wet slit. Kate groaned into Alexis’s folds, feeling like she might combust.

“You taste so fucking good,” Alexis growled.

Alexis groaned, then began her slow attack on Kate’s clit with her tongue. She lapped at it slowly, making Kate jerk, wanting desperately for her to just clamp her mouth down and feast on her pussy. The anticipation was torture, and Kate ground against Alexis’s mouth.

Kate focused in on Alexis and sucked her clit into her mouth and inserted two fingers

back inside her. She was soaked for her, and Kate pumped her fingers and swirled her tongue, urging Alexis on.

Responding immediately, Alexis inserted a single digit into Kate's tight, grasping heat. Kate groaned and bucked into her hand. The teasing went away as she pushed Alexis closer to another orgasm.

In response to the fire building in her, Alexis sucked Kate's clit into her mouth and inserted another finger. She pumped her hand, grazing Kate's G-spot and flicking her clit with her tongue, determined to push Kate over the edge before Kate managed to set Alexis off for the third time.

Fire built in Kate, and she moaned into Alexis's soft flesh and rode her mouth, unable to control her grinding hips anymore.

"Alexis," Kate gasped out.

Alexis didn't speak, only sucked harder and grazed Kate's clit with her teeth. Her fingers pumped in rhythm, and Kate's vision exploded into stars as her orgasm overtook her.

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She lowered her mouth from Kate's pussy long enough to say, "Yes, baby, ride my face while you come." Then she went back to lapping at Kate's clit.

Tremors overtook Kate's body, and she cried out and ground into Alexis's mouth. She sucked hard on Alexis's clit and readjusted her fingers to press her G-spot. Soon, Alexis was moaning into Kate's pussy, and Kate felt the beginning twitches of her body as she came undone.

They lay there together, naked and slick with sweat, gasping, moaning, and writhing until their bodies finally stopped shaking.

Kate repositioned herself, still straddling Alexis but chest to chest. Mouth to mouth. She lowered her mouth to take Alexis's lips in a kiss, tasting salty sweat and sex and that earthy unmistakable taste of Alexis that she just couldn't resist. She kneaded one of her breasts gently, circling her thumb over one of Alexis's nipples. Kate tried to remember the last time she'd had sex that had felt like that. Shocked, she realized she'd never had sex so raw, passionate, or deeply emotional. Not even with Lorelei. The idea lodged itself in Kate's heart as she drifted off to sleep with her head pressed against Alexis's heart.

She was falling in love with Alexis.

Chapter 6

Alexis

The sandstorm had come and kept them pinned down for ten hours. The wind

whipped and howled, the sky darkened by the flowing wall of sand. Alexis had slept through most of it, but had watched some of it in awe, wondering how such insane things happened.

By the time the storm was over and the dust had settled, the sun, which had been up for hours, illuminated the world again. Movement in daylight would be tantamount to suicide. Alexis had woken up about an hour before the storm had died and had kept watch over Kate's sleeping form. They'd have to stay until the sun went down anyway, so Kate needed to sleep while she had the opportunity.

What she'd said to Kate hours before had been the truth. Alexis actively avoided strong attachments to anyone but purely platonic friends. As a result of this, most of her friends were men. Fear had kept her from getting too close to someone romantically, and Alexis wondered if she could push that fear aside for Kate.

Since she'd lost her aunt, Alexis had written off relationships. The single, casual sex lifestyle she had was the only kind of romance she knew. Alexis wasn't even sure she knew how to be in a relationship.

There was no denying the feelings that had snuck in. Kate was like a drug, and she'd become addicted to her the moment they'd met. Alexis just hadn't known it at the time. Now she was faced with the decision of allowing herself to be vulnerable and at Kate's mercy. It was terrifying, thinking of giving that part of herself to someone—although she wasn't sure she'd given her heart to Kate. It was more like Kate had snuck in, a thief in the night, and stolen it right out of her chest.

Alexis couldn't deny that Kate seemed the best person who could ever have stolen her heart. If Kate could find a way to trust Alexis, even with her reputation of being a player, then the least Alexis could do was try.

They may not even make it out of there alive, and Alexis couldn't imagine the agony

of making it safely to the extraction if Kate weren't with her. She couldn't let Kate die in the goddamned desert.

Deep down, Alexis had always believed she'd die in a place like this. Deployed on some suicide mission in a dessert hellhole. It made her long to see forests, mountains, and lakes again. The green was a special type of peace that a person missed, particularly when facing death around every corner in a sandbox. But she couldn't let Kate suffer the same fate. She still had healing to do and a life to live. If it was at all within Alexis's control, she'd get Kate to the extraction point alive and in one piece. Then, she'd spend the rest of her life trying to convince Kate that she could trust Alexis and would treat Kate the way she deserved from a partner. She wanted to spoil her rotten and push away both women's sadness and loneliness.

Was she capable of it? Capable of loving one woman forever? Alexis didn't know, but she did know that for Kate Cross, she wanted to try.

Deep voices echoed down the alley to their left, and Alexis backed slowly and silently into the basement, positioning herself with the best sightline to take out any intruders but still keeping herself between the stairs and Kate. She flicked off the safety, started her breathing routine, and waited.

Breathe in for four seconds, then hold for four, she thought to herself. Alexis slowly exhaled through pursed lips like she was blowing through a straw, then started the loop again. She repeated it as the sounds of men speaking grew louder. Alexis knew a little Arabic, and she understood basic Kurdish, at least enough to get directions and order a beer. She couldn't understand a single phrase of what was being said, and she figured they were speaking Arabic or one of the other languages common in the Syrian/Iraqi border. Their voices were casual with happy inflections. Alexis was pretty sure they had no idea she and Kate were hiding mere feet from them.

Shadows passed over the doorway to the building, but they kept moving, not stopping

to do a search. Alexis moved silently toward the staircase and watched the men pass, identifying four different men, all carrying some type of weapon. Most had rifles or machine guns. Alexis rolled her eyes and tracked their path, curious to see if she could follow their prints in the sand later.

The men's voices faded away as they left the area. Alexis kept her ears open and guarded the staircase like a statue until the sun started to set.

When the sun started its descent, the rhythm of Kate's breathing changed. She was waking up, and Alexis retreated back into the basement. Her bag sat near Kate at the far wall, and she searched through it as Kate began to stir. Alexis grabbed an M.R.E., pulled it out of her pack, and set it and the remainder of their water next to Kate.

After deploying several times, getting stuck in the desert, and going without meals for a while, Alexis had grown used to being nauseated when she was in the desert. Not eating wouldn't bother her for at least another day. If everything went according to plan, they'd be out of there before then.

She was used to living like this. Kate wasn't.

Shuffling sounds emanated from behind her, and Alexis heard Kate wake up and search for her clothes in the semi-darkness. A smile grew on Alexis's face, but she kept her gaze trained on the entrance, determined not to let thoughts of Kate dressing distract her from guard duty. Plastic crinkled and tore, and Kate's soft groan echoed through the darkness.

"Thank you for the food." Kate's voice came from behind her, and Alexis turned to find her in a t-shirt and panties, her hair tumbling down past her shoulders.

Nearly swallowing her own tongue, Alexis nodded at her. "No problem." She returned to her watch and felt Kate approach from behind. She pressed her head into

Alexis's back and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"I really want a shower," Kate grumbled into Alexis's back.

Alexis chuckled, "Me too. Soon enough. The sun will be down soon and we will get out of here. Go finish eating."

Kate turned on her heel and did as she was told.

When the sun had gone down completely and the street was quiet, Alexis led them back onto the street and down the alley they'd turned in from last night. She surveyed the different alleyways and turned them south again along a different path. The streets were still littered with obstructions. Cars, boxes, and rubble from nearby buildings were strewn everywhere, making the path difficult to traverse.

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They picked their way through the streets as silently as possible, and Alexis drew them to a stop behind an old, burned out bus. The end of the city was just a few blocks ahead, and nothing stood between it and the entrance to the valley. If they could make it the last few blocks without being followed, they stood a good chance at extraction within the next few hours. The opportunity to escape was nearly overwhelming, but Alexis continued with caution.

The streets were silent, Kate and Alexis crept forward, keeping their eyes and ears open for any sign of trouble. Wary of the silence, Alexis glanced around. Something didn't feel quite right, and Alexis slowed, trusting her gut.

Ahead of them, the final intersection loomed in darkness. Blinding lights flicked on, coming from each side of the intersection. Behind them, the sound of a truck revving its engine roared into the night, and more lights bathed them.

They were trapped. It had been an ambush.

They'd known that any survivors would have headed through the city and not around it, so they'd just set up their men by the exit to the city. The lights were blinding, and Alexis couldn't make out how many combatants there were.

"Get down," Alexis ordered quietly. Kate dropped to the ground just as gunfire rang out and Alexis crouched over her to shield her. Heat and searing pain bathed Alexis's previously injured shoulder. She'd taken another hit, but this one had definitely hit something important. Hot, wet blood trickled down her left side, and Alexis rolled off Kate, stood, and ran toward the southern exit dragging Kate with her.

Rifle at the ready, Alexis fired, ignoring the pain that threatened to make her pass out. She managed to take out two of the enemies ahead of them, and a gunshot barked near Alexis's ear from behind. Kate fired, nailing the third assailant. He went down, and they broke into a sprint. Kate followed close behind her, and Alexis heard her firing behind them. It sounded as if she had taken a few out from those who were pursuing them, as well.

“I need to conserve ammo,” Kate said in her ear.

Alexis nodded, running as fast as her injury would allow. There was a cave off to their immediate right, and if they were fast enough, no one would see them go into it. She put on a burst of speed and led Kate into the cave. Her knees gave out five feet from the entrance, and Alexis collapsed.

“I took a hit, Kate.” Alexis coughed. The pain was blinding, and she didn’t know if she’d be able to stay conscious much longer.

Kate rolled her over and saw the condition of her left shoulder. “Oh, fuck. Oh, Alexis, you idiot!”

Blood pooled around the wound, and Alexis started to feel cold.

Alexis had been right all along. She would die out here in the sand. She would never make it home.

Kate dug through her pack, searching for something, and Alexis’s vision swam. At least Kate was uninjured. Alexis pushed her rifle into Kate’s hand, dug through her pockets and found her satellite phone.

“Take it. Call them and let me know you’re twenty minutes from the extraction site. Leave me. Just run south. They’ll see you and pick you up.”

It was as if Kate had been slapped. She reared back, obviously angry.

“Don’t you fucking dare think I’m leaving you here. Shut your mouth, stop moving, and sit the fuck still while I save your life, you idiot!”

Angry tears coursed down Kate’s face, and Alexis cupped her cheek and swiped at the tears with her thumb.

Darkness crept in, and she let it as the pain engulfed her. Alexis saw Kate shake her head before she blacked out.

Chapter 7

Kate

Fear and adrenaline surged through Kate’s system as she searched for her cauterization tool. Alexis’s shoulder looked mangled. There were several bullet wounds, and she was bleeding from them all. There was so much blood that Kate wasn’t sure if she’d even be able to pinpoint where all the bleeding was coming from. With only so much she’d be able to do, she was grateful Alexis had passed out. Cauterizing the wound was going to hurt like a bitch, and there weren’t any narcotics left. It was going to be extremely painful, and it was better that she didn’t have to be awake to endure it.

Determined to stop the bleeding, Kate pressed gauze into the wound. She tried to mop up as much blood as possible, hoping to find the source and that there wasn’t any damage to major arteries or veins. Alexis would bleed out in minutes if a major artery had been hit, and Kate moved robotically, intent on staying calm.

The location of the injury was disadvantageous, at the juncture of her arm and shoulder, and Kate wouldn’t be able to tourniquet the wound. She had to cauterize

what she could, then put quick clot powder on the rest. If she could bandage it in place well enough, it might hold a twenty minute jog to the extraction point, but that was only if Kate controlled the blood loss. And Alexis was growing paler by the second.

Kate's hands worked tirelessly, and time stopped existing. The only thing that mattered was repairing the damage done to Alexis's circulatory system. She swiped and mopped up blood with her gauze, applied the red incandescent tip to the injury.

The smell of burnt flesh usually bothered her, but Kate ignored it and the pain in her chest and pushed on. She could only use the tool in so many places, and then she had to resort to quick clot powder. When all the obvious bleeding had been stopped, Kate hit the speed dial on Alexis's satellite phone. It rang twice, and then a deep male voice answered.

"Come in, Sniper Alpha. This is Bulldog One."

"Bulldog One, this is Medic One. Sniper Alpha has multiple life threatening GSW's. We are twenty minutes north from extraction point. Headed your way. Come get us. Over."

"I read you loud and clear, Medic One. Bulldog One is sending the cubs. Over and out."

Kate hated radio speak. He'd been clear and concise, knowing that life threatening meant they were under a time constraint. She knew the terms and codes were to keep anyone from intercepting information, but it still took her a second to put it together. They were coming to get them. Now Kate had to finish bandaging Alexis and get her up and to the extraction point without being seen.

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Kate whimpered quietly at the prospect of what they faced ahead, her fear and exhaustion slipping out. Silent tears ran down her face as she poured quick clot powder into Alexis's shoulder wound and began wrapping it in a tight bandage. As Kate secured the bandage, Alexis woke up, the pressure from the bandage causing pain and pulling her out of sleep. Kate pressed harder, applying as much pressure as possible. It was the only way to stop the bleeding. Alexis hissed at the pain in her shoulder and sat up.

Alexis's beautiful azure eyes looked into Kate's, and Kate swallowed down a lump in her throat.

Whatever was in her eyes didn't look like hope or confidence, and she wouldn't let Alexis give up.

Don't die, Alexis. Please don't die. I love you.

"Listen to me. You're not going to let this stop you, you hear me?"

Alexis's gaze was distant, and Kate leaned close until Alexis focused on her.

"I will not leave you. If you stay here, then I'm staying, too."

Despite blood loss and the pain, the words seemed to sink in, and Alexis's gaze narrowed on her.

"You can't!"

“Watch me, Lieutenant Cole. You are my partner, and I swore to save as many as I could.” Kate’s tone was final, reflecting her opinion on the matter.

Alexis glared at her. “Don’t you dare. Kate, you have to get out of here. I can barely move, and I’ve suffered serious blood loss.”

Kate cocked a brow at her. “I’m aware of your medical condition. That’s exactly why I’m staying. I won’t leave my partner behind, and I would never abandon a patient.

“Kate,” Alexis said, her teeth bared in an angry expression.

“Are you really going to leave me alone? Let me wander out from here by myself and try to find the extraction point on my own?”

It was a low blow, but Kate didn’t care. She was competent at navigation and had memorized the maps of the area just in case something like this happened. But that didn’t matter. Kate wasn’t leaving her behind. It was completely out of the question. If she had to take the low road to get Alexis home safely, she would do it.

“And what kind of person do you think I am? You think I’m just going to abandon you to save myself?”

Alexis looked stunned. Kate went on angrily, not giving her enough time to respond.

“Hold still while I secure this. It’s going to be tight, and it’s gonna hurt like hell. But the pain will keep you awake and alert.”

Alexis gritted her teeth and Kate pulled hard on the ends of the wrap, securing it as tightly as it would go without completely cutting off the circulation to her fingers. A pained groan tore from Alexis’s throat, and Kate’s heart ached at the sound of her agony.

“Can you stand?”

Alexis jerked her head in a nod and slowly got to her feet with Kate’s assistance. Kate tried to give as much support on the injured side as possible, but the whistling of breath between Alexis’s teeth told her the pain was excruciating.

“If you’re going to pass out, let me know. Otherwise, we’re going to start walking. There’s some lower embankments, and we may have a shot of staying out of sight if we take the lower ground.”

Alexis didn’t respond, just put one foot in front of the other. They trudged south as fast as Alexis could stand going. The air was cold, and Kate was uncomfortable, the cold sweat from exercise mixed with the lower temperatures creating a biting damp. In the back of her mind, she worried about being severely dehydrated. It wasn’t a current threat, though, so she just kept going, one arm wrapped around Alexis’s waist, giving her a solid base to push off of for each agonizing step. Kate was astounded she hadn’t passed out from the pain and couldn’t imagine the searing fire of the wound in her shoulder.

After ten minutes of walking, Alexis’s breathing became labored. She kept going, though, and Kate worried that Alexis would overdo it and reopen the wound, or that she’d lose consciousness at any moment. They pressed on, Kate constantly monitoring every nuance of Alexis’s condition, while Alexis kept them headed in the right direction.

Kate talked softly, demanding Alexis’ attention to keep her awake.

“Tell me how bad the pain is in your left shoulder right now, scale of one to ten.”

“Eight. Hurt worse before you bandaged it.” Each word was staccato, slow, and coming from between gritted teeth.

“That’s good. If it gets worse all of the sudden, tell me. Okay?”

Alexis jerked her head in a nod.

“How far do you think we have left?”

“Did you call while I was out?”

Kate suppressed a shudder, the panic trying to choke her at the memory of being covered in Alexis’s blood and calling for help.

“Yes,” Kate answered, not trusting herself to say more. She choked down the tears that threatened to spill again.

“Five more minutes of walking? Then I’m going to need a rest. They’ll be here shortly after that. If we’re lucky, we haven’t been followed. I think it’s more likely that our next extraction site will have combatants in the area.”

Kate tried not to let it bother her but knew that they’d have to find a way to either be fast or get by undetected. If they went too fast, Alexis could tear her injury open, and if they went too slow, they risked being seen and Alexis losing consciousness from the prolonged pain. Kate didn’t know what to do.

We are both going to die out here.

The options were all bad. All they could do was keep moving forward. Every other step came with a sharp exhale or a pained grunt. Alexis kept silent, her teeth locked together. The walk was grueling, but eventually, Alexis began to slow. Kate looked around for a good place to hide until their team arrived.

They were surrounded by small hills and desert and the remains of an old neighborhood. What used to be homes stood abandoned, neglected, and some consisted of crumbling rubble. Their best hope at finding cover without running into

an ambush would be to stick to the hills and ditches and stay away from buildings.

Kate pointed to a hill with a jerk of her free hand. It looked to have a deeper valley or ditch on the other side, and they'd be able to crouch out of sight until help arrived.

“Just over that hill. Is that close enough for our guys to find us?”

Alexis coughed, pain wracked her body, and Kate felt her trembling against her.

“Yes. The extraction point is the flatland between the hills and that graveyard.”

She motioned toward the ruin of an old neighborhood with her good arm.

Kate steered them toward the ditch and discovered it was deep enough to hide them well until their team arrived. The incline wasn't too steep, and she was grateful that Alexis wouldn't need to climb in or out of it. She wasn't sure Alexis's wounds could take the strain.

Time seemed to slow as Kate got Alexis settled into the ditch, and she saw crimson spreading through the wrap at Alexis's shoulder. It looked nearly black in the darkness, and Kate swore and reached for her pack. The supplies had dwindled, and she wasn't sure she even had what she would need to restabilize Alexis. She dug through the bag for more gauze.

Removal of the wrap securing the bandage informed Kate that Alexis had definitely torn something open again.

“Fuck. Alexis, talk to me. How are you feeling?”

She gave a wet chuckle. “Not great.”

Kate almost never had to remove a field dressing. She didn't want to cause more damage by tearing out a formed clot by removing the bandage. But if she didn't take the bandage off, she couldn't apply more clotting agent into the wound or use the cauterizer.

The old bandage was soaked through, and Kate swore as she ripped it off and set about applying more clotting powder and then used the last of her gauze and bandages to apply pressure to the wound. She pressed down hard, causing Alexis to whimper quietly.

"I'm sorry, I have to do this. I've got to control the bleeding."

"I know." Alexis grumbled through clenched teeth.

Kate fought down her emotions, unable to entertain them while trying to actively keep Alexis alive. The second she lost her focus, Alexis could die. Kate wasn't sure that Alexis would survive the injuries she'd sustained even if the extraction went according to plan.

The level of blood loss was becoming critical, and Alexis was going to need a blood transfusion as soon as possible in order to survive. The reality of their chances robbed her of breath, and the tears she'd been holding back streamed silently down her face.

She's going to die. I'm going to lose her, too.

Alexis raised her good arm and swiped away Kate's tears with her thumb. "No crying. Not for me." Her voice was hoarse and strained.

She is going to die. There is no way we will make it.

The sound of truck engines had Kate's heart racing and fear turned her stomach sour.

They hunkered low in the ditch and watched the beams from headlights rising and falling, indicating a truck or two was driving through the hills. Kate wasn't sure how far they'd patrol. She tucked their heads down and put her hands on either side of Alexis's pale face.

A soft, near silent sob tore from Kate's chest. "Listen to me. You have to stay with me."

A hint of a frown turned down Alexis's lips and her eyes drifted shut.

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“I don’t want to go. I just found you.” Alexis whispered back to her.

Kate choked down a sob and tried to focus on keeping pressure on Alexis’s wound and being silent.

The rumble of engines grew closer, accompanied by the sound of deep male voices calling out into the darkness. They weren’t concerned about being seen or heard, which meant they either had control of the area or they had weapons. Kate figured it was probably both, and tried not to let fear paralyze her.

“I know, and I just found you, too.” She wasn’t going to let Alexis give up.

“You can’t leave me now. I love you. I am not leaving this godforsaken desert without you, Alexis.”

I love you.

I love you so much.

Kate cried silently and wondered to herself if, after spending so much time imprisoned by grief, she was going to die in the desert or they both were before they ever got their chance to be together.

Chapter 8

Alexis

Those three words echoed in Alexis's mind, and she wondered if the universe would be so cruel as to let her die the same day she heard a real I love you for the first time in over fifteen years. Sure she had heard it from women who loved the idea of her. But Kate had seen beyond that. Kate loved her, Alexis was sure about it. Because she felt it too. There was something magical between them.

I love you.

Alexis had felt the words like a visceral jolt of electricity that coursed through every atom of her being.

Kate had come into her life so suddenly and unexpectedly. Alexis lived most of her adult life with no real dream of ever finding the one person to spend her life with. Never dating seriously meant never letting anyone get too close. It had never occurred to her that she could have a life with Kate beyond the one she'd known previously. The only thing now keeping them from a life together was the small matter of whether Alexis could stay alive long enough to get help.

Please. Let me live. If there is a god, please get us the hell out of here.

Despite Kate's admission, Alexis could feel all the energy draining from her body, and she wished Kate had gone ahead to extraction without her. With her injury, Alexis had only slowed Kate down. She didn't think she would make it. The injury felt too serious, and she'd already lost too much blood.

The rumbling of truck engines grew louder and closer. It brought Alexis back to reality. They were hiding in a ditch with enemy combatants roaming the hills in trucks looking for them. There was no way Kate would get out alive if they were caught in a ditch together and she refused to leave Alexis's side.

Panic, an emotion Alexis to which was a stranger, rose in her throat, nearly choking

her. She had to convince Kate to leave her there or come up with a plan to get them out of there. Their hiding spot would only work for so long, and with their team headed toward them, Kate might stand a chance at survival if she moved closer to the extraction point without Alexis.

Alexis swiped at the tears on Kate's face with her good hand and whispered fervently to her.

"Kate, you can't stay here. It's only a matter of time before they find us."

Kate's glare was withering, but Alexis pressed on.

"Please don't make me watch you die. I can't watch anyone else I love die."

Her arms were crossed over her chest and silent tears ran down Kate's face.

"No. I am not leaving you. If you want me to get out of here, you better think of a plan."

Fear rolled through Alexis. There was no way she could make Kate do anything in the condition she was in. The best she could do was make a plan and be sure Kate made it to the helicopter no matter what it cost Alexis.

"You're so goddamned stubborn," Alexis said accusingly, wishing Kate would just do as she was told.

Kate surprised her by lowering her head and capturing Alexis' mouth in a swift, passionate kiss that stole her breath.

"So what's the plan?"

“Turn the volume down on the satphone and call the team. Ask them their ETA.”

She did as she was told, and Alexis kept her gaze over the hill on the headlights drawing closer to them. If the team wasn't already close by, Alexis wasn't sure what she could do.

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“Bulldog One, this is Medic One, come in.”

“This is Bulldog One, I read you Medic One. Go ahead,” the man said, and Kate looked at her in confusion. Alexis just indicated with her hand that Kate should keep talking.

“What’s your ETA, Bulldog One?”

“We are less than five minutes out. I repeat, less than five minutes out.”

Alexis was filled with relief. She could still get Kate out alive with their team that close. She grabbed the radio from Kate.

“Bulldog One, this is Sniper Alpha. Enemy combatants in proximity. Setting up diversion as we speak. Haul ass, boys. We don’t have much time. Over.”

“I read you Sniper Alpha. Over and out.”

The line went dead, and Kate glanced at Alexis with wide, wild eyes.

“Diversion?”

Alexis nodded. “Dig through my pack. Front pocket, the small one. You’ll find some flares.”

Kate dug through the near empty pack and found four flares held together with a rubber band.

“Take one. Do you know how to light it?”

Kate nodded and answered quietly, “Strike it against a coarse surface like a match pointing it away from face.”

Alexis nodded weakly “Yes, there’s a striking pad on the lower handle if you can’t find anything hard to light it on.”

“So what kind of diversion are you thinking?”

“How’s your throwing arm, Kate?”

“Pretty good. I’ve played my share of football.”

Another miracle, Alexis thought.

“Okay so here’s the general idea. These flares have wicks that most people don’t use. Works like old school ACME dynamite. Light it, throw, and in five to ten seconds, the flare will fully ignite.”

She stopped speaking. Kate pressed down on the wound in her shoulder and Alexis gasped for breath. She glanced around looking for the best place to start throwing flares.

“Kate, if you can take the three extra flares, sneak through our ditch and closer to the hillcrest. Then light ‘em and toss ‘em as far as you can.”

“That’s a horrible idea. If they see me throw them, they’ll find us right away.”

Alexis nodded. “But if it works, it will distract them long enough for us to make a run for it.”

All the movement was catching up to her, and Alexis felt increasingly dizzy and weak, and the pain in her shoulder felt like a rabid dog was gnawing on her abused flesh.

Kate was silent as she stared at Alexis and worked it through in her mind. Alexis was sure that Kate would come to the same conclusion she had. They didn't have any other choice unless Kate was going to leave Alexis behind.

“Fine. Talk me through the logistics of this.”

She let her eyes slide closed as she talked through the plan, imagining how it would play out if it were to go exactly as planned.

“Just make sure that you throw them as hard and far as you can. And be fast. Once the helicopter gets closer, they'll be able to hear it. Then we are shit out of luck.

Kate's eyes scanned the hills in the darkness, and Alexis handed her the remaining three flares.

“Save the fourth flare to signal our team. If we don't make it out this time, I don't think we're going to make it out at all.”

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The statement was grim and quiet. Kate bent down and pressed a small kiss between Alexis's eyebrows.

"I'll have to stop holding pressure on your wound. Don't move until I get back. Stay out of sight and out of trouble and try not to die. Promise me you won't do anything stupid?"

Nodding her agreement, Alexis thought it was unlikely she'd be able to do much but listen anxiously for the helicopter and the sound of flares being lit.

The pressure at her shoulder went away, and Alexis sucked a breath in between her teeth. Searing hot agony engulfed Alexis' shoulder in flames, and the drowsy, blood loss stupor she'd been in dissipated.

Kate was gone, sprinting north up the ditch. Alexis watched her for a moment until she disappeared into the dark. She waited for the sound of flares or helicopter blades. The deep reverberating thumping of the helo tickled Alexis' senses, and she picked up the minute sound of their team coming for them from the south.

To the north, Alexis watched as a bright red flare hissed and emitted blinding red light in the distance. The sound of truck engines roaring into motion had Alexis's heart racing in fear. The night grew brighter still as two more flares joined the first. Their red lights illuminated the northern section of the sky that Alexis could see, and she was impressed at how far Kate had managed to throw them. It would only buy them so much time, as the men in the trucks would eventually hear the helicopter, and they'd see the last flare being lit up to flag down their team.

Relief spread through Alexis as Kate reappeared at the northern end of the ditch, sprinting toward her silently. The exertion showed on Kate's face, and she looked scared.

"We've got to go now. There's six trucks, not two."

"Fuck," Alexis swore and forced herself to her feet, the pain sending sparks of agony through her, threatening to make her pass out.

Kate came and wrapped her arm around Alexis's waist.

"We have to run, Kate," Alexis whispered, her tone hard, leaving no room for argument.

"You can't! If you lose much more blood you'll die," Kate exclaimed in a furious whisper.

"Baby, if I don't run, we are both going to die anyway."

Kate's mouth snapped shut, and in a burst of energy, pouring everything she had left into it, Alexis pushed herself into a run. It was the only way she'd get Kate out of there willingly, and Alexis had known the chances of making it out of the desert with such a severe injury wasn't likely. So running and losing what was left of her blood volume meant nothing as long as Kate got out alive.

As their feet pounded toward the south, the sound of helicopter blades thumping in the distance grew louder. They weren't trying to hide anymore, just be as fast as possible. The enemy seemed distracted by their flares, and Alexis hoped it would keep them occupied long enough for them to reach the extraction site.

The dry, dusty air choked Alexis, and her lungs burned with the effort exerted to stay

upright and moving. Stars danced around the edges of her vision, and a wave of nausea rolled through her. At any moment her legs would give out.

Her gaze flitted to Kate, and she saw fear written in every crease of her beautiful face. She pushed harder, unwilling to go down before they reached the helicopter, knowing that Kate wouldn't go without her.

At once, two things became apparent. The helicopter was landing about fifty feet ahead of them, and their diversion was no longer fooling the enemy. Kate's head whipped around, and from the way her eyes widened and nearly popped out of her head, Alexis guessed the men in trucks were advancing on them from the north. The fear distracted Kate, and she stumbled slightly.

“Head forward, babe. Helo's here. Run like hell.”

Kate's head snapped back around, eyes falling on the helicopter ahead of them. Alexis dipped into the last of her energy, and they ran as hard as they could. Shots rang out behind them, the popping of rounds almost deafened by the helicopter's loud rhythmic whooping.

Ten feet from the helicopter, Alexis's knees gave out, and to her surprise, one of the men in the helicopter jumped out and ran to them.

“Get into the helo!” he yelled at Kate. She hesitated, and he yelled again.

“Now, Lieutenant! I've got Cole. Get in!”

The world disappeared from beneath her as the man lifted her, and Alexis realized she knew him.

“Hey. You're not supposed to be here.”

Maloy's face held concern, and Alexis knew she probably looked like a fresh corpse.

“Tough shit, Lieutenant. I wasn't leaving you out here.”

Maloy lifted her into the helicopter and then was shouting at their pilot to take off. The sound of a machine gun offloading rounds near Alexis's ear told her that the trucks were coming in close, and their aerial gunner had decided to return fire. The helicopter jerked, rising into the air, and Alexis's vision swam. Kate was safe, and that's what mattered.

I love you, too.

Shouting came from both sides of her in different voices. One was Kate's, and the other she didn't recognize. The pain in her shoulder amplified, and Alexis let out a guttural scream before it finally became too much. She passed out, letting the sweet bliss of unconsciousness take over and release her from her pain.

Chapter 9

Kate

The helicopter ride back to base had been hellish. Kate was exhausted, dehydrated, hungry, and too nauseated with worry to even consider drinking water or eating. Maloy had been on the crew to retrieve them, and he was hovering in the background watching the paramedic who worked on Alexis like a hawk. TSgt Howel was a tall, striking black man with a soft face rimmed with a serious, set mouth drawn downward in a frown.

When Kate looked at him, she thoughtman, this dude's seen some shit. A medic she hadn't noticed before began working on her, flashing a light in her eyes to check her pupils' response, looking for any obvious signs of injury. The medic pulled out all the supplies for an IV and had Kate hooked up to a bag of fluids in minutes. It felt as if time stretched, and Kate wasn't sure if the trip took twenty minutes or two hours. She watched TSgt Howel work over Alexis, hooking her up to a blood infusion, taking vital signs, and trying to staunch the bleeding coming from her shoulder.

Alexis's eyes didn't open, and she didn't flinch in pain as Howel worked. Kate had the hand on Alexis's good side clasped in her own and she squeezed it, wishing she'd open her eyes or speak. The bloody bandages were strewn along the floor of their helo, and the medic tried to gather it all up at lightning speed as Howel opened gauze dressings and tossed their wrappings away haphazardly. The cabin was silent as they worked to keep Alexis alive.

All the time she'd spent keeping people away, and when she was finally ready to let

someone in, a twist of cruel fate was going to kill Alexis. They hadn't had any time together, and Kate's heart throbbed in her chest as she lay there, clutching onto Alexis' hand, waiting for her to show some sign of life.

Abruptly, the helicopter landed. The men carried Alexis out on a stretcher, and Kate tried to turn her head so she could watch as Alexis was led off into the hospital. With a jolt, the stretcher she was on raised off the floor of the helo, and two people carried her in after Alexis.

Kate watched them take Alexis directly into surgery as they took her into an emergency triage area. As Alexis was taken out of sight, Kate bolted up into a seated position.

“Okay, that’s far enough. Let me off. I’m fine.”

The medics looked at her as if she'd grown a second head.

“Lieutenant Cross, you’re seriously dehydrated and have just spent several days in the desert without a water source. At minimum you need more fluids pushed and a decent meal.”

“Fine, but I want you to administer the fluids to me while I sit outside the surgical area. Bring me food if you want, but right now I feel too nauseated to eat.”

“We can give you some IV medication for the nausea.”

“Great. Then I’ll just sit here,” Kate indicated to an old plastic chair that sat next to two others outside the doors leading into the operating room. They weren't meant for patients, but she didn't care. She sank down into the chair, leaned her head back against the wall and kept her eyes trained on the doorway to the O.R.

The medics looked at each other and left, realizing they weren't going to get her to move on her own. Kate watched them walk to a desk with a nurse and a field doc and waited for them to decide what they wanted to do with her. She glanced back at the O.R. doors. They could try to get her to move, but short of knocking her out with drugs in her IV and moving her themselves, she wasn't leaving until Alexis came out or until they let her go in.

After a few minutes, one of the medics came over with an IV pole with a few different bags hanging from it. One was for hydration, one for nausea, and one was an antibiotic, standard downrange procedure when one comes into contact with blood. Kate had been swimming in her patients's blood, including Alexis's since they'd arrived in the damned desert.

The nausea medication started to kick in, and Kate finally felt the gnawing nausea fade away. A bit later, the other medic brought her a tray from their kitchen. It wasn't an MRE—it was real, hot food.

“How are you feeling? Think you can eat this now, Lieutenant Cross?”

Kate looked at the plate and realized it must be early morning and the breakfast crew had probably just started their day. There was eggs, toast, sausage patties, plain pancakes without syrup, and orange juice. Her mouth watered, and Kate nodded her head.

The medic smiled at her. “Good. The kitchen crew just came on thirty minutes ago. It's fresh, and I have to admit, it's not bad for army food.”

Kate didn't have the energy to talk about how most military food sucked, but occasionally there was a dining facility at an obscure base that had the best food she'd ever tasted.

Instead, she took the tray and picked away slowly at the food. It smelled amazing, and tasted better, but Kate was worried if she ate too quickly she'd throw it up. After twenty minutes, her plate was empty, and so was her IV bag of fluids. The nice medic who'd brought her breakfast appeared out of nowhere with a fresh IV bag and a small paper cup in her hand. She held it out, and Kate got a whiff of strong, bitter coffee and perked up slightly.

“Is that coffee?”

The medic chuckled at her. “Yep, I brought it just for you. As long as you promise me you'll drink your orange juice, I'll give it to you. I also brought you cream and sugar.”

“I will do whatever you want me to do if you give me that coffee.”

The medic raised her brow at Kate, and Kate huffed a laugh and accepted the warm, steaming, beautiful brown liquid. Swapping out the IV bags only took a few moments, and Kate was grateful for not having to drink down a ton of water to rehydrate herself. She wasn't sure her stomach could handle it.

“Except move from the waiting area.”

The medic nodded and cracked a smile at her. “There's something to be said about loyalty, Lieutenant. Call for me if you need anything, I'll be just down the hall at the desk.”

Then she turned on her heel and left. Kate watched her return to her desk and begin tapping away at her computer, probably documenting in the chartpatient is a total pain in the ass. Kate had always wondered herself why medical personnel were the worst patients.

The waiting area, as she'd called it, was really a small section of hallway in an old concrete building. The lights were fluorescent and horrible, casting bright white beams down. Kate closed her eyes and pulled her hat down to cover her face.

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Alexis's pale face was imprinted on the backs of Kate's eyelids. They'd both come so close to death, with Alexis' wounds and Kate almost running into the patrol of trucks when trying to create the diversion. Tossing the flares had been a good idea, but Kate hadn't expected to nearly round the corner into the trucks they'd been hiding from. She'd never been so close to dying. Watching as Alexis bled out in the helicopter had taken years off Kate's life. She'd been so afraid of letting Alexis in, but Kate couldn't imagine losing Alexis after so much had happened and not being able to tell her how she really felt.

She knew she and Alexis had built what they had in the most extreme of situations. But it felt real. So very very real.

The general fear, anxiety, and pressure of the previous days condensed in on her, and she bent forward, put her head between her knees and sobbed. The pain wrenched out of her, washed down her face, and soaked the fabric of her pants at the knee as she wiped them away, trying to stop the tears all together.

Kate had been saved, rescued and brought back in one piece all due to Alexis's navigation, ideas, and guidance. Yet, Alexis was the one lying in an operating room fighting for her life. The pressure was overwhelming, and Kate just took deep breaths, letting it all out, feeling the fear and guilt leave her in waves. She'd done all she could and had gotten Alexis into the helicopter. All she could do now was wait until the doctors came out to update her.

So she sat, steeped in anticipation, and waited. Her nerves clawed at her. Eventually, a nurse came out and Kate jumped to her feet, wringing her hands.

“She’s touch and go. We have her stabilized enough to fly her back to Palstein. She’ll need to be taken directly to their intensive care unit, but I think we’re out of the woods, as long as nothing surprising happens.”

Kate couldn’t believe her ears. Alexis was most likely going to be okay. Any strength she had left fled her, and Kate collapsed down into her chair. Sobs rose and Kate felt relief spread through her.

“Can I take the same bird home with her?”

The nurse nodded. “Of course, dear. We had one waiting for your return. The flight crew is checking its status now, making sure it’s all fueled up and ready to go. Shouldn’t be long now.”

Overwhelmed, Kate just let the tears roll down her face and stayed silent, waiting for the medical transport team to bring Alexis out so they could board the plane. The nurse left and returned sometime later in total silence to set a box of tissues next to Kate’s left foot before retreating once again.

Kate snatched up a few tissues and hid her face in them, blotting the tears and hoping to stop any more from falling.

The medic from earlier came up and extended an orange soda to her. “Drink this and stop crying. I spent all that time rehydrating you. You wouldn’t want to just cry it all out again.”

Laughter bubbled up in her throat, and Kate burst into a mixture of hysterical laughter and tears. They’d survived, Alexis was stable enough to fly, and they’d be on a flight back home within the next few hours. The emotional rollercoaster was just too much for her, and she took the soda and drank it down. Resting her head back on the wall again, Kate thanked the medic for making her laugh, then promptly passed out from

sheer exhaustion and relief.

Doors banging open woke Kate from her restorative sleep. Alexis was being wheeled out on a stretcher, and Kate got her first look at her since they'd been separated. Wires poked out from underneath her gown and hooked to the heart monitor that beeped steadily, if a little slowly for Kate's liking. Several different bags of meds hung from Alexis' IV pole, and Kate could see a large bandage that went from her elbow, and disappeared underneath her gown, reappearing at the neckline, and the rest was hidden under the fabric. The damage appeared extensive, but she looked much more stable than she had when they'd been in the helicopter.

Face drawn in exhaustion and slack in slumber, Alexis eyes were closed, and she was completely immobile. The doc waved at Kate, indicating she should walk with them.

“She's stable. I've got her knocked out with meds. Should last most of the trip, and if she starts to wake up, they'll put her back to sleep until she gets into the operating room in Palstein.”

The doc wiped his brow and continued. “As I said, she's stable, but the pain will be miserable in the air. It's better that she sleep through the flight.”

Kate nodded in understanding. She couldn't imagine how intense the pain must be.

“Any major arterial damage or muscle loss?”

He shook his head. “Nothing I couldn't tie off for repair later. Shouldn't be any substantial damage long term as long as the repairs hold until she gets to surgery. All right, that's all I have for you. Get out of here. They're waiting to load you two up.”

“Thank you for saving her!” Kate yelled as she turned and jogged to catch up with Alexis's stretcher, dragging her IV pole along with her. Her two medics from earlier

were waiting at the plane for them.

The medic pointed at her stretcher, tucked in a rack on the plane by itself. “You don’t have to lie down the entire way, but you at least have to sit in your rack. If you’re going to sit, wear the belt harness. You won’t be falling down on this aircraft while you’re undermycare.”

Kate gave the girl a smile. “Yes ma’am. I’ll be good, I promise.”

She promptly sat on her rack and belted in, pleased that she had a view of Alexis rack, which hung one down from her, withspace for her nurses on either side. It was soothing to listen to the nurses chatter about Alexis's stable vitals, and Kate fell asleep sitting up before the plane even took off.

Alexis didn’t wake up before they reached Palstein. She had stirred once, and her nurse had administered more medication, immediately putting her back to rest. Kate was grateful they weren’t making her remain awake and in pain.

When they landed on the tarmac with a jolt, Kate waited anxiously as they taxied, then the door of the plane lowered. The transport bus arrived, and Alexis’s team immediately began unloading her stretcher and hustling her toward the bus. Kate tagged along behind them with her medics. They’d stopped trying to tell Kate what to do and had just taken to monitoring her in silence.

They arrived at the hospital, and Alexis was taken off again, wheeled away for the final stages of her repair surgery. Kate was hopeful that they’d be able to fully restore the circulation in Alexis’s arm. Before she could follow Alexis and wait for her to get out of surgery, her medics stepped in front of her. Kate sighed, knowing that they weren’t going to let her off the hook anymore.

“Okay. Tell me what you want, and then I’ll tell you what I need.”

With a smile on her face, her medic shook her head in exasperation. “I already talked to Colonel Williams. They’re going to put her in a double. You’re under a forty-eight hour observation period. So in order to get you to cooperate, I’ve had them put you in the same room. As long as Lieutenant Cole is okay with that when she wakes up from surgery, you’ll be able to remain there.”

Kate was astonished and struck silent. She was so grateful.

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“Tell me what you need me to do,” Kate said, feeling guilty for being so difficult.

“We’re going up to the ICU. I’m doing a full evaluation on you, taking labs, administering fluids and meds, and giving you another meal. If you have any symptoms of disease, infection, or injury, I want you to tell me immediately. If you don’t cooperate, I’m going to have Colonel Williams come down here and yell at you herself.”

Kate chuckled. “There’s no need. I’ll comply willingly. Sorry for being such a pain in your ass. You know what it’s like, trying to keep a patient alive even if it’s the last thing you do. You’ve got to see it through.”

The male medic chimed in, finally breaking his silence and holding a hand out waiting for a fist-bump in return. “I hear that. Thank you for bringing back a lost sister.”

Kate scanned his face and noticed he had striking resemblance to Alexis. His Native American heritage was clear, and he, too, was sporting an almost out of regulation mohawk type haircut. She fist bumped him back but shook her head.

“I didn’t do it for entirely unselfish reasons. I’m not sure I’d be the same if I lost her.” Emotion crept in, and her voice cracked at the end as she choked on a silent sob.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” he said as he gently steered Kate toward the ICU. He kept talking, ignoring that Kate was crying, letting her have that shred of privacy.

“When you and Lt. Cole didn’t come back from the retrieval, your friend Bowie told

us what happened. He said you patched them all up, and without you, none of them would have survived. Andrews's concussion was a lot worse than they expected, and Cassidy's shoulder almost suffered internal amputation. If you hadn't repaired it, he may have lost total use. Then, when you were separated in the desert, you kept Lt. Cole alive through one of the worst injuries I've ever seen in my ten years as a combat medic. She's lucky she's not going to lose the arm. And that's all because of you, Lt. Cross. Here we are. This is your room."

Kate was silent, letting his words sink in and soothe the raw ache in her heart as tears cascaded down her face.

"Now, little sister, I want you to be quiet and go to sleep. We're going to check you over, and your doctor will be in soon to join us. Understood?"

Kate nodded, walked to the bed, stripped off her torn, dirty clothes, and got on top of the bed in just her bra and panties. They poked and prodded her, checked her head to toe, gave her some sleep medication, put food in front of her, and told her to eat and sleep. They'd assured her Alexis would be brought up to the ICU once her surgery was finished.

With nothing to do but follow directions, Kate ate an entire plate of bland hospital food, surprised to find that it wasn't as good as the meal she'd had in Iraq, and passed out in her hospital bed, more exhausted than she'd realized.

People filtered in and out of the room, flowing like water. Kate was unaware of what was happening. She slept lightly, ignoring them when they came to draw blood and take vitals. It was only when they brought in a tray of food that Kate stirred. Her appetite had returned, and she was ready to eat.

As the girl in scrubs set down the tray on Kate's table, she asked for another tray to be brought in.

“I can do that. I’ll be back in a bit. You want the same thing, or want me to bring you something else?”

Kate shrugged. “Surprise me.”

The girl laughed, turned, and left. Kate opened the top of the container and found mashed potatoes and roast beef with aside salad. Her mouth watered, and she tried to remember to eat slowly and breathe in between bites.

When the girl returned, Kate saw that her name tag said Lacey. “Thank you so much, Lacey.”

Lacey smiled in return. “No problem. Your room has a phone, so if you need anything else, just dial our number. It’s next to the receiver.”

Kate smiled. “Thank you.”

The second tray had chicken strips with a side of fries, and a second plate with a cup of steaming tomato soup with a little plastic lid and a grilled cheese cut into triangles. On the side there was chocolate pudding and two Gatorades. Kate ate it all, happy to be full. Before long, she dozed, only waking when the sound of a bed's squeaking wheels brought her into consciousness.

Alexis’s bed was being rolled in by a few people in scrubs. A nurse trailed behind them, reading off information from the blue medical chart in her hands. The other nurse in different colored scrubs followed her, taking in the information and making notes on a small writing pad. Kate watched as they chattered to each other. The two who’d been pushing the bed plugged all of Alexis’s monitors and pumps in, hung fresh IV bags, and left the room.

From where she sat, Kate could see Alexis lying in her bed, sleeping peacefully. Her

color had returned, and she no longer looked ashen. As someone with richer copper tones skin, Alexis's pale complexion from blood loss had terrified Kate.

The O.R. nurse handed the blue chart to the other, turned, and left. A severe looking nurse approached Kate's bedside.

"She should wake up in a few hours. Probably needs the sleep. If I'm not mistaken, you need some sleep, too. I'm going to check her over and then leave you guys be. Call if you need anything."

She pointed to a red button on the side of Kate's bed. Kate nodded but said nothing. Contented, she just watched Alexis sleep. Before long, she drifted off, too.

Kate woke to find Alexis stirring, beginning to awaken. She checked the time and realized they'd slept almost all day. It was past six in the evening. Pressing the red button on her bed, Kate called in the nurses.

Two women in scrubs came in, and Kate smiled at them. "She's waking up, and I think we're probably going to need two or three food trays for the two of us. I don't think she's eaten in three days."

The nurses smiled back at her. One went to Alexis' side, and the other turned around and went to the desk to call for dinner. Kate watched as the nurse gently woke Alexis, murmuring softly to her and asking her questions. She checked her vitals and monitored her breathing, and Kate could hear the gruff murmured responses from Alexis. She hadn't realized Kate was there yet, so Kate tried not to leap out of her bed and overwhelm her.

"Your food is going to be here in a bit, so just take it easy until then. If you aren't feeling up to eating, then don't try. We can get you a smoothie or something to drink and start on food in the morning. If you have any questions, just hit your button and

I'll come in."

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Alexis's nurse turned to Kate, and nodded at her. "Keep your eye on her. She should be okay to eat. I'm not anticipating any problems, but if she doesn't react well to the anesthesia, she may get sick and throw up. No way to know."

A slurred response came from Alexis's bed. "I'm not a little puss--." She coughed. "Sorry. I mean, I'm not gonna get sick. Just a little of the good stuff. Never hurt nobody."

Kate laughed. "What did you give her?"

The nurse grimaced and chuckled. "Morphine. They wanted to give her Ketamine, but before she went into surgery she woke up and said something like, 'Don't give me that ketamine shit. I don't need a trip to see my ancestors again so soon.'"

Laughter burst from Kate's chest. "That sounds like something she'd say."

There was a grumbled response from Alexis's bed, but it wasn't an actual sentence, so the nurse shrugged, turned on her heel, and left. Kate dropped her feet to the floor and crept the few feet between them. She lifted herself onto Alexis' bed to sit at the foot, tucking her legs underneath her. She grabbed one of Alexis's ankles to anchor herself and to have tangible proof that she was warm, alive, and breathing.

Kate groaned as tears threatened to spill again and looked up with tears swimming in her eyes to see Alexis's piercing blue eyes studying her. Alexis tried to sit up, wincing in pain, and Kate scooted down the bed toward her, filling the space Alexis left as she shifted to give Kate more room.

Alexis's good hand rested on the bed, and Kate reached out and took it into hers. She lifted it to her mouth and kissed the back of her hand and her tears spilled over. Kate tucked her chin to her chest and hid her face behind Alexis's hand. Kate wasn't sure if she could ever let it go.

"Come on, don't cry. Not for me." Alexis's words were still a bit muddled, indicating her pain meds were still working.

"I can't help it. We almost died. You almost died. I almost lost you." She choked off at the last word, unable to continue.

"But you didn't, Kate. I'm still here."

Alexis freed her hand from Kate and swiped away her tears with her thumbs.

"I'm scared. I've been scared of getting attached, Alexis. But when I saw you in the helicopter fighting for your life, I realized that I'm more afraid of losing you, that we'll never have our chance."

The adjustable bed had a button to raise the head so Alexis could sit up, and she raised it slowly, pulling herself into a sitting position.

"Come here," Alexis commanded.

Kate tried to say no, but Alexis wrapped her arm around Kate's waist with her free hand and pulled her toward her lap. Afraid she'd hurt Alexis by leaning on her wound, Kate relented and sat in Alexis's lap, leaning toward her good side.

"Tell me again."

At first Kate didn't know what she meant, but after a beat, she realized Alexis wanted

her to admit she loved her.

Kate raised her hands to cup her face and drew her close, their eyes locked.

“I’m fucking scared. I’m pretty certain I’m in love with you, and it terrifies me. But I think if we don’t try, it would be the worst mistake of our lives.”

Her arm pulled Kate closer, and Kate crossed the last two inches between them and took Alexis’s lips with her own.

“You didn’t leave,” Alexis said, her voice shaking.

Confusion rolled through Kate. “What?”

“You didn’t leave me in the desert when I asked you to, Kate.”

Kate drew back, the words throwing her off balance.

“No. I didn’t. I wouldn’t, and I never will. You’re kind of stuck with me now.”

Kate didn’t expect the tears that rolled down Alexis’s face.

“I’ve had everyone I’ve ever loved taken from me. Watching you refuse to leave made me realize that I can’t keep you at a distance. I don’t want to keep things casual or just be friends. I love you, Kate.”

She swiped at Alexis’s tears. “Don’t cry. It’s okay. I know.”

Her head shook, eyes pinched shut, tears rolling down her cheeks, she rested her forehead against Kate’s chest. “I’ve never done this before. I’ve never felt like this or wanted to be someone’s person. But I want it with you. I don’t know what to do, but

I'll do anything I can to convince you that we work."

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Kate threw her arms around Alexis's shoulders, careful not to disturb the wound covered with many layers of bandages.

"You don't have to convince me. We work. I know it."

"Promise me you won't do any dangerous shit like that ever again. If someone says to leave them, you have to listen."

Kate shook her head in exasperation. "Fine, I promise that if anyone other than you orders me to leave them in mortal danger, I will leave."

Instead of responding or arguing, Alexis leaned forward and took Kate's mouth with her own. The relief of being safe and mostly intact overwhelmed them, and after a few minutes, Kate chuckled and had to start batting Alexis's hands away.

"Cool your jets. We're in a hospital, and I'm sure someone will come in to check on you at any moment."

Alexis shrugged and reached for Kate, gently grasping her neck and stealing another long kiss that had Kate gasping for breath.

Chapter 10

Alexis

The road to recovery was painful. The shoulder injury she'd sustained in battle had seriously taken a toll on Alexis' mobility. The doctors were going to put her into

aggressive occupational and physical therapy, to get her as close to back to normal as possible. The injury had Alexis questioning what she would do if the injury was too severe to heal completely and she wasn't able to return to her job as a Combat Rescue Officer. The doctors said they genuinely didn't know if the injury was too extensive, and that only time would tell. It petrified Alexis, who'd come to believe that it wasn't just what she did—being a Combat Rescue Officer was who she was.

Kate hadn't left her side since she'd been released from the hospital, and Alexis hadn't adjusted to her presence at all. It was a special kind of torture for Alexis to be so physically weak but surrounded all day by Kate, who stayed just out of her reach. The doctors had refused to let Alexis go home alone, and they told her she either had to have someone stay with her, or she'd have to go stay with a friend. Kate hadn't even hesitated to volunteer, and Alexis was being inundated with all things Kate.

They'd decided to stay at Alexis's house, since Kate lived in a house off base and Alexis's was in the neighborhood on base. It was much closer to the hospital, and Kate hadn't wanted to go too far, just in case they needed to take her back.

Alexis had tried to tell her that she'd be fine, but Kate had insisted. She didn't mind having Kate in her space, but she wasn't used to it. Kate's clothes were in her hamper, her soap in the shower, and her scent wafted through every room in the house. It was like the longest game of foreplay she'd ever played, constantly seeing Kate flitting around to take care of her, grab water, or clean the house. She wore these yoga pants that had Alexis losing her mind.

Her mobility was still limited, as her doctors were giving her pain medication and didn't want her stressing the wounds too much. She was allowed to walk, shower, sit, and lie down. Anything else was considered too strenuous. Every time Kate came near, her scent tantalized Alexis's senses, but before she could reach out and pull her in, she had flitted away.

The house had two bedrooms, and Alexis had a massive couch that served as a bed when she had too many guests over. She'd never had anyone else stay with her but the occasional friends after a party, and they'd all been men. Alexis had told her to pick whichever room she wanted and told her she could crash in her bed.

"I need to be on the couch. My bed frames are three feet tall."

Kate's eyes had widened, and she'd rushed down the hall to check. Alexis heard Kate yell from across the house.

"Holy shit! How am I supposed to get up there?"

Alexis had chuckled to herself and collapsed backward onto the couch as gently as possible. "Little Lieutenant."

She'd had every intention of talking things through with Kate, making sure they were on the same page. However, she'd passed out before Kate had finished checking out the bedrooms.

The next day she'd woken up to find a note next to her head.

Alexis,

I'm headed to the grocery store. If you want anything, just text me. I put my number in your phone.

Love always,

Kate

When Kate had come back, ready to cook her breakfast from scratch, Alexis had

forgotten her thoughts and hadn't found the right time to bring it up since.

It had been about a week, and Alexis was gaining some mobility in her shoulder. The physical therapy appointments always left her sore and irritated, and that day had been no different. Kate had brought her back home, given her an ice pack, and told her to go take a bath.

Alexis sat in the tub flicking water with her fingers, staring at Kate's rose shampoo. There was a light knock at the door and Kate opened it a crack and peered in.

"Can I come in?"

Alexis smiled. "Absolutely."

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She was covered in bubbles and was grateful for it. The wound hadn't healed entirely, and Alexis's shoulder looked mangled. The scarring was unavoidable, and Alexis wanted to start telling people she'd been mauled by a bear. Better story than taking almost a full clip in the shoulder in the sandbox.

Kate came in and sat on the floor next to the tub with her legs crossed. She rested her arm on the side of the tub and flicked at the water, mirroring Alexis' movements.

“What's up, babe?”

A smile came to her face at the endearment. “I want to talk about us. See how you're feeling, make sure we are on the same page.”

Concern stirred in Alexis's chest. “You haven't changed your mind yet, have you?”

Kate's eyes widened. “No. Absolutely not. I just know you said that you've never done this before. I haven't been with anyone in over five years and my last girlfriend died. I figured good communication was the place for us to start.”

Relief spread through her, and she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

“Okay. So, where do you want to start?” Alexis felt a bit awkward, unsure how couples normally went about confessing their feelings.

Kate chuckled at her. “It's okay, don't feel pressured. I just want to know what you're feeling. Are you sick of me being here? Do you need a little more space, or is there

anything I'm doing you don't like? I know I brought a lot of my things with me, but--
,

Alexis interrupted Kate by grabbing her hand and sitting up to lean in close.

“Don't go. I don't mind your things being here. I actually kind of like it. I think, more than anything I'm just scared you're going to change your mind or decide it's all too much. Then when your things aren't here anymore and you're gone...” Alexis trailed off with a shrug and emotion clogged her throat.

“I'm not emotionally tough, Kate. At least not when it comes to love. I think you'll probably have to help me through it.”

Kate's free hand reached out and cupped her cheek. She leaned in and captured Alexis's mouth with her own, running her tongue along the seam of Alexis's lips.

A small frown appeared, and Kate's voice sounded vulnerable when she asked in a whisper, “You haven't changed your mind about me either, have you?”

Alexis didn't know if the question was hard to ask, but the guilt she felt at making Kate feel unsure was poisonous lead in her gut making her mouth taste like acid.

“Oh baby, no. I haven't changed my mind. I want to be with you. And only you. I promise that if I change my mind, and I definitely won't, I'll tell you if that's the case. I won't just leave you wondering and in the dark.”

Kate's eyes were filled with unshed tears. “I feel bad, making you change your lifestyle to be with me.”

Alarm ran through Alexis, and she had to abolish whatever fear lived in Kate that made her feel that way.

“No. Listen to me, Kate.” Alexis lifted the hand of her bad arm to join it with her other one and grasped Kate’s hands in her own. The pain was intense, but she ignored it. Kate’s eyes drifted to meet hers, and Alexis went on.

“I chose not to have relationships because I was afraid of getting attached and losing people. I’m already attached to you, and unfortunately for you, I’m not letting you go without a fight. I only lived that ‘lifestyle’ because I was lonely and wanted to fill some of the void. With you here, that void is already full.”

Silent tears ran down Kate’s face. “I hate crying. I feel like all I’ve done since we’ve met is cry.”

Alexis sighed. “Baby, that’s because you bottle things up and then let them all out at once. I bet you hadn’t cried in years before this. Eventually this wave of intense feeling will fade. It’s okay to let it out and feel the emotions as they’re happening to you. You’re only human, despite your efforts to be superwoman.”

Kate laughed and cried for a few more minutes, chatting with Alexis about her injury, and then a calm sense of peace settled over them.

“What are you going to do if the injury doesn’t heal?” Kate asked, bringing Alexis back to the present.

“I’m not sure. I’ve thought about it a lot. I guess I’ll apply to teach at one of the CRO locations. There’s plenty of positions open in the schoolhouses for nurses and CRO’s, and we’d be able to be stationed together. Or I can just follow you wherever you go. Maybe I’ll take up painting. Or sculpting. I’ve always wanted to learn how to carve my own tools out of wood.”

Her gaze lingered on Alexis, and Kate watched her with intensity. “You’d do that? Take a low-risk assignment and teach? To stay with me?”

Alexis reared back, confused. “Of course I would. There isn’t an assignment I wouldn’t take if it meant I got to stay with you. I love you, Kate. I want to have a future with you.”

A tear rolled down Kate’s face. “I love you, too.”

“Now, open that window so we can see the sun go down, and then get in the tub with me. I promise I’ll be good and keep my hands to myself.”

Laughing, Kate stripped out of her clothes, pulled open the window, and climbed into the tub. She sat between Alexis’s legs and leaned her head back on the uninjured side of Alexis’ chest.

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The sun was lowering over the small mountain ranges in the distance. The sky was painted in pinks, yellows, oranges and blues. Kate and Alexis watched the sun go down over the horizon and held each other close, just grateful to be alive and to be together.

Epilogue: Five Years Later

“Hey, let's get a move on, ladies,” Alexis shouted through the open window. Kate and their daughter Lilly came rushing down the steps toward the car.

They were laughing, and Alexis took a moment to appreciate the little family they'd created. Three years ago, Kate and Alexis had adopted Lilly after her parents had died in a tragic car accident, taking both of their lives and leaving the little girl orphaned. Kate had been friends with Lilly's father, and when they'd died, Lilly hadn't had a place to go. She was only seven years old at the time. The authorities wanted to put her into the system, likely a foster home or an orphanage. Kate had nearly come unhinged, desperate to shield Lilly from the grief and pain of loss and also unwilling to let the girl get lost to the foster system.

She'd gone to her chain of command and the legal office, and in a few days, they'd managed to pull together the required paperwork and schedule a home inspection. The process and approval would take ninety days minimum, but the foster system in Palstein moved slowly, since they were an overseas base. Colonel Williams had pulled some strings, and Lilly had been held on location for health reasons. They'd kept her with a local foster family and allowed Kate and Alexis to visit daily. After the ninety days were up, the approval finally came in. They fostered her until their request for adoption was approved. It took over a year, but it had been worth it to

them.

Kate and Alexis had talked about the possibility of doing artificial insemination, adopting, or fostering a child. Lilly's need became the push Alexis needed to commit to them adding a member to their family. The little girl had dark hair and blue eyes, just like Alexis, and when she'd thought of how she'd felt, losing her own parents to a car accident, she'd known it was fate that had brought Lilly to them.

They got in the car, laughing and chattering, and Alexis turned to look at Lilly's new dress. "Beautiful. It looks so wonderful on you, Lils.

"Thanks, Momma," Lilly said, her wide grin lighting up the back seat.

"Put your seatbelt on, little rascal. We're going to be late."

Kate and Lilly buckled in, and Alexis turned off the radio as she pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the officer club.

"So talk to me about the plan for next week. Do we still have that appointment on Tuesday, or did they let you move it?"

Kate huffed in annoyance. "They rescheduled it after I explained that my child has a ballet recital and that I wouldn't be attending the appointment, and that if they couldn't reschedule me I'd have to find somewhere else to take the car for maintenance."

Alexis laughed, knowing that Kate was full of shit. She was too nice and would never give a salesperson an ultimatum. It was probably just what she'd told the person in her head.

"I didn't actually say that. Anyway, it's rescheduled. Monday I have to teach a seminar

on emergency medicine, Tuesday is the ballet recital, and Wednesday you have to teach that combat rescue training course. They want you to talk about extractions, so I'm sure they're looking for our story of the retrieval in Syria."

Alexis grunted. "You'd think people would get tired of hearing about how I almost died."

Kate cleared her throat and looked back at Lilly in the backseat. Luckily, she had headphones in and was watching Frozen for the third time that day.

"Sorry. Okay. What about Thursday and Friday? Or the weekend?"

Kate hummed and looked at her calendar app. "Thursday through Sunday we are totally free."

"Ah, perfect. Then let me inform you I've just scheduled you for a romantic getaway that starts Thursday and ends Sunday."

Kate started to object, but Alexis held up a finger. "Ah, ah, ah. No arguing. I reached out to Bowie, and he and his wife are taking Lilly for the entire weekend. They're taking Lilly and Aliana camping."

Wide eyed, Kate stared at her. "You planned this?"

"Of course. We haven't had much alone time since we started these new teaching positions. There's a lot of demand on our time now, with Lilly, so I thought that we deserve a weekend away. I didn't want to leave Lilly with strangers, and there aren't many people I'd trust to watch her for that many days. But Lilly knows them and is friends with their daughter. They're in the same class, and Bowie's wife is special forces. No one will get near the girls."

A smile spread across Kate's face. "Thank you for making this happen. You're so amazing. I love you. Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

Alexis laughed and shook her head. "Nope. It's a surprise.

The car fell silent as they pulled in the parking lot and looked at the many rows of cars already parked. Several people meandered around, slowly drifting inside. There were officers and enlisted members of every branch of the military present, and all non-civilians were in dress uniform. Civilians wore dresses or suits, and everyone looked put together and pristine.

They parked, and Kate reached across the center console to take Alexis's hand. She squeezed it affectionately.

"Are you ready to go be the guests of honor?" Kate asked her, and Alexis shook her head.

"Genuinely, you'd think people would get over this."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I guess if I'd known that Lieutenant Cassidy was the son of a general, I would have just let him die out there so you wouldn't have to accept a purple cross and I wouldn't have to accept a Soldier's Medal."

Her sarcasm was clear, but she'd whispered it anyway, unwilling to allow anyone to overhear such an inappropriate joke.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:02 pm

“You’re never going to let it go that it’s called a Soldier’s Medal, are you?”

Kate huffed in mock indignation. “I’m not a soldier, Lex. Technically I’m an airman. But it doesn’t matter either way. This medal, and your purple heart, are some of the highest honors that can be given. We are going in there, and you’re going to be good and smile.”

Alexis huffed again and looked back at Lilly, still oblivious to their conversation, totally engrossed in the movie on her tablet.

“Babe. To be honest, I just don’t feel I deserve it.”

Kate sighed and smiled at her softly. “Well then, accept it for me. If you hadn’t been there that day, I wouldn’t be alive. I don’t think anyone else could have gotten us out of there and lived to tell the tale.”

Alexis grabbed her hand and brought it to her lips, pressing a kiss to the underside of her wrist.

“Okay, fine. I’ll be good, but just don’t forget. I didn’t save you because it was the right thing to do or for the award. I saved you because I love you. Without you, I wouldn’t have made it out of there, either.”

Kate smiled, her jaw trembling slightly and eyes brimming with unshed tears.

“Same here, Lieutenant Cole. Same here. I love you.”

They got out of the car, collected Lilly and turned to go inside. Alexis straightened her uniform and read the event sign standing near the door.

Congratulations Lieutenant Kate Cole and Lieutenant Alexis Cole

Please join us in the recognition of their valor, sacrifice, and courage

Purple Heart and Soldiers Medal Ceremony will commence at 1800

Kate smiled at Alexis and they each took one of Lilly's hands and entered the building, prepared to accept their awards, take some pictures, eat, have a few drinks, and then go home. Alexis didn't care how much socialization they were going to be forced into. She was just glad that after the evening ended, and every evening afterward, she'd get to go home with her wife, Little Lieutenant Kate Cole. Alexis wouldn't want it any other way.