



Hunted

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: Love always aims for the heart...

Former Navy SEAL Clint Backwater just wants to keep his head down and mind his business. So when a beautiful, young mother arrives at his gun range desperate to buy a weapon, he knows he has a problem. No way he can sell a gun to someone as frantic as Leila Ortiz. But he feels driven to protect the terrified woman and her child, at all costs.

With her abusive ex-husband released from prison, Leila will do whatever it takes to keep her baby safe. She wants a gun, not a protector. But what Leila wants and what she needs are two different things. And it isn't long before she finds herself falling for the honorable former SEAL... And falling hard.

Clint hardened his heart long ago. But he finds himself drawn to Leila, a woman who touches him as no other. Until Leila's past threatens their new love, and Clint is forced to wonder... Can they really trust each other?

And can their hearts take it if things go wrong?

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A quiet day on the gun range was a good day on the gun range.

At least that was usually Clint Backwater's philosophy. Today, though, as he wandered around the small showroom of his business, Ask Questions Later Firearms and Training, he couldn't seem to shake the restlessness inside him.

If he was truthful with himself, he'd have to admit that his skittishness had nothing to do with the slow day at the range and everything to do with the approach of the one-year anniversary of his retirement from the military. Since joining the Navy right out of high school and undergoing training to become a SEAL, he'd always been a busy guy. Busy, but solitary. Relationships weren't really his thing, platonic or otherwise. Loved ones, in Clint's experience, had a tendency to disappear. When he'd been in the military, surrounded by his team and other colleagues every day with privacy at a minimum, he'd thought he'd appreciate the quiet peace of being alone.

Now, though, he was lucky if he talked to six people a day, and sometimes things were a bit too... silent. Not that he was a recluse or anything. It was just living by himself out in the Nevada desert, albeit only a few miles outside Las Vegas, meant his penchant for self-sufficiency came in handy, even if it was lonely at times.

Today, his buddy, Devin, was there to talk to as he checked the inventory of ammunition and firearms and accessories for the umpteenth time. Ask Questions Later provided him with a livable income between the sales of stock and the fees he charged locals for using the gun range and for shooting lessons, but he wouldn't be making the Forbes 500 list any time soon. Clint was fine with making enough to get

by. He didn't need to be rich. He didn't need much of anything—and he liked it that way.

Clint moved from display case to display case, noting the stock in each, while doing his best to ignore Devin chatting loudly on his cell phone. To call the other man a “buddy” would be too generous. Devin was more like a guy who Clint talked to when he came in to shoot. They sometimes shared a meal at Ritzi's Diner in town. That was about it. Still, it was more interaction than Clint had with most folks these days.

He finished marking down the sixteen boxes of .45 caliber bullets in front of him, then moved to the next glass-topped case, giving Devin some serious side-eye as he did so.

“What do you mean she won't go out with me?” Devin whined into his phone. The guy was pretty typical of the sort who came into the gun range. A wannabe cowboy with a Stetson on his head and a holster strapped around his waist. Nevada tended to be a haven for Mavericks and outlaws, due to the wide-open spaces and the mind-your-own-business attitude of the local law enforcement and residents. It was what led to things like Las Vegas and the Mustang Ranch and dudes like Devin who fancied themselves Billy the Kid reborn. “I'm everything she said she wanted in her online dating profile.”

Clint gave a snort and shook his head. Devin was harmless enough. Clint had run into lots of guys like him in the military. Gung-ho to preserve life, liberty, and the American way—as long as it didn't push them too far out of their comfort zone. But everyone had their own comfort zone, Clint supposed. As a SEAL, he'd been accustomed to facing danger the likes of which most people couldn't imagine. But internet dating, like Devin? Not a chance. That was a risk he wasn't willing to take.

He shuddered at the thought of connecting with a total stranger and trying to make small talk over dinner and drinks. He'd decided long ago that he was better on his

own.

The sound of a car door slamming echoed in the store's quiet interior. Clint peered past where the sunlight streamed through the glass front door. Outside, a dust-covered black SUV had pulled up. Or backed up, would be more accurate. Through the hazy glass he saw a "Baby on Board" sticker in the rear window.

Not that unusual. Probably another local dad wanting some away time from his wife and kids.

Clint turned to head back behind the counter. He'd just about made it there when he heard Devin behind him saying, "Uh, I think my dream girl just pulled into my life."

Cringing, Clint gave his buddy a disgusted look over the corny line and was just about to rib him about it when the bells above the door jingled and in walked said dream girl.

Or woman, to be more accurate. A woman with a baby.

Huh. Okay. That wasn't typical. Clint narrowed his gaze a bit, focusing on her as she stepped closer and moved out of the stream of light that silhouetted her from behind. Mid-twenties, he'd guess, making her about ten years younger than he was. Wavy dark hair, golden bronzed skin. Clint didn't have a dream girl image in mind, never had. If he did, though, she'd be well on her way to matching that. Except she was scared. Her large dark eyes scanned the shop nervously.

Yeah, definitely scared.

Clint couldn't shake that thought. He'd never seen her before in his life, but he'd bet his business and everything he owned that he was right about her. His instincts had been honed on the battlefield, and the past year of retirement hadn't dulled them.

After all, you couldn't afford to get careless when you owned a gun shop.

His conclusions were only confirmed as she moved closer to the front counter and met his gaze. There were shadows in those pretty brown eyes of hers, deep and dark and dangerous. Then there was the fact that her nails looked chewed to the quick and her hands shook slightly as she held a cute kid in one arm. A boy dressed in blue jeans and a baseball hat. Maybe a year, year-and-a-half old, Clint guessed.

"Welcome to Ask Questions Later Firearms and Training," he said, his words emerging a bit rougher than usual because of the odd constriction in this throat. Not nervousness. Not adrenaline. Attraction. Clint swallowed hard and crossed his arms. "How can I help you today?"

He could guess her answer before she responded. Everything about her spoke of fear—from the way she clutched her son to how her eyes darted around the room. An instinct deep inside him rose to the surface. He had to help her. It was almost a compulsion that he already knew he wasn't going to be able to tamp down or deny.

The woman took a deep breath and checked behind her once more before saying quietly, "I need to buy a gun."

Sure, that might be what she'd convinced herself of. But he knew one thing—guns and fear didn't mix.

Oh God.

The last place Leila Ortiz ever thought she'd find herself was in a gun store. She wasn't an aggressive or confrontational person by nature. Just the opposite, in fact. But circumstances—and the fact that the Federal Bureau of Prisons had screwed up her contact information—meant that she and her son needed protection in a major way, and they needed it ASAP.

She eyed the man behind the counter and did her best to look as confident as possible, mimicking that blank, closed-off stare he was giving her. “I’ve heard that Glocks are good for women to use. I’d like to see one of those, please.”

“A Glock, huh?” The guy narrowed his gaze on her then moved forward. Leila stepped back automatically before she stopped herself. Years of abuse had taught her it was easier to retreat than to stand her ground, but that had all changed the day Thomas had been born. Now she had more than herself to think about. Now she had her son to protect. The man looked her up and down. Not in a sexual way, more in a what-the-heck-are-you-doing-in-here way. She checked him out too, again out of habit born from experience—negative experience.

If attacked, it was best to have a good description for the cops. They didn’t take you seriously without it. She noted his short, light brown hair with the military cut. Blue eyes. Maybe five-ten, five-eleven max, but with a muscular build. Good looking—seriously good looking. A hint of a tattoo on his left bicep peeked out from beneath the sleeve of his dark blue T-shirt—a snake perhaps, wrapped around a knife? Weird but an identifier, if she needed it.

You won’t need it, she assured herself. The gun shop and range had been recommended to her by a friend of a friend. She’d be fine here. She’d get what she’d come for, and then she’d leave.

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Frankly, she didn't care if this dude had Daffy Duck and Wily Coyote inked all over himself. She needed a gun and fast. Her ex was being released from prison and coming back to town. She had no delusions about him. He'd come for her, and it wouldn't be pretty. No way would she allow Mike anywhere near her or their son. He'd lost his parental privileges the day he'd beat her up so badly she'd ended up in the ER with two broken ribs and a bruised collarbone. That had been the same night she'd discovered she was pregnant with Thomas. Talk about the good with the bad.

"That's right." She tried to project more confidence than she felt as she stepped up to the counter once more and set Thomas atop the glass display case. Her son was eighteen-months old and weighed nearly twenty-five pounds. Good for Thomas, not so good for her when she had to hold him for extended lengths of time. Leila was strong, but her usual workouts had not prepared her for holding a squirming kid in her arms for hours at a time.

"Unless you think there's another firearm that might work better for me," she continued, doing her best to focus on the important conversation at hand and not the fact that her baby was currently grinning at the man behind the counter. "I don't really care as long as it works."

"Hi!" Thomas said, his attention focused on the gun store owner.

"Hey, kid. What's your name?" the guy asked with a genuine smile for the boy.

"T...ta." Her son turned to her in confusion since he'd been struggling with the "th" sound.

“Thomas,” she said quickly. “This is Thomas.”

“Nice to meet you, Thomas. Give me five?” The man held out his hand, palm up, and Thomas smacked it with his own. “Nice job, little guy. Now, let’s see what we can do for your mama.”

His gaze came back to her as he placed the heels of his hands against the glass topped case and rested his weight on them. His movement caused his muscles to ripple beneath his T-shirt. Not that she was noticing. Nope. After a lifetime of bad experiences with men, Leila was done with them. This guy had been nice to her son, which was a point in his favor, but there weren’t enough points in the world to make her trust a man with her safety or her son’s again.

She and Thomas would be just fine on their own—and she’d raise him to be the kind of man a woman truly could trust. She’d make sure he’d respect women and not yell at them or hit them. She’d had enough of that from her father growing up and later from her ex. All her regrets and mistakes came back to her. Those mistakes were what led her to this gun shop.

If only she’d known Mike was involved with a gang—running drugs and worse—she’d never have married him. But she’d been young and stupid, and she’d given him her heart and her virginity at twenty-two thinking he’d take her away to a better life. He’d taken her away all right. Straight to hell. Now, three years later, she was alone and raising her son as best she could.

No way would Mike ever get near them again. No. Way.

“You ever used a gun before?” the guy asked, his tone wary.

“No.” Leila raised her chin. “But it can’t be that hard, right? Point and shoot.”

“Not exactly.” The guy glanced over her shoulder and the hair on the back of her neck prickled. Shit. Someone else was in the store. She’d vaguely registered another person when she’d entered but had been so focused on getting a weapon she hadn’t paid much attention. Stupid, Leila. So stupid. The first thing the instructors taught her in those self-defense classes she’d taken last year had been to be aware of her surroundings at all times.

She turned fast, one hand on Thomas on the counter, the other clutching her keys between her fingers, ready to lash out at anyone who tried to hurt her.

“Whoa there, little lady,” a skinny guy in a cowboy hat said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Didn’t mean to startle you. I was just going to ask you if you wanted to get a cup of coffee.”

“She doesn’t want coffee, Dev,” the guy behind the counter answered for her.

“How do you know what I want?” Leila frowned at him and squinted at the name embroidered on the man’s T-shirt. “Clint.”

“Do you want coffee?” He raised a brow at her.

No, she didn’t. But it was none of his business, and she didn’t need him talking over her and answering questions addressed at her. “What I want is a gun. You going to sell me one or not?”

“After a background check and proof you’ve had the proper training—yeah, I’ll sell you a weapon.”

Damn. It wasn’t that she couldn’t pass the check, but she had no training. Leila grimaced. She hadn’t really thought things through before racing down here. She’d always been a bit impulsive that way, as her mother would attest. It was what had

gotten her in trouble with her father growing up, always acting without considering the consequences. It was how she'd ended up married to an abusive asshole like her ex. It was the main thing that kept her up at night wondering how in the world she'd ever be a fit mother for poor Thomas. If she couldn't make good choices for herself, how would she ever be able to do that for her child?

"Dev, go away," Clint said from behind the counter, his voice authoritative. "Go find yourself another online girlfriend and leave this lady alone." Surprisingly, the other man did as he was told, the bells over the door jangling merrily at his departure. That left her alone with Mr. Intense, Hot, and Brooding. He focused those bright blue eyes of his on her again and squinted. "Perhaps if you tell me what you need the gun for, I can figure out what would work best for you. Then we can talk about what kind of training you need."

"Oh." She tucked her hair behind her ear and pulled a leather key chain from a nearby display away from Thomas. He was at the age where he was grabbing at everything. "Just the usual." She tried to sound casual. "Can't be too careful these days."

"Uh-huh. Here you go, buddy." He handed Thomas a bright orange koozie with the store's logo on it to play with. "Look, lady, I can tell you're nervous about something. I don't mean to pry, but if you're in trouble in some way, maybe I can help. I used to be in the military and?—"

The tension inside Leila exploded into full-blown panic. No, no, no. She didn't need that kind of help. The fewer people who knew about her past and her ex, the better. She'd come in here expecting quick service and no questions. Wasn't that what the business's name seemed to promise? This cross examination wasn't what she wanted. It was bad enough she was even in here, trying to buy a gun. Blood pounding in her head and pulse racing, Leila picked up Thomas and stepped back. "I need to go. Sorry."

“Wait,” Clint said. “I’ll help you, but there are more steps to this than you might realize. You have to shoot a gun before buying it, and little ones don’t usually like the noise.” He gestured to Thomas.

“Right. I’ll come back another time.” She turned and hurried to the door with one nervous glance over her shoulder. Her hopes for a quick transaction had faded, and she didn’t want to stick around and deal with more questions, more probing. She sure as hell wasn’t going to confide in him just because he was nice to Thomas and wasn’t a dick to her in the five minutes since she’d walked in the door. She needed to retreat and re-think this.

She hustled outside, strapped Thomas into his car seat quickly, and slid behind the wheel to drive away. As she put her SUV in drive, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Clint was standing in the door to his shop, leaning one muscular arm against the frame. He hadn’t chased after her. Instead, it felt like he was watching over her.

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She didn't trust men, and she had good reason for that. But there was something about this one that made her pause. Hemightbe okay. But she wasn't sticking around to find out.

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The next day Clint worked in the shop, unpacking a new shipment of Sig Sauers and thinking about that woman from yesterday again. To be honest, he'd been thinking about her since she'd walked out of his store the previous afternoon.

It wasn't just because she was attractive, though she was. No. It was that haunted, hunted look she'd had that bothered him most. He'd seen that look before on men in combat. Specifically, men who'd been held prisoner by the enemy. But why in the world would such a young woman look so scared? The most likely answer made his gut churn. He'd seen some shit in his days both in the SEALs and before that growing up in the foster system. As a result, he'd learned to take care of himself. He'd also developed a strong protective instinct for those weaker than himself. It was part of what had made him such a great SEAL, that need to keep his men and any noncombatants under his care safe. But it wasn't always such an asset in civilian life. For all that Clint tried to keep to himself, he had a tendency to stick his nose in where it didn't belong.

He sighed and closed the display case he'd been arranging, trying to push the woman out of his thoughts. Hell, chances were he'd never see her and her kid again anyway, not with the way she'd torn out of here like her butt was on fire the day before.

Stupid, Clint. So stupid.

He'd just had to go and ask about her situation. It was none of his business. Legally, anyone could own a firearm, as long as they met the necessary requirements. Still, she'd seemed so nervous, he'd felt compelled to ask if she was in trouble. So he had—and he'd frightened her off in the process. Putting a gun in her hands that she didn't know how to use would have only made her situation more dangerous, but he still didn't like the idea of her out there with no protection at all.

With a shake of his head, he went in his office to put the box holding the additional inventory in the gun safe. When the bells over the front entrance rang, he called out, “Welcome to Ask Questions Later Firearms and Training. How may I help you today?”

“It's me, again. If I get the training, from you, will you sell me a gun?” a now-familiar female voice said.

Clint's heart stumbled like a drunken sailor as he returned to the shop floor and faced the woman from the day before. She was back, that cute kid of hers once again in her arms. Today, the boy was decked out in a pair of denim shorts and a T-shirt bearing the logo of the Las Vegas Raiders. Good taste in sports. The kid stretched out a hand toward Clint and grinned. At first, Clint panicked, thinking maybe the little guy mistook him for his father, but then he realized the boy was staring past him at the colorful poster of the Nevada desert behind him on the wall.

Clint couldn't help grinning back at the little boy. He really was adorable, all big dark eyes and curly dark hair, just like his momma. Before he could stop himself, Clint leaned forward on his elbows on the counter and started talking to the kid. “You like that picture, huh? Lots of pretty colors, right? I like them too. Reminds me of the deserts back in Kandahar.”

The woman cleared her throat and gave him a pointed stare. “Will you train me or not?”

He straightened and blinked at her a second. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and she kept tapping one foot on the carpeted floor as if she were in a hurry. Given her nervousness the day before and the way she continued to periodically check over her shoulder, he knew something wasn't right. Normally, the gun range was open to everyone during normal business hours, no appointment necessary. First come, first served. But she didn't know that, and Clint wasn't inclined to tell her either. Not yet, anyway. Not until he found out exactly what she was so scared of.

He gestured for her to follow him into his office. It was a particularly slow day, and he could monitor the front door through the camera feeds on the computer in his office. If anyone came in, he'd help them.

Once inside the small room, he closed the door behind them and took a seat behind his desk while she sat in one of the chairs in front of it. He'd not really changed anything in here since taking over from the previous owner. The walls were still the same plain beige and the carpet the same basic brown as in the store. The one addition he'd made was a large picture of his team, taken on the last day of their final mission together in Qatar. They were on a white sandy beach near Doha, all smiles after completing another successful assignment. He missed them all every day, but having their picture in his office helped a bit.

The kid seemed enraptured by the photo. Clint pointed to himself in the image.

"That's me, and those are my buddies," he explained for Thomas's benefit.

"Jeep!" the kid yelled and clapped his hands.

"Yeah, that's a Jeep," Clint said. The boy seemed as bright and cheerful as his mother was nervous. Clint looked at her. She was watching him with an odd expression—a mix of shock, suspicion, and softness. It was the softness that did him in. A strange tug pulled at his heart. Clint coughed to clear the weird constriction from his throat

before seating himself behind his desk and pulling out a blank registration form. “Okay. Let’s get started then, shall we? Have a seat.” He gestured to the chair across from him. “This form is required by the state of Nevada prior to the sale of a firearm.” She sat with Thomas on her lap. “Since your hands are full, I’ll ask you the questions and write down your answers.”

“Thanks,” she said. “That would be easier.”

“First and last name?” he asked.

“Leila Ortiz.”

Clint jotted it down. “Age?”

“Twenty-five.” She adjusted the kid on her lap. He was squirming to get down. “Will I be able to take the gun home today?”

“You have to pass the background check and complete the requisite ten hours of training on the gun range first. As soon as you do that, the weapon’s yours.” He exhaled slow and narrowed his gaze on her. “Reason for purchase of firearm?”

She hesitated, so slightly that he would’ve missed it if he hadn’t been watching her so closely. “Safety.”

“Right.” Clint nodded and frowned down at the form. It was none of his business, but he was going to say it anyway. “Look, there are lots of ways to secure your home without bullets.”

“It’s not my home I’m worried about,” she said, under her breath. She gave up struggling to keep her son on her lap and put him on his feet in front of her. “Why do you care?”

“No reason,” he said, shrugging while he looked up again, making eye contact. “Just curious.”

Her chin jutted out. She looked about as tough as a woman could who had a toddler dancing around in front of her. “I can take care of myself.”

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“I believe you.” Clint felt a smile forming on his lips but suppressed it. He did admire a strong woman, though he didn’t think she’d appreciate him voicing that opinion at the moment. “I’m not trying to be nosy. It’s just that my knowing what your goals are for owning a firearm will help me ensure that you receive the proper training to use it. Someone who wants to shoot recreationally has different needs than someone who’s, say, trying to fend off a stalker.” He took a stab at a likely scenario. “In the case of the second, you’d probably want to also get a permit to carry concealed.”

It was a shot in the dark, but one he hoped might get her to open up a bit more.

“No stalker. Just safety,” she said before looking down at her son with a sigh. Clint let a moment of silence fall, waiting. With another sigh, she added, “the permit might not be a bad idea, though. Are there any more questions on that form I need to answer, or can we get to the next step?”

They went through her social security number, address, and phone number, then Clint faxed the form off for her background check while they filled out her concealed-carry permit information then went back out into the showroom to pick out a firearm.

“You never did answer me yesterday,” she said, perusing the selections in one of the cases while holding onto Thomas’s hand. “Which one is best for someone my size? My hands are smaller, so I’d need to take that into consideration, right?”

“Sure.” He moved around her in the small shop, careful not to brush against her, though he did catch her scent—fresh and floral with a hint of soap. Awareness prickled his skin before he shoved it aside and pulled out a gun from the display. “You mentioned Glocks, which are good, but honestly, for you I’d recommend the

Luger LC9. It's 9mm, has a seven-round, single stack magazine, and is well-suited for smaller framed shooters and those wishing to carry their weapon concealed." He placed it atop the glass display case along with a fresh magazine of bullets. "Should we go try it out on the range?" He checked his watch. "Probably another half hour or so before the background check's complete."

She stared down at the firearm like it might explode in her face and then looked at her son. She swallowed as though gathering her courage. "I want to try shooting it, but I'm not sure what to do with him."

Clint had suggested yesterday that she come without her son, but maybe that wasn't an option for her. She didn't wear a wedding ring, so she might be a single mom. His need to help her just kept growing.

"Hmm. Hang on a minute." Clint walked to the front door and looked over at the small souvenir shop down the way. The Native American woman who owned it had been in the area for longer than the gun range had been in business. Suzie was in her sixties and a grandmother. Her place looked as empty as the gun range right now. Maybe she would watch the kid for a bit. One short phone call and a few minutes later, an older woman with glasses and a long black ponytail walked in. "Hey, Suzie." Clint waved her toward the back of the store where he and Leila were waiting. "Let me introduce you to my customer, Leila Ortiz. And this is Thomas."

"Are you sure you don't mind watching him?" Leila asked. She'd been reluctant to accept the help when he'd called Suzie, but seeing the other woman seemed to have put her at ease.

"Not at all," Suzie said, grinning and presenting Thomas with a handmade buffalo toy from her shop. "I've got two granddaughters about his age who I don't see nearly enough. I'm happy to do it. Is he two?"

“Eighteen months,” Leila said, passing the little boy off to her. He snatched the buffalo and squealed in delight, giggling as he made the toy dance.

“Well, that’s just fine.” Suzie laughed. “We’ll hang out in here while you two go and take care of business. Don’t worry about a thing. He’s safe with me.”

Leila still seemed to waver a bit, but Clint did his best to reassure her. “She’s trustworthy, I promise. And we won’t be gone long. Just need to show you how to load the gun and fire it and make sure it’s comfortable for you to use. C’mon.”

Reluctantly, Leila handed over a bag with snacks and toys, then followed Clint into the soundproofed gun range. Their footsteps echoed off the long concrete room and the lingering scent of gunpowder hung in the air. Clint talked her through the mechanics of the gun and explained how to chamber a round and change the magazine. Then he showed her the safety and how to turn it on and off. Then he unloaded the gun and had her go through all the steps herself. He had her repeat it all back to him. Finally, they were ready to shoot.

“Okay. Rules to remember. One, always treat every firearm as if it’s loaded at all times. Two, always keep the firearm pointed in a safe direction, a direction where an accidental discharge would cause minimal property damage and zero physical injury. Three, always keep your finger off the trigger and outside the trigger guard until you’ve made the conscious decision to shoot. And four, always be sure of your target, backstop and beyond. That means you should always know what’s in your line of fire, even beyond the thing you’re aiming at. Understand?”

Leila nodded, seeming to take it all in.

“Good.” Clint moved in beside her, his own Sig Sauer in his hand to demonstrate. “You want to hold the gun high on the back of the grip with your dominant hand. This will give you more leverage against the weapon and help you control the recoil

when you fire.” She tried to do as he asked, and he moved in closer to shift her hand position. “Great. Okay. Next, place your support hand—the non-dominant one—firmly around the exposed part of the grip. All four fingers of your support hand should be below the trigger guard with your index finger pressed hard underneath it.” He adjusted her hand accordingly, doing his best to concentrate on the task at hand and not the warm curves pressed against him. Now wasn’t the time, or the place, or the person. He couldn’t deny the pull he felt toward her, but it would be totally inappropriate to hit on a customer. “Like with your gun hand,” he lectured, struggling to stay professional, “you want your support hand as high up as possible with the thumb pointing forward, roughly where the slide meets the frame. Your two hands should fit together, like a puzzle.”

“Wow. This is a lot more complicated than I expected,” Leila said, giving a low chuckle that Clint felt clear to his toes. “Way more than point and shoot.”

“Told you.” He grinned over at her, his heart squeezing with warmth at her return smile. It was the first time he’d seen her look happy, and it was like the sun coming out on a cloudy day. He inhaled sharply and forced his mind back to business. “Right. Okay. We’re ready to assume the extended shooting position. You want to stand with your feet and hips shoulder-width apart. This will allow you to fire the weapon with stability and mobility. Then raise your weapon toward your target.”

He pointed toward the paper target at the end of her lane, and she did as Clint had asked.

“You really know a lot about this stuff,” Leila said as he moved behind her to adjust her stance. “Is that from being in the military?”

“Yep. Navy SEAL for around fifteen years.”

“Oh. Impressive.”

“I hear that a lot,” he joked, leaning in to make another small adjustment to her arm position. His front pressed to her back, and she turned slightly, putting their mouths mere inches apart. His gaze dropped to her soft pink lips and time seemed to slow.

If they’d met under different circumstances, he’d let the attraction he was feeling gain momentum. If they knew each other better, he might even have kissed her.

As it was, he stepped back and exhaled slowly, gathering his scattered thoughts together. “All right. Back to business.” He didn’t miss the pink tinge to her cheeks. Seemed he wasn’t the only one feeling this unusual connection between them. “Aiming your gun.” He talked her through the steps, waiting for her nod of understanding each time.

“Now, we get ready to fire.”

“Pull the trigger?” she asked.

“Not yet. And you don’t actually pull it. It’s more of a squeeze or press. Apply constant, increasing pressure on the trigger until the weapon fires.” She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and he nodded, putting on a pair of protective ear muffs and sliding a set onto her as well. He mouthed, “Go for it.”

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She resumed her stance, squinted, and fired, jolting slightly then grinning as the reverberation of the discharge echoed through the gun range. Leila pulled off her ear muffs and squealed with joy, just like her son had earlier. “I did it!”

“You hit the target. Good job. Not center mass, but flesh wounds can hurt like hell.” Clint couldn’t help laughing along with her. Her enthusiasm was contagious. “Okay. Let’s try it again. See if that gun’s the right fit for?”

The button he’d set up in the shop for customers to get his attention when he was on the range buzzed loudly, cutting him off. Suzie’s face peeked through the window.

Clint rushed over to answer it. “Yeah? Everything okay?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine with us.” Suzie bounced the happy boy in her arms. “There’s something wrong with your vehicle though,” she said to Leila. “We went outside for a minute, and it looks like your tire’s flat.”

“Damn.” Leila clicked on the safety on her weapon and handed it to Clint. All the excitement he’d seen on her face disappeared, replaced by fear again. She bit her lip but squared her shoulders like she was facing some kind of trial.

What was up with that? Tires went flat all the time—any bit of debris on the road could get wedged inside them and cause damage. And yet, some instinct told him more was happening here. Her reaction suggested that she didn’t think this was a normal flat. She thought someone had tampered with her car. He had a feeling the tire problem was somehow connected to her desperate need for a gun, her skittishness about telling him the truth.

The flat tire was probably nothing...but if it turned out to be something, he wasn't going to let her face it alone. He secured her weapon in a lockbox but kept hold of his firearm. "Let me take a look for you and see what's going on."

3

Dread boiled inside Leila as she watched Clint leave the store and take a slow walk around her SUV. He was on alert, everything about his body tense and ready. She was glad to see he was taking this seriously. She certainly was. This sabotage of her car felt deliberate, and that scared the shit out of her. Her hands started to shake, so she shoved them in the back pockets of her jeans.

She glanced over at Thomas. He and Suzie were sitting on a small loveseat in the corner of the gun shop. He was eating goldfish and listening to Suzie read a book, giggling like he hadn't a care in the world. She wanted to keep it that way. Would do anything, make any sacrifice to make sure Thomas grew up safe and happy.

Clint gestured for her to join him outside. He'd stuck his weapon in the back of his waistband and was crouched beside the right front tire.

"This was deliberately slashed," he said. His tone was questioning, waiting for her to explain who would do such a thing—and why. But if he was waiting for answers, he'd be waiting a long time. She had no intention of sharing.

She wasn't ready to take that next step with him yet. Maybe she never would be. She'd learned the hard way to keep her secrets well-hidden. Even though having help would be a burden off her shoulders, the trust it would require just wasn't something she was ready to give. Clint was a virtual stranger, even if he had been kind and helpful so far. Leila shook her head and focused on her mangled tire. Damn her vindictive ex to hell and back again.

“What’s happening is I need to figure out how to get this fixed pronto,” she said. “I have to get Thomas to daycare and go to work later.”

Clint frowned, his expression clearly stating that he saw right through her bullshit answer. He shifted his weight and crossed his arms, his muscles working beneath his tanned skin. He wasn’t built like someone who spent hours in the gym, toning their bodies and guzzling protein shakes to within an inch of their lives. No. Clint was built like a man who used his body for good, hard, honest work and he had the tanned, slightly weathered skin to go with it. He’d mentioned being a former SEAL. That would certainly account for his appearance and fitness level. And protectiveness.

“Where do you work? I can take you,” he offered. “Shop’s slow today anyway, so it’s not like I’d be losing any business. We can call a tow truck to take your vehicle to the nearest tire shop.”

He was a problem solver. She hadn’t known many men like that. Most of the ones in her life had done nothing but cause problems that she had to fix. But not Clint. He’d jump in if she let him, so she waved off his question with a vague, “I work at the dental clinic in town. And you don’t need to worry about this. I’ve got a spare in the trunk. If you can help me get that on, I’ll be fine. Thanks though,” she added, not wanting to appear ungrateful.

“The cut on that tire is pretty deep,” he pressed. “Looks like they used a knife. Maybe we should call the police and report it. It’s vandalism, if nothing else,” he said, watching her closely. Too closely for Leila’s comfort. Those blue eyes of his were far too perceptive.

She did her best not to fidget as heat prickled her cheeks that had nothing to do with the bright sun above. “No. No police. I’m sure whoever did this is long gone by now.” Liar. “Seriously, you’ve gone through enough trouble on my behalf today, with the shooting lesson and all. Like I said, if you can just help me get the spare on, that

would be great. I've got it from there. I'll take the car in to the tire shop once I've gotten paid next week."

Clint was silent for a long moment, long enough to make her think that perhaps he wasn't going to drop this. But then he sighed and cursed under his breath. "Fine. I'll get this tire changed for you and then we'll discuss your next lesson."

Her heart tripped with gratefulness and anticipation. She clicked the button on her key fob to open the trunk with shaky fingers. "Next lesson?"

"Yeah," he said. "You're a long way from the required ten hours." He rummaged around to find the jack and her spare, along with a tire iron beneath the panel in the floor. He pulled them out then got to work. Leila did her best not to stare at his perfectly formed butt or the hint of smooth tanned skin on his lower back peeking out from beneath the hem of his T-shirt. This was crazy. She had her ex stalking her and her young son to consider, but she felt such a strong attraction to this man.

She bit back a sigh. Clint was the kind of man she should have been looking for when she was younger. Someone dependable and decent, kind to children. He even took her seriously, gave her lessons on how to protect herself, which was so incredibly appealing. She was a petite Latina, and people tended to see her as someone they could push around. The other men in her life had never been interested in empowering her. Not like Clint.

She wished she'd known there were guys like Clint in the world before she'd gotten mixed up with her ex—but she couldn't change the past. All she could do was try to live a better life for her and Thomas from this point on. Focusing on that took all her time—there was no room in her life for a romance, even with someone like Clint. She gave herself permission to admire him, to appreciate his hot body and helpful attitude. For just a minute. And then, when the minute was over, she'd walk away.

Clint glanced back at her over his shoulder and that weird connection sizzled between them once more, the same one that had made her knees tingle and her breath hitch. Okay, so she'd use this minute to appreciate him and maybe also feel like a woman and not a tired, scared momma for a beat. But that was it.

"Does today's lesson count toward my hours?" She forced herself to get back to business.

"It does, but today was just a basic introduction. If you want to become competent with handling a firearm, you'll need practice and additional training. Safety first. Always."

She was on board with that.

"Yes. Absolutely," she said, nodding a tad too vigorously due to her guilt over checking out the way the denim of his jeans stretched over his butt. "I'm all about safety these days."

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“Mama!” Thomas shouted. She turned. Suzie was carrying him from the store, and he stretched out his pudgy little arms toward her. She smiled at her son, remembering her responsibilities and tucking away her desires. He held out the buffalo stuffed toy to her, and she smiled at Suzie, taking her son from the other woman.

“Thank you for watching him,” Leila said to Suzie. “I’ve got him now.”

“My pleasure,” Suzie said, starting off back toward her tiny shop. “He’s a sweetheart. Let me know if you ever need my help again.”

“Will do.” She waved to the older woman then took a deep breath to get herself back on track. “So, when can we schedule the next lesson? I’d like to get this done as soon as possible.”

“Tomorrow work for you?” Clint asked, popping off her hubcap and setting it aside then grabbing the tire iron to remove the lug nuts. “I can make time for you whenever.”

There he was being so good to her. She couldn’t let it go to her head. She brushed the hair from Thomas’s eyes with her fingers, a silent reminder to herself of what was important. Handsome, helpful former SEALs weren’t on the list. Unfortunately.

“I have to work in the morning,” she said, “but I could come in the afternoon before I have to pick Thomas up at day care. Would that be okay?”

“We’ll make it work.” Clint pulled off the slashed tire and set it aside, then slid the spare into place.

She studied him as he tightened the bolts. Despite herself, she was curious about him. She'd noted the lack of a wedding band, and there were no pictures of women or kids in his office. Just his buddies. Was he lonely? She wanted to ask but she knew she shouldn't. It was best she not get close to him.

"That'll do it," he said, rising and putting the tools back in her vehicle. He turned to her, his eyes assessing. "Don't drive too long on the spare."

"I won't," she said, even as she tried to figure out how long she could stretch it before shelling out for a new tire. The repair would have to wait at least a few days. She wouldn't have any money to spare until her next paycheck, especially since she was spending so much on the gun. That expense was non-negotiable. Just thinking about that made her square her shoulders. Taking an offered kindness from a near stranger was okay for now, but she was in this mess with her ex-husband alone.. She'd take Clint's lessons and learn what she needed to—and then, she would leave him behind. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Leila, if you need something else..." Something about the way he said it made her think she could ask him for anything. Again, she fought down the temptation to tell him more.

"I'm good. Thanks." She put Thomas in his seat and got on the road for the five-mile drive. She checked her mirrors constantly. The slashed tire meant that Mike or someone in his gang had found her.

And she knew from experience that they wouldn't back off.

The next morning was not turning out to be any less hectic for Leila than the previous one. She was currently fiddling with Thomas's car seat in the back of the car while

talking to her mom on the phone, thanking God for the millionth time that her phone plan included unlimited calls to Puerto Rico.

“Don’t worry about us, Mama,” she said, straightening up the mess of toys and snacks left over after she’d dropped her son off at day care on her way to her job as a dental hygienist. The spare tire was holding out, thankfully, but she knew she needed to take it in. She could have really done without that extra expense this month, which was probably exactly why Mike had chosen to slash her brand-new tire, the bastard. “Seriously. We’ll be fine. I can take care of myself.”

She did her best to sound more confident than she felt.

Still, her mother saw right through the charade. “Don’t pull that with me, chica. That criminal of an ex of yours is nothing to mess around with. For my peace of mind, I wish you and Thomas would move down here with me. There’s room at the condo and we could watch over you. Protect you.”

“I don’t need protection, Mama.” Okay, she did need protection, but there was nothing her middle-aged mother and the set of elderly grandparents Mama cared for back home could do to help with that. If she moved home, Leila would have to worry about keeping all of them safe, not just her and Thomas. No. Staying in Nevada was the best course of action for all of them. Even though her mother brought up the idea of her coming home during every conversation they had. “Look, I’m going to get a gun and I’m learning how to shoot. I won’t let anything happen to my son. We’ll be fine, I promise.” She finished fussing with the car seat, then straightened to close the car door and lock the vehicle. “I need to go now, Mama, or I’ll be late for work. Talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love you too, chica,” her mother said, her words tearful. “Please be careful.”

“Always.” Leila ended the call and grabbed her bag from the front seat. She had a

busy day ahead of her. Her schedule was full with patients, then later, with her lesson with Clint.

“Leila,” a voice said behind her, making her jump.

Her blood froze and her pulse stumbled. Mike. Her ex was here. A million thoughts whirled through her mind at once. Run. Hide. Fight. Flee. None of those options seemed feasible in the parking lot when he had her blocked in between her SUV, a van parked next to her, and him. He’d caught her at a vulnerable moment. Damn him.

Mike was a lot of things, but stupid wasn’t one of them.

Swallowing hard, Leila swiveled to face him. He looked harder than ever after his stint in prison for drug and weapons trafficking. Same angry green eyes, same gang tattoos covering his arms and creeping up his neck from beneath his army-green T-shirt. There was a tightness around his mouth, a hint of the tension that always skimmed right below his surface. His fists were clenched at his sides and a muscle ticked near his tight jaw. He was beyond pissed. Leila knew all the signs. He could go off on her right there, risking her life and the lives of anyone who happened by. Mike was a man who didn’t give a shit about consequences anymore, for himself or others. That made him all the more dangerous.

Leila inhaled slowly and repeated the mantra they’d taught her in self-defense—stay cool, stay calm, defuse the situation if you can. She didn’t have much hope that she’d be able to talk him down, but she had to try. “What do you want, Mike?”

He took a step closer. “What I want to know is why you waited until I was locked up before you filed for divorce and took my son away from me, you bitch!”

She maintained eye contact with him although it took everything in her to do so. “You knew things weren’t working out between us. I told you I wanted to leave.

There was no surprise about that.”

“You belong to me, Leila. You and Thomas.”

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“We aren’t property,” she said, struggling to keep her voice from betraying the shaking of her insides. “But then I guess you never understood that. Maybe thinking of me as some kind of pet or possession made it easier for you to beat me.”

“You made me do that. You disobeyed me.” He loomed even closer. “Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was for me to have you leave me like that? How much shit I had to put up with from the other inmates? It was humiliating. No one does that to me, Leila. No one.”

“Yeah, I can see how dealing with the consequences of being abusive might be hard for you to deal with,” she said, then instantly regretted it when she saw his scowl deepen even more. Just like it used to before he hit her. Defuse, she reminded herself. “Look, this is my workplace?—

“I don’t give a shit if it’s the Taj Mahal,” Mike yelled. “I came to get back what’s mine.”

Why wasn’t someone driving by? But the position she was in was terrible. She was trapped where a casual passerby wouldn’t notice them, and neither of them were speaking loudly enough to draw attention. Why had she parked at the back of the lot today hemmed in by big vehicles? She was usually better about that, but she’d been distracted and on the phone with her mother and had just pulled into the first space she saw. So stupid.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” Mike said putting a hand on her car and closing her in even more. “You aren’t. You’re just a dumb bitch who doesn’t know how good you got it. Never did appreciate me and all the things I did for you. You

never deserved me. Never.”

She felt the bile rise in her throat. Her mind went blank, none of her self-defense training helping her. She felt hopeless and terrified. She didn’t even have her key fob in her hand. Not that the panic buttons would attract much attention. Talking was her only choice. She had to stay calm and firm.

“Let it go, Mike. Let us go,” she pleaded. “You’re out now. You’re free. You have a second chance to make a new life, a new start. If I’m as worthless as you say I am, don’t waste your time on me.”

“What about Thomas?” he said, glaring a thousand daggers at her.

“What about him?” Leila felt some of her backbone returning. No way would this asshole get his hands on her son. Nope. She’d rather die than let him get to her child. She pulled some bravery from deep inside her. “Leave him alone.”

“Or what?” Mike got right in her face, his breath stinking of alcohol even this early in the day. “What are you going to do to me, Leila?”

She didn’t miss the mocking in his tone or the murderous glint in his eye. He’d kill her this time. There was no doubt in her mind. He’d go back to prison, and she’d go into a grave. End of their sad, sordid story. But Thomas...oh, god.

“Tell me where my son is now!” Mike said, grabbing Leila’s arm in a bruising grip. “Tell me!”

The echo of a car door slamming vaguely registered through the pounding of blood in her ears. Footsteps drew closer. She was torn between crying out for help and wanting to warn whoever it was to stay away, stay safe. All words stuck in her throat.

“If I were you, I’d let the lady go,” a deep male voice said. A very familiar voice. Clint.

He had no idea who the bastard was getting in Leila’s face, and he didn’t care. His number one priority at the moment was keeping her safe. Clint stepped a bit closer and stared the guy down. “Is there a problem here?”

The man, about the same height as Clint at five-ten and covered with gang tattoos, glared over at him with angry green eyes, his brutish face twisted into a menacing snarl. “Who the fuck are you? Mind your own business.”

It was meant to be intimidating. Might’ve been too, if Clint hadn’t already faced down some of the worst badassess on the planet during his stint as a SEAL. This dude was a weak wannabe compared to some of the scum he’d encountered then. He took a step closer and met his opponent’s gaze directly. “I’m the guy who doesn’t like when assholes like you don’t treat women with respect.”

“Yeah?” The guy swiveled away from Leila and cracked his knuckles. “What the fuck you gonna do about it?”

“Mike, don’t—” Leila started before the jerk shot her a murderous glance.

“Don’t tell me what to do, bitch. You lost that right when you served me with divorce papers.”

Right. Clint put two and two together. This asshole must be her ex-husband. From the looks of him—rough and on-edge, his muscles taut and toned from hours in the gym, and what looked like a raw, fresh tat of a black tear drop under his left eye—Clint would guess he’d been recently released from prison. That certainly would explain Leila’s nervousness and sudden, desperate need for a weapon.

He took another step, one that firmly put him between Leila and her behemoth of an ex-husband. “How about you tone down the threats and we discuss this like rational adults?”

“How about you get the fuck out of here and keep your nose out of where it don’t belong before I smash it?” Mike growled. “You sleeping with her or what?”

“Why? Afraid she’ll see what a real man is like?” Clint couldn’t help baiting him. After seeing how frightened Leila was and picturing her cute kid, he suddenly felt the urge to pummel this guy’s face into the dirt. Clint wasn’t a violent guy by nature, but the thought of this son of a bitch hurting Leila or Thomas brought it out in him.

“I will kill you,” Mike bared his teeth and got nose to nose with Clint. “Nobody insults me and gets away with it.”

“Yeah?” Clint didn’t back down an inch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leila slide away. Smart move on her part. He didn’t want her to take a hit if fists started flying. “Want to take me on? Let’s go. I’ve taken down people way worse than you before breakfast, bud. It’ll be a pleasure to knock you to your knees.”

He’d wanted to say more, but a police car drove by, giving a quick beep of the sirens in warning. Apparently, someone had reported them. Much as Clint wanted to take this asshole down a peg, he didn’t fancy a trip to the local jail for brawling, either.

The squad car pulled up near them and the officer’s tinted window lowered. “Problem here, ma’am?”

Leila’s gaze flickered between Clint and her ex before meeting the cop’s. “No officer. Thank you. My ex-husband was just leaving.”

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Mike all but bristled with testosterone and rage and the cop stared him down a moment before the infuriated man finally stepped back. “Fine. I’m outta here. But it ain’t over, Leila. Not by a long shot.”

Clint maintained his position until Mike peeled out of the parking lot in a used rust-bucket of a car, then he turned back to Leila. “You okay?”

She nodded, visibly still shaken, though some of the color was returning to her cheeks.

“Thanks, Rodney,” Clint said to the cop. The officer was a frequent visitor to his gun range. Someone Clint knew and trusted. “I owe you one.”

“No problem,” Rodney said. “Watch yourself with that guy. He looks like he’s got a chip on his shoulder a mile wide.”

Clint took a glance at Leila. Did she want the police to get involved? It didn’t seem so. “Will do,” Clint said.

After a tip of his hat, the squad car pulled away, leaving him and Leila alone. He wanted to pull her in for a hug. He wasn’t usually the hugging kind, but it seemed like she needed that. Still, he got the sense that anything physical might frighten her, so he held back.

“So, you were married to that guy?” Clint finally asked after several long seconds. Leila was avoiding his gaze, her shaking hands twisting the hem of her pink pastel scrub shirt. He wanted to sit her down somewhere before she collapsed. He gazed

around the parking lot but didn't see any benches nearby. "I'm assuming this is the dental clinic where you work. Want to go inside and talk about it?"

"No." She shook her head, staring into the distance toward the direction Mike had taken. "I'm good."

"You don't look it."

"Looks can be deceiving." She sighed and finally met his gaze. "Thanks for helping me out with him, but I...I can manage."

Clint crossed his arms and gave her an assessing stare. She clearly didn't have this situation in control at all, but he didn't want to force her into accepting his help either. Honestly, he wasn't sure his getting involved in all this was a wise move on his part either. He'd learned long ago not to form attachments to people in crisis mode. They could hurt you in so many ways—by leaving at a moment's notice, by pushing you away...or worst of all, by clinging tight while the danger lasted and then letting go just as soon as it passed. He didn't blame them for doing whatever it took to protect themselves. He just didn't want to get caught in the fallout. Still, she clearly needed protection, even if she was too stubborn or scared to admit it. His honor wouldn't let him walk away. Not until he knew she and Thomas would be safe.

"Maybe you should talk to the police about getting a restraining order," he suggested. If Clint didn't miss his guess, her ex was on probation. An incident like the one that had just happened could land him back in jail. That might be the best thing—for the time being, anyway.

But he'd get out and her problems would start again.

"Won't stop him," she muttered. "Seriously, I'll be okay. You're helping me already by teaching me to shoot. The rest..." She rubbed her hands down her arms, seeming

chilled despite the heat of the day.

He could not let this go, but how could he convince her to take his help? A slow, non-threatening approach seemed the best option. “Given the time of morning,” he said, “I’m guessing you were on your way into work. You still feel okay to do that?”

“Yes, and I really don’t have a choice. I need the money.”

“Okay. Fair enough. Your son at day care?” She nodded but didn’t offer up a location. “Is he somewhere secure?”

Leila nodded again, looking over at the entrance to the dental clinic, where the receptionist was standing near the door. Maybe she’d seen something and been the one to call the police. “Believe me, I checked them out thoroughly. They know not to let anyone in to see Thomas except me and to call me if anyone else show up. He’s safe there.”

“Good.” Clint stepped back and forced a smile he didn’t quite feel. He had one more question for her. No way was he letting her just walk outside after work by herself since Mike knew where she’d be. “What time are you done today?”

She hesitated, then said, “Five. Why?”

“If you don’t have any objections, I’ll come back then and escort you to the range for your lesson this evening, just to make sure Mike doesn’t show up again and cause trouble.”

“No, it’s?—”

“And I’ll go with you when you pick up Thomas. I can check out the place and follow you home.”

He gauged her reaction to his offer, watching as she seemed to come to some decision within herself. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before meeting his eyes. “Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

Relief went through him. That was progress, but it also proved how shaken up she was by what had happened. She was scared for herself, but she was more frightened for her son. For him, she’d accept help.

5

At four forty-five that afternoon, Clint pulled his pick-up into the lot of Spectacular Smiles Dental Clinic, parking behind Leila’s SUV. He’d spent the day at his shop, working off some of his adrenaline and frustrations on the gun range, before heading back here. He’d brought his firearm with him, in the glove compartment, just in case.

Clint cut the engine and got out, locking the door of his truck then walking up to Leila’s car to make sure it hadn’t been tampered with. His heart stuttered when he saw the damage. Her tires were still intact, thank goodness. But it looked like her vindictive ex had returned at some point during the day to smash her headlights and scratch the words “You can’t hide from me forever bitch” into the side door with either a key or a knife blade. The passenger side window was smashed in as well and the glove box hung open, empty.

Shit.

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Blood pounding in his ears, he crouched down to snap a few pictures of the damage with his phone, thinking he'd text them to Rodney and have him look into it. Should probably get the cops involved officially, even if all they'd do was write a report. Since it wasn't his vehicle though, he'd leave that up to Leila to decide. He'd just sent the pics off to Rodney when she arrived.

"Hey, thanks again—" She stopped suddenly and cursed under her breath at the sight of the damage to her car. "Crap. I knew I should've pulled it behind the building during my lunch hour. Mike lashes out when he's pissed."

Clint didn't like the sound of that. He straightened slowly and proceeded with caution. "Did he ever lash out at you? Or Thomas?" He had to suspect that Mike had.

Her chin came up, and she swallowed hard. He expected a quick denial, so her answer surprised him. "Sometimes. Always at me though. Thomas was born after Mike went to prison, so he's always been...safe.." Leila gave a sad little shrug. "It was nothing too awful," she tried to reassure him, but he could sense that she was lying. "A split lip one time. Some bruises. For a long time, I thought I deserved it."

"No woman deserves to be hit. Ever."

Her casual tone sliced deep into his heart. Apparently, the abuse had happened often enough that it became just another fact of life to her. Clint wished he'd met her years earlier, before the hitting had started, so he could have told her that she deserved so much better than asshole Mike in her life.

The realization brought him up short for a moment. He already cared about this

woman and her child more than was probably wise, given that he'd just met them two days before. Also, he wasn't sure getting more deeply involved in her troubles was a good idea, but in for a penny, in for a pound. Besides, he knew what to expect, if Mike got out of hand. Leila and Thomas needed him and that called to the deepest recesses of his warrior heart.

Decision made, Clint tucked his phone back into his pocket then hiked his thumb toward his truck. "It's going to get dark soon and with no headlights, your car's not drivable. How about I give you a ride to the gun range and we have your shooting lesson then I take you to get Thomas?" He looked back at her car and frowned. "You should call the cops and have them write a report, even if you can't prove it was Mike. Where do you keep the vehicle registration?"

"In the glove compartment. Why?" She followed his gaze then cursed again. "He's got my registration. That means...that means he knows where I live now. Damn, damn, damn." Pure terror showed on her face as she realized her home was no longer safe.

She began to pace, mumbling to herself under her breath.

"Do you have family to stay with?" he asked. She shook her head. "Friends?"

"I wouldn't want to bring them trouble. That wouldn't be fair to them," she said. "I'll just be really cautious. I can do that."

Being cautious wasn't going to cut it, and he couldn't stand the thought of her or Thomas in danger. What he was about to say was a bad idea. He knew that. A stupid, godawful idea...but I'm going to do it anyway. "I've got an extra room at my place. You and Thomas can stay with me if you want until this either blows over or you find other accommodations."

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Leila stepped back, holding her hands out in front of her. “That’s going a bit far. I’m grateful for all you’ve done for us, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to continue helping us. And staying at your place, well...”

“I want to help,” he said quickly, maybe too quickly based on her surprised look.

“Why?” Leila shook her head. “You saw what Mike’s like earlier. Why would you want to get involved in a mess like that? You barely know me.”

Clint looked around the lot and chuckled. “True. But what can I say? I’m still a SEAL at heart. I like helping people. And you and Thomas need help. Your ex isn’t going to just go away on his own. I’ve dealt with a lot of people like him. I can handle him, make him leave you alone, if that’s what you want. I can teach you how to protect yourself and your son better too. If you’ll let me. I won’t even charge you for the lessons.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and Clint lived and died in that short eternity. If she said no, he’d obey her wishes, even if it would kill him to walk away. He didn’t want her and Thomas to become another set of statistics on the evening news. Then she gave a dry chuckle and stared down at the mess of glass in the parking lot. “This is crazy, but...okay, I’ll take you up on your offer. I don’t know why I trust you, but I do.” She lifted her head and gave him the tiniest of smiles, reminding him that her smiles were worth their weight in gold. “Don’t make me regret that.” Her voice was half serious, half teasing.

Overwhelming relief swamped him, and Clint couldn’t stop his grin. He held out his hand to her. “Got it.”

Leila shook his hand. Her skin felt soft and warm against his, her grip strong and sure. He ignored the jolt of awareness zinging up from their point of contact. Heat flickered in her dark eyes before it vanished, letting him know he wasn’t the only one

who felt this strange connection between them.

“Good.” Clint said. “Call the police. After they get here and do their thing, we’ll get Thomas’s car seat out of the back of your vehicle and put it in my truck. Then we can swing by your place. I’m guessing you’ll need some things from there before we go to mine—and we should take care of that before we have Thomas with us, just in case.”

As she pulled out her phone, he had a moment of second guessing the decision he’d just made. It was too late to change it, though—and he wouldn’t even if he could. He felt a need to protect her. It was just that he’d never lived with a woman before, let alone a kid. He’d kept his distance from that world. Intentionally. So what was it about her that had him changing his tune? As she talked with the dispatcher, she pulled the ponytail holder from her hair and shook her dark locks out. The breeze caught them, blowing them around her shoulders. He had the almost overwhelming urge to touch her. Part of that was the need to give comfort, but yeah, he was attracted to her physically, too.

And there was something else. Something he couldn’t quite identify that drew him to her. Something he was just going to have to keep a handle on while he focused on keeping her safe.

As they drove toward the day care center, an awkward silence fell. Leila felt the need to say something, anything, to fill up the space between them. She didn’t know how to thank Clint for what he was doing for her and Thomas. It seemed too much, and it should be sending off alarm bells in her head. But for somereason, it wasn’t. Admittedly, she hadn’t always been the best judge of men’s characters. And yet, Clint seemed different from anyone she’d ever known.

It bothered her, though, that he probably thought she was an idiot for having allowed a dangerous criminal like Mike into her life. And considering that Clint was opening

his home to her, she owed him an explanation of how she'd gotten in this spot. So she was going to give him the ugly truth.

"Mike wasn't always that bad," she blurted, staring out the passenger side window at the scenery passing by. "Not at first anyway. When I first met him, he was nice. He used to take me out to dinner and buy me nice clothes and gifts. At the time, he was working at a convenience store. I never questioned where the money came from—he said he made good overtime there." She gave a snort. "It wasn't until we we're engaged that I first learned about his gang involvement. Mike told me that those guys were like his family and that they'd be my family, too, if I did right by them. Meaning if I looked the other way while they committed their crimes." Leila glanced over at Clint and gave him a sad smile.

"But you didn't," he said.

She had for a time, and she wasn't proud of that. "I begged him to leave it behind. He said he couldn't cut ties with his friends, but that he'd stop committing crimes. I was naive enough to believe him, so we got married. It didn't take long before things started to go south for me and Mike. His gang was always hanging around. I didn't bother hiding that I didn't like them, which made Mike angry. I guess they made fun of him for not being able to keep me in line. He got really controlling and aggressive. Started monitoring my movements. He would get so angry when I did something he didn't like." She sighed, upset with herself for having gone along with it for so long. "Even after he got abusive, I still loved him and wanted to try and make things work. The night...the night he beat me up enough to send me to the hospital was the night I found out I was pregnant with Thomas. I made the decision to get out of the marriage right then. I couldn't risk bringing my child into an abusive home."

"What about him hurting you?" Clint asked. He looked at her when they stopped at a traffic light, concern darkening his blue eyes.

“I didn’t matter. All I cared about was my baby.” Leila shook her head, pulling her gaze from him and going back to staring out the windshield at the horizon where the sun was setting in the west. “Before I ran, I gathered up as much information as I could about Mike’s criminal activities and turned it over to the police on the condition that I wouldn’t have to testify. After that, I got as far as I could as fast as I could, then I hid until I thought I was safe.”

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“Was what you gave the police was enough to have him arrested?”

“Yeah. Mike was convicted on multiple drug charges along with grand theft auto, so I mistakenly thought I was in the clear. I filed for divorce while he was in prison, which really pissed him off. I’d planned to save up my money and move to a different town—maybe a different state—before he was released. But then he got out early on good behavior.” She scoffed, not able to imagine the man she’d known being a model inmate.

“You should have been notified of that.”

“I think the letter must have gone to my old address. I had no idea he was on the streets again until I caught sight of him a few days ago. That’s when I decided I needed a gun. To keep me and Thomas safe. I could try for a restraining order, I guess, but like I said, I don’t think it would help. It’s just a piece of paper. It’s not going to stand up against Mike’s violent tendencies.”

Her mother had petitioned the courts for a restraining order against her father when she was little. It hadn’t stopped him from kicking their house door down and shoving her mother’s head through a wall. She shuddered at the memory of that horrible night. The cops had come and taken her father away, but the lesson she’d learned was that they’d been unable to stop the attack. She feared the same situation happening to her. It was why she needed that gun. She’d just have to be tough enough to pull the trigger if needed.

“You’ve been through a lot, Leila.” Clint exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry.” Clint slowed for a red light and looked over at her. “I’ve got to ask. Where is your family in all

this?”

“My parents split up when I was eight. I have no idea where he is anymore, and I don’t want to. I have a brother, but he lives in New York City. And my mother was here in Vegas until recently, but now she’s back in Puerto Rico now to take care of my grandmother. She’s been asking me to move down there too, but I thought Thomas would have a better life here. I may have been wrong about that. I don’t know.” There were so many things she didn’t know and so many mistakes she’d made. She felt the burden of having to fix those now so her son could have the future he deserved. “I’ll understand if you don’t want anything to do with this mess now that you know the nasty details. You can just drop me off at the day care center, and I’ll get an Uber from there.”

“And then what, Leila? Keep looking over your shoulder until Mike comes after you? Until he hurts you again or hurts Thomas.?” He shook his head. “No, I’m not letting you face this alone.” The light turned green, and he accelerated through the intersection. All she could think about was how grateful she was to his help and how comforting it was to have someone—have him—in her corner.

“Guys like Mike didn’t give up easily,” she said quietly. She’d noticed that Clint kept glancing in the rearview mirror. She was doing the same in the side mirror of his truck, paranoid she’d find Mike or one of his friends following them. It was only a matter of time before her ex made another appearance.

“Understood.” Clint signaled and switched lanes to turn onto the day care’s street. He turned into the lot and pulled up to the curb by the front door, shifting the transmission into Park before looking at her. “I’m glad you walked into my gun shop yesterday. I hope you’re able to trust me because I promise you that I’ll keep you and your son safe.”

She only nodded, too overwhelmed to say anything else. She’d find a way to repay

Clint for what he was doing. She wasn't a taker by nature. She thought of herself as more of a doer, a survivor. But in this situation, she was in over her head and had to admit that. And while she may have had made so terrible choices in her twenty-five years, she didn't think putting her faith in Clint was one of them. During her lunch, she'd done a little digging online about him. He didn't seem to care much about social media—but there had been a news article after he'd taken over the shop, talking about his sterling military record and the commendations he'd received for courage and valor. He'd risked his own life to protect others in the direst of circumstances..

"I'll be back in a minute." She smiled at him.

"I'll be waiting," he said, returning her grin with one of his own. She ignored the tingle in her knees that it caused. Clint hiked his chin toward the entrance of the day care. "Now get inside and get that adorable kid so we can get back to my place and settle in for the night."

She slipped out of his truck and went up the sidewalk to the center's door. When she glanced back as she reached it, Clint's eyes were on her, watching out for her. His gaze was protective, but she saw something more in it. Interest in her as a woman. She couldn't let that figure into their relationship. She'd keep her head in the game and her heart out of the equation—no matter how attractive she found Clint—and when this was over, she'd walk away from him with gratitude and a better future to look forward to, once Mike was out of the picture.

6

"Here we are," Clint said a few hours later as he flipped on the lights in his modest three-bedroom, one-story ranch home. He lived in Sunrise Manor on the outskirts of Vegas—a safe, quiet, blue-collar neighborhood located close to his firing range. He wasn't sure what kind of accommodations Leila was used to. When he'd taken her to

her apartment so she could grab somethings for herself and Thomas, he'd been too busy guarding the hallway to take much notice of her living quarters, so he felt a bit nervous. He didn't have people back to his house often. "Sorry, I didn't really have a chance to clean beforehand, so..."

She walked past him into the great room and looked around the beige and white space, her expression unreadable. He put down the box with the portable crib they'd bought at the superstore up the road. He went back outside to grab more bags and kid stuff.

"This is really nice," she said, glancing sideways at him when he returned. "Very modern and spacious."

"Thanks." He kept his place organized and neat, another remnant from his military days. And while some people would consider it plain, without a lot of mementos or knickknacks sitting around, that was the way Clint preferred it. He didn't need stuff. He'd learned early on in foster care that it was easier to keep his belongings to a minimum. It lessened the chance of something getting left behind when he had to leave a placement without much—if any—warning. He'd kept a few things, though, from those days.

"Um...where should I put our things at?" she asked and he realized she was still standing there, holding Thomas and staring at him. Somehow, she looked right in his living room. The neutral background showcased the vibrancy of her coloring.

He cleared his throat, uncomfortable heat prickling up from beneath the collar of his T-shirt. Having this woman and her kid under his roof, under his protection, was doing funny things to him. He tried to dismiss it as just the responsibility he'd taken on, but if he was honest with himself, he cared about her and her boy.

It was all too quick and made no sense whatsoever. It went against everything in his

loner MO.

Yet, he couldn't stop how he felt.

Clint shook off the tension knotting the muscles between his shoulder blades and turned to head down the hall to his right. "The guest rooms are this way, though I use one as an office. You can set Thomas up in there if you like or keep him in the room with you."

"He can stay with me for now, since we won't be here long," Leila said, following him into the larger guest room on the left. It was sparsely furnished—a dresser he'd refinished, a queen-sized bed covered with a navy-blue spread, and a small nightstand. Nothing fancy. "This is great. Thanks again for taking us in."

"No problem." He set the bags on the floor, then stepped back toward the doorway. "I'll, uh, let you get settled while I start dinner. Are steaks on the grill okay?"

"Perfect. I haven't had a good home-cooked steak since my mom left. Medium well for me." She smiled and set Thomas on his feet. He immediately started exploring the room. "If you wouldn't mind opening that bag on the left, there's a grocery sack of food and snacks for Thomas I brought from home. Since you're headed to the kitchen, could you stick them in your fridge for me?"

"Sure thing." He did as she asked him, unzipping the black duffle bag on the floor, doing his best not to notice the lacy underthings that brushed against his fingertips when he reached inside the bag. He pulled out the plastic sack then stepped back again, wondering how it had gotten so hot in there. He'd caught a whiff of her perfume wafting off the things she'd packed—cinnamon and sweet soap—and his pulse quickened without his consent. Perhaps inviting her to stay with him hadn't been such a wise idea, considering his crazy reactions to her. Too late now though, as he watched her talking and laughing with Thomas as she put her things away. "Uh,

I'll go get dinner ready now. After dinner, we can...um...put that crib together, eh?
Good times."

Shit. He sounded like an idiot.

"Okay." She took her eyes off what Thomas was doing for a second and grinned at him. He suddenly felt like he'd been struck over the head with a happy stick. Ridiculous, really, since he knew relationships weren't for him. They didn't last. He'd learned that lesson early on, courtesy of his parents' deaths when he was six. People came and went. It was a fact.

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And Leila was definitely a temporary feature in his life.

To be truthful, though, no woman had ever grabbed his attention quite like she had. He still couldn't explain it.

Cursing himself inwardly, he walked back down the hall to the great room, then into the attached open kitchen. This attraction between them couldn't have happened at a worse time, with her in danger and him promising to protect her. Wanting her might make him weak, vulnerable. He might make stupid decisions, and Clint wasn't usually a stupid guy.

Since retiring, he'd been focused on living a quiet, solitary life, running his gun range and minding his own business. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd dated anyone or taken a woman to bed. It just hadn't been a priority for him. His life was simpler and less complicated when he kept to himself.

But involving himself with Leila and Thomas and their situation had just plunged him head first into a whole, deep ocean of issues, including the instant, undeniable connection they shared.

Sighing, he scrubbed a hand over his face, then gathered the supplies he'd need before carrying them outside to the grill. Staying busy helped clear his head and keep him on track. Now, if he could just get his libido on-board with the plan, he'd be all set.

"That was delicious," Leila said, pushing back from the dining room table two hours later. "If you don't mind keeping an eye on Thomas, I'll clean up. He gets a little

squirmy in the booster seat.” She’d brought the kid chair from her apartment because there was no other way to keep an eighteen-month-old safe and under control at the table.

“Happy to,” Clint said and scooted his chair closer to Thomas.

They were kind of cute together—the big man and the little boy. She bit back a sigh. Too bad her son didn’t have a father worth a damn. She shook that thought away as she gathered the dirty dishes together and carried them all to the kitchen sink. “Seriously, that’s the best meal I’ve had in a while,” she said as she opened the dishwasher.

“You don’t cook?” Clint asked.

“Oh, I do. I enjoy it, too, but with just myself and Thomas to feed, making a big meal just doesn’t seem worth it. Well, you know how it is, being single.” The minute the words were out of her mouth, she flinched. Honestly, she didn’t know enough about him to say whether he had a girlfriend or not. Like in his shop, there were no happy couple pictures sitting around the house, and he didn’t have a ring on his finger, but that didn’t mean squat these days. Leila was shocked by how much she wanted him to agree, to confirm that there was no one special in his life. Not that it was any of her business, but man, oh man. She hoped there wasn’t.

Which was silly. The last thing she needed right now was to get involved with a new man. Not with her crazy ex out of prison and on her tail. She needed to be focused on Thomas and keeping them both safe, not the tingle that raced down her spine when Clint was near her.

When he didn’t answer right away, she hazarded a glance at him over her shoulder as she stuck the dishes in the dishwasher. He was laughing with Thomas, telling him a story about the toy car Clint ran across the table. Her son was making vroom noises.

Warmth squeezed her heart tight at the sweetness of it. Clint was good with kids, and Thomas was clearly eating up the attention. Her poor son hadn't known anything like a father-figure. Right now, he was too young to notice much, but that would change before long.

Soon, Leila's influence alone wouldn't be enough, no matter how hard she tried.

She turned back to the sink and blinked hard against the tears now stinging her eyes.

"Yeah," Clint said, suddenly behind her. "I don't really cook much either, unless you consider grilling high cuisine."

Startled, Leila turned fast to find him not two feet away. He'd moved to the kitchen with Thomas on his hip without her even realizing. Her son's eyes were getting droopy. She'd been so wrapped up in her thoughts about Clint and her future that she hadn't noticed. Not good for a woman who needed to be on guard at all times.

Leila leaned back against the edge of the sink and crossed her arms, putting a bit more distance between them. It wasn't enough to stop her from feeling the heat of him through her scrub shirt, nor did it stop her from inhaling his scent—soap and fabric softener and warm, clean male. Feeling oddly nervous, she shuffled her feet, the rubber soles of her white sneakers squeaking against his hardwood floor. She hadn't changed after work and imagined she probably looked a mess after the long, stressful day. She did her best not to fidget. She shouldn't care about how she looked, about whether Clint found her attractive. And yet, she did.

"Well, whatever you call it, dinner was great." Could she sound any lamer? "I, uh, should probably get that crib together. It's almost time to put Thomas down for the night." She took her son, careful not to touch Clint, and sidled out of the danger zone that was a three foot radius around Clint. She took off for the guest bedroom, exhaling her pent-up breath as she went. He was so strong and masculine and handsome and...

Nope. Totally off-limits.

It had been so long, too long, since she'd been with a man. Mike had been her one and only.

That had to explain her strong reactions to this guy, right?

Lust and stress. Not a winning combination.

While Clint finished cleaning the kitchen, she carried Thomas into the guest room and put him down on the bed. He was sleepy enough to stay still—thank goodness—with a book to flip through. While he was occupied, she opened the box that leaned against the wall, laying out all the pieces of the crib on the floor, then grabbing the directions to put it together.

Clint joined her a few moments later and chuckled. “You don’t need those. I can figure it out. We’ll need tools though. Let me grab some from the garage. Be right back.”

He disappeared through a door down the hall and returned a moment later with a toolbox. Men. She always followed the directions. A by-the-book kind of gal. Then again, look where it had gotten her so far in life. Perhaps Clint had the right idea, following his gut and instincts. If only her own instincts were safe for her to trust.

Clint carefully laid out screwdrivers and wrenches and even a hammer. He glanced over at Thomas and then back to her. “Will we wake him?”

“Huh? Oh.” She saw that Thomas’s eyes were shut, and he had his thumb in his mouth. “I doubt it,” Leila said. “He’s always been a sound sleeper once he’s out. For a single mom, that’s a blessing.” Satisfied that they wouldn’t disturb him, she picked

up the direction sheet again, noticing Clint's raised brow. "I'm sure you think it's silly, but I like knowing what to expect."

"I get that." Clint shrugged and began picking up pieces and trying to fit them together. When one didn't work, he went with the next one until he found one that did. "I'm that way about neatness."

"Yeah? From your SEAL days?" she glanced around at the mess currently on his floor. It must be driving him up the wall. As the mother of a toddler, she'd become used to the chaos a child brought to her life on a regular basis, but Clint was used to living alone. Or at least she thought he was. He'd never answered her question from earlier, she realized, so she tried a different tack. "Well, whoever cleans your place keeps it super nice."

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“Thanks. It’s just me, so it’s easy.”

A swell of joy crested inside her before she tamped it down. Don’t care. Don’t care. You have no right to care.

Except shedidcare, more than she wanted to admit.

With the help of the directions, Leila grouped the assorted pieces and parts into piles while Clint assembled it all together. Theyworked well as a team, she noted, despite their different styles. Before long, the crib was ready to go.

Clint stood and held out his hand to help her up from where she was kneeling on the floor. She took his offered hand, and for just a second, she allowed herself to enjoy the frisson of awareness that sizzled up her arm from their point of contact. He met her gaze and she’d swear she saw an answering heat in his eyes before he hid it away again. It was the same heat she’d sensed back in the parking lot when they’d shaken hands the first time, the same heat she’d felt at the shooting range the day before when she’d turned and found him close—so close, that they’d nearly kissed...

Oh, Lord. She was in major trouble here.

Clearing her throat, she busied herself by walking around the crib and checking it all for safety. “Thanks for helping me get this together,” she said at last, her voice gruffer than usual due to the constriction in her throat. “Would’ve taken me hours by myself.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and helped him maneuver the crib over against the wall. “That’s perfect. We’ll try and stay out of your way now.”

Clint stopped fussing with the crib placement. “You’re not in my way.” He watched her, the length of the crib between them. “It’s nice having someone else here besides me for a change.”

Did he mean that? Or was he just being a good host? She studied him, and a pang of sympathy stabbed through her at the hint of loneliness in his expression. She knew that feeling. Most nights she was so busy with her son or so exhausted from work that there wasn’t the time or energy for socializing or dating. Didn’t mean she still didn’t stare at the ceiling late at night, remembering what it was like to have another warm body beside her in bed.

Time seemed to slow, and her breath hitched as he leaned in, closer, closer, so close she could see his pupils blown wide, nearly obscuring the blue of his irises, could feel his warm breath stir the hair near her temples. He was going to kiss her. She was going to let him. This was going to happen...

“Mama!”

Thomas’s plaintive cry came from the bed and snapped Leila from her sensual haze in a second. She switched from wanton woman to devoted mother instantly. “Oh, Thomas. Baby. What’s the matter?”

She leaned down to pick up her son, aware of Clint walking out of the room. Leila exhaled slowly, the tension inside her easing as she held her son close, feeling like she’d dodged a bullet of forbidden temptation once more.

7

What was that sound? Clint woke instantly. It was early, daylight barely creeping around the shades. Something was off. He held still, listening until he could finally identify what he was hearing. Music. A lively, fast beat and singing.

Right. His house guests. He scrubbed a hand over his face and put his feet on the floor. It had been late by the time he'd gotten to sleep. Having a woman with glowing skin and sexy curves in his house had taken a chunk out of his night as he'd stared at the ceiling asking himself two questions.

One, what the hell had he been thinking by inviting Leila to stay with him?

Two, would she have let him go ahead with that kiss if her son hadn't woken up?

Question two brought him to a third question. Were her lips as pillowy soft as they looked?

He groaned. Not helpful. And not appropriate. There was too much at stake for him to be thinking with the wrong part of his anatomy.

"Mama?" Thomas's voice drifted to Clint. The kid didn't seem upset, just confused maybe. Where was Leila? That's when he clued in that she was singing in the shower. Not a mental image he needed right then. He shoved it away as he yanked on sweats and a T-shirt. Putting himself on kid duty should kill any wayward sexy thoughts about the woman in the shower.

His bathroom was en suite, but the guestrooms shared one down the hall. When he passed the door, he heard her voice more distinctly. It was low and sweet sounding. He willed himself not to listen as he pushed open the door to the room where she and Thomas were staying. The bed was rumpled as if she'd had a restless night, too. Couldn't blame her after the day she'd had.

"Hi," Thomas said. He was standing in the crib, holding onto the top rail. "Me up."

"I can see you're up." Clint reached for the boy, lifting him from the crib. He wasn't a natural with kids, but he had some experience from his foster home days. The older

kids had been expected to help out with the little ones. “I’ll bet you’re hungry. How about we find you some food?”

He carried Thomas out of the room. As they passed the bathroom, Clint heard the water shut off. He was tempted to yell to her to take her time since he’d watch Thomas, but Clint was afraid that it would make her rush since she seemed concerned about taking advantage of the situation. She’d thanked him countless times the day before, and it wasn’t necessary.

“What’s good for breakfast?” Clint pondered aloud as he crossed the great room on the way to the kitchen.

“Me play,” Thomas said and started squirming in Clint’s arms. He looked around. A laundry basket with toys in it was sitting near his coffee table, and Thomas had spotted it. “Play.”

“Message received, little man. Play first, breakfast later.” Clint put the kid down near the basket. He’d figured out already that the kid like cars. Apparently, trains were high on the list of favs, too. The boy yanked a blue train engine with a smiling face on the front from the basket and began running it along the couch cushions.

“Choo-choo,” he said and zoomed the engine across Clint’s thigh. “Me train.”

“Yeah, it’s your train. No one’s going to take it.”

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Thomas shook his head and held up the engine. “Metrain.”

“Hey, I get it.” Clint clued in. “That’s Thomas the tank engine. Thomas, like you. I remember having one of these.” His memories of those early years before his parents had died were slippery, fading in and out. With a sudden clarity, though, he remembered pushing a toy train, just like the one Thomas clutched, along a hardwood floor. If he tried hard enough, he could almost hear his mother’s voice calling to him. He shook his head at the thirty-year-old memory and focused on the boy in front of him who was looking back at him with a smile on his face. “Got any more train pieces?”

In a few minutes, they were on the floor setting up tunnels and curves for the train to travel through. Clint vaguely registered the sound of a hairdryer coming on. It was not something he was used to, but he kept his attention on Thomas and having fun with the boy, which was no hardship. The kid was cute and seemed plenty smart for his age.

Clint wasn’t an expert on child development, but he had to guess that Thomas’s intelligence and adaptability to his new surroundings came from the hard work his mother had put in with him. Another reason to like and respect Leila. As if he needed one.

Leila’s mouth popped open to say good morning, but no sound came out. She was enchanted—that was the only word for it—by the sight of Clint on the floor playing trains with her son. She’d come out of the bathroom, dressed and ready for the day, when she spotted them.

She should go get Thomas. He wasn't Clint's responsibility after all. And she would. In a minute. For now, she was just enjoying this brief interlude of contentment. She'd had damn few of those as a single mom—and none at all since finding out Mike was out of prison. She'd been operating in crisis mode, which wasn't good for her or Thomas.

She could relax a bit thanks to Clint and his generosity, which was probably the reason she'd lingered in the shower, taking the time to shave her legs above the knee. She rolled her eyes. Only the mother of a toddler would see that as a treat. Thomas usually played on the bathmat while she was in the shower, but he'd been out cold still that morning when she'd checked him before going to the bathroom, so she'd decided to leave him in his crib.

She hoped he hadn't woken Clint. She studied the man. His hair was a little mussed, and his T-shirt was an old one that stretched tight across the muscles of his chest and shoulders. His feet were bare. The whole look was way sexy.

"Good morning," he said, making her jump. She'd gotten caught up with looking at him and was completely busted. Her cheeks went hot.

"Hello." She forced herself to take the last steps into the room. "I hope Thomas isn't bothering you."

"Heck, no." Clint ruffled her son's hair. "We've bonded over trains. Haven't we, buddy?"

"Choo-choo," Thomas responded. He looked happy, which made her happy. She'd loved to take more time to enjoy the moment, but she was due at work in an hour, which was just enough time to feed Thomas, get him dressed, and drop him at the day care.

“Come on, Thomas. Time for breakfast.” She went to her son, scooping him up and giving him a kiss on the cheek. Clint rose from the floor and stood next to her. For a second, they felt like a family. It was weird, but good, too. She and Thomas had never had that with a man before—with anyone, really. It was always just the two of them since her mother moved back to Puerto Rico.

Thomas deserved more people in his life, more family. Maybe she should take her mother up on the invitation to visit, maybe even stay with her and her grandparents for a while, once this whole mess with Mike was over.

“I’ll get dressed while you do that. I can drop you both off before opening the shop.”

“I’m sorry to put you out like that. Maybe we could—” She was about to suggest getting an Uber, but he cut her off.

“I’m driving you,” he insisted. “I’ll be ready to go in thirty.” As he went past her, he touched her arm, just the slightest of brushes. It was comforting and exhilarating. That was weird, too. She smiled at Clint, but he was already headed down the hall toward his bedroom.

“Toast or Cheerios?” she asked her son, switching her attention to him.

“Ooooo’s.” His favorite.

“That’s what I thought.” She carried him into the kitchen and pulled his booster chair up to the table. While he ate his cereal and some grapes cut in half, she downed an energy bar and packed herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch. Thank goodness, day care provided snacks and lunch for Thomas. She paid extra for that, but it was more than worth it since it made her life so much easier.

After breakfast, she got Thomas dressed as quickly as she could, hurrying to the door

to wait for Clint at the front door. She didn't want to delay him and be an inconvenience—any more than she already was, at least.

Thomas willingly went into the day care, and they arrived at the dental clinic five minutes before her scheduled time to start. Clint had been quiet on the drive. And watchful. She supposed that was how he was, in general. She wanted to thank him again for playing with Thomas that morning—for everything, really—but she couldn't find the right words, so she settled for a simple thanks and got a smile in return—a smile that curled her toes in a good way.

“I'll see you later,” she said and slid out of his truck. He waited for her to get inside before driving away.

She was feeling so much better than she had just the day before as she greeted her first patient and got to work. Her morning was busy with back-to-back appointments. At noon, she went into the breakroom and took out her sandwich.

“Hey.” Katy, the receptionist, sat down across from her. She was young, younger than Leila, and a total sweetheart. “Everything okay after yesterday?”

“Yeah, it's fine.” Leila kept her answers brief, not wanting to drag her personal life into work. “Just a little trouble with my ex.” That was as much as he was saying. Katy gave her a doubtful look. “What is it?”

“I had a call for you that was kinda nasty.”

“Nasty how?” Leila asked as her stomach sank.

“Some guy insisted on talking to you. When I said you were unavailable, he demanded to know when you got off work. I wouldn't tell him and...”

“And what, Katy?” The bite of sandwich Leila had just taken turned to dust in her mouth.

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“He called me names, so I hung up.”

“I’m so sorry about that.” So much for the good day she’d been having. She’d known Mike wouldn’t back down, but the fact that he’d harassed the receptionist pissed her off. And it was embarrassing. She worked here, and she was a professional.

“It’s not your fault, but you need to be careful,” Katy said, concern in her voice. “He was scary sounding.”

“Yeah.” And it wasn’t just the way he sounded or the words he used. Mike wasn’t afraid to get physically violent. “Let me know if he calls again.”

“If I hear that voice, I’m hanging up,” Katy said with more steel in her tone than Leila had ever heard before. “But I’ll tell you about it.”

“Thanks.” Leila put her sandwich down as the receptionist left the breakroom. She’d gotten all caught up in a fantasy world earlier when she’d seen Clint playing with Thomas. That wasn’t her reality. Her reality was an ex who was out to get her and her son. She needed to remember that.

8

“Sorry. Excuse me,” Leila said, sidestepping around Clint in the kitchen.

It had been five days since she and Thomas had moved in with him. They’d fallen into a pattern of sorts. Get up, get ready, get to work, get home, get to bed. Normal as it all sounded, there were new elements to it that were a bit unsettling for a guy who

prided himself on keeping things orderly and spic and span.

Where his house had once been neat as a pin, now there were toys and clothes and just general stuff everywhere. Part of him cringed at the mess. But another part found it oddly...welcoming.

“No problem,” he said, moving to the side while waiting on his bread to get done toasting. He had a busy day ahead. After the usual drop offs, he had to hustle back to the shop where he was meeting with a sales rep about carrying a different line of weapons. Then, he had a concealed carry class he was teaching in the afternoon. When Leila got off work at four, he’d pick her up again and take her back to Ask Questions Later for another shooting lesson before picking Thomas up at five. His life was way busier than it had been a week or so ago.

As he watched Leila coax her son to eat orange slices along with his cereal, he couldn’t help smiling. She was getting really good with a weapon. Almost as good as she was at being a mom. From what he remembered of his own parents, his mom had been a lot like Leila—kind, caring, patient, with a backbone of pure steel. He admired so many things about her. And if he lost some sleep fantasizing about what she might taste like, how her skin might feel, the sound of her sighs as he licked and nibble his way down her body, from her neck to her breasts, lower still... Well, that was his problem, not hers.

He didn’t do relationships. He liked his solitary existence, he reminded himself. It kept life simple. No serious connections with others meant no pain when they left his life. Besides, he had no business getting involved with her now when she was vulnerable.

No matter how glorious a night with her sounded.

Though nothing had happened, the tension and connection between them lingered.

While cooking dinner and in the evenings, they made small talk to avoid the white elephant of desire shimmering around them. He'd learned more about her childhood, and he's shared some of his experiences as well—an edited version for the most part.

Mike hadn't shown his face since vandalizing her car, but that didn't mean Clint wasn't ready for him when he did. The guy would turn up. It was just a matter of time. Because of that, Clint made a regular drive-by of the dental clinic twice a day—without Leila knowing—and also had made sure the garage where her car had been towed for repairs parked the vehicle inside at night, where Mike couldn't tamper with it again. He didn't trust that asshole any farther than he could see him and at the moment, that wasn't far at all.

His toast popped up, and he grabbed the slices. “Want some?”

Leila glanced over at him, cheeks pink and hair still damp on the ends from her shower. The purple of her scrubs brought out the creamy bronze perfection of her skin. “No thanks. I had an energy bar earlier.”

“Yuck.” He scrunched his nose and spread butter and strawberry jam on his whole wheat toast. “Those things taste like sawdust.”

“True.” Leila laughed, the sound brightening his day. “But they're good for me and fast.” She managed to get the last orange slice into her son's mouth before he turned away to focus on the toy car in his hand again. “These days, I'm all about fast.”

Clint shook off his unwanted thoughts of pressing her up against the wall and taking her quick and hot, showing her the true meaning of fast. He'd already decided to keep his hands off of her. And when he made a decision, he stuck to it, dammit.

She moved past him again, her sweet cinnamon scent buzzing around him. “Let me just clean this up and finish getting ready, and we can go.”

He nodded, not daring to look up at her for fear she'd seen the naked desire in his eyes.

This thing for her was crazy, reckless, and more intoxicating than the finest whiskey.

If he wasn't careful, Clint knew he'd have both his heart and his emotions engaged in this situation and that was a sure-fire way straight to a world of hurt and pain.

At dinner that night, Leila found herself relaxing for the first time since her ex had gotten out of prison. Mike hadn't shown up again since that first horrible encounter in the parking lot, and he hadn't called the dental clinic again. Her car was due to be out of repairs by the end of the week, so she wouldn't have to depend on Clint so much. Thomas seemed happy too, laughing at Clint who was talking to him and making funny faces.

Things were...nice. Normal. Better than they'd been in a long time.

If she wasn't careful, Leila would get too comfortable being here. With Clint.

He glanced up and caught her staring at him dreamily and she looked away fast, concentrating on the plate of baked pasta in front of her. He wasn't going to let it go though, apparently. He sat back and took a swig from his beer bottle. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, scrambling for a lie that sounded convincing. She certainly wasn't going to tell the guy she'd been daydreaming of them together in some way. She checked herself and her imagination, wondering how she'd managed to go there after such a short time. Probably because she'd never had that chance at being part of a happy couple and happy family. And all the books and movies that made the fantasy seem possible only fed her dreams. But she needed to be realistic. Even if something like that was possible, it wasn't in the cards for her, not now, not in the foreseeable future, and likely never with Clint. Still, her heart squeezed with yearning

at the idea. She couldn't say any of that to him. So, instead, she narrowed her gaze on him. "Where'd you get the scar?"

“Huh?” He frowned.

“The one through your left eyebrow,” she said, smiling at his confused expression. “Piercing accident?”

“Oh, that.” Clint reached up and brushed his fingers over the white line bisecting his dark left brow. “No. Happened so long ago I forgot about it. It’s from a firecracker when I was a kid.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. The foster family I was living with at the time wasn’t exactly big on safety. Our foster dad bought a bunch of illegal stuff at one of those roadside stores and we took it all out into a field on the Fourth of July and lit the place up.” His deep chuckle as he remembered the events of his past did funny things to her stomach. “Don’t get me wrong. That family was great. Positive, loving environment—just a little too lax when it came to rules. There were two other foster kids there besides me and while I did my best not to light anybody else on fire, one of the other kids wasn’t so careful. He lit off a roman candle. You know, the ones that shoot the fireballs into the sky, without warning anybody to step back. One of the lit ones exploded and a hot spark grazed my eyebrow. The hair never really grew back.”

“Man,” she said, eyes wide. “You’re lucky you didn’t lose an eye.”

“Tell me about it.” He smiled and twirled his half-empty bottle between his fingers. Such long, lovely fingers. Leila found herself mesmerized by them, thinking how they might feel against her skin, skimming through her hair, down her neck, lower

and lower...

She looked up to find him watching her expectantly.

Crap.

He'd obviously asked her something and she had no idea what. Swallowing hard, Leila gave him a small smile. "I'm sorry. Could you repeat that?"

Clint tilted his head slightly, his expression amused. "Distracted much?"

Heat prickled her cheeks and she focused on her plate again, silent.

"Everything okay at work?" he asked after a long moment. "No problems I should know about, right?"

"No. Everything's fine," she said, reaching over to fiddle with Thomas's sock-covered toes, making her son giggle. "Just tired, I guess." She gave herself a mental shake and concentrated on what he'd said, hoping to get the spotlight off herself. "So, it sounds like your time in foster care wasn't all bad then?"

"Nah." Clint shrugged, running his fingers through the condensation on his bottle. "Foster care gets a bad rap, but honestly most of the people in the system are decent. The hardest thing for me to deal with was feeling like I didn't have roots. It's hard, being untethered. But I adapted, became used to it." He snorted. "Maybe too used to it, some might say, considering I'm such a loner now. Childhood shapes us more than we think, I suppose."

"Hmm." Leila sipped her water and toyed with the few remaining bites of pasta on her plate, feeling a bit of the tension easing inside her. "That's true. After my dad was out of the picture, I saw how hard Mom worked to support my brother and me. I guess

that's why when Mike got sent to prison, I knew I could handle it, since I'd grown up without a dad. And, really, Mike wasn't the dad I wanted for Thomas." She sighed and looked back at her son. "I do want him to have a good father figure someday, though. I want him to have everything I didn't growing up."

"Understandable." He drained his beer then tossed it across the room into the recycle bin. "Three-pointer." Clint grinned, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table. "I have to say, it's been nice having you guys here."

"Don't sound so surprised," she teased. "We aren't that bad, are we?"

"Other than stuff everywhere, no."

"Stuff?" Leila gave him a look. "I'll have you know I clean up after myself and my son all the time." She did, but she had to admit it was tough to control the clutter with a toddler.

"I know. It's just different is all." He sat back and rubbed his eyes. "I'm used to living by myself."

"Yeah, I noticed." She finished her food then rose to help him clean up the table. "You don't really go for much decoration around here, do you?" His walls were without any artwork, and there wasn't a single knickknack on display.

"Not really," he said, rinsing the plates and sticking them in the dishwasher while she wiped the table. "Part of it is my time in the military and foster care. Like I said before, when you're constantly moving, there's not much time to settle in. I don't see much point in getting attached to stuff either."

She wondered if that meant getting attached to people, too. "What's the other part?" she asked, wanting to know more about him.

“Mementos are about helping you remember—but I prefer to keep the past in the past.”

“Huh.” She lifted Thomas from his booster chair and went with him into the living room. He made a beeline for the basket of toys and immediately started zooming cars across the floor, happy as a clam. She should leave her conversation with Clint at that, but she was curious about his attitude. When he finished in the kitchen and came to join her, she asked, “So, you don’t have any reminders of your parents?”

“Not really,” he said, but she noticed something flicker across his face. “Well, there is this one thing.”

“What?” She found herself, encouraging him with a smile. He looked so adorable, all rumpled hair and faraway expression. She remembered the feel of his chest against her back from the gun range earlier. He’d been working with her on her aim and her stance, his warmth surrounding her, his muscled body hard and strong brushing her back. Leila bit back a groan of frustration before focusing on him again. “Tell me.”

He held still for a moment before striding over to a small closet in the corner. “Probably easier if I show you.”

Clint rummaged around, giving her a fantastic view of his taut butt in those faded jeans of his, then turned. In his hands was a raggedy-looking stuffed rabbit. One of its eyes was missing and the ears showed signs of several repairs, but it also appeared well-loved, carefully preserved. Her heart melted at the sight. “This is Trixie. She’s the last toy my parents ever bought me.”

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“Oh, my goodness.” Tears stung the backs of Leila’s eyes before she blinked them away. “How precious is that? And you kept it all these years. It must mean everything to you.”

“It’s important, yeah,” he said, watching her closely. “But not the most important.”

“Bunny,” Thomas yelled, staring expectantly at the stuffed animal.

“He thinks that’s for him,” Leila said, walking over to her son. “No, no, honey. That belongs to Clint.”

The little boy frowned and reached toward the rabbit again. “Bunny.”

Clint came back toward her, right into her personal space. He was welcome there and he must have felt that because he didn’t pull away. Instead he met her gaze, his warm blue eyes flickering to her lips before he looked down at Thomas and handed him the stuffed toy. “Hey, gifts are meant to be shared, right?”

“Right,” she whispered, feeling herself falling for this man a little more. Clint’s eyes came back to hers, their faces so close that if she stretched up, just a tiny bit, she’d kiss him. Electric desire sparkled between them, and time seemed to slow as Leila slowly, slowly closed the gap between them and brushed her lips over his. Soft, warm, infinitely inviting. He reached up and brushed the backs of fingers down her cheek, turning slightly to slip his arm around her waist and pull her to him. His fingers traced from her face to the nape of her neck, tilting her head back to deepen the kiss and...

“Mama!” Thomas yelled, thrusting his new toy up at her and jolting her out of the kiss.

Leila stepped back and touched her still-tingling mouth, feeling as stunned as Clint looked. That kiss had been earth-shattering. World rocking. A mistake.

She turned and picked up her son, using him like a shield between herself and the man who had her body throbbing with need. “I, uh, need to get him ready for bed. Excuse me.”

9

“No, keep that arm straight,” Clint said, the next day. He nudged Leila’s left elbow. “Make sure your sights are lined up.”

He stepped back and watched as she fired six rounds, all of them missing her target by a mile. Dammit. That kiss the night before was messing with both of them today. It sure as hell had him in knots. The whole thing had been so unexpected and unreal and unbelievably hot.

Shifting slightly, he did his best to ignore the way heat pooled low in his belly whenever he thought about Leila in his bed, under him, crying out his name as he brought her to orgasm after orgasm.

Shit. Just shit.

This was why he stayed alone. So much less complicated that way.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me today,” she said, taking off her ear muffs and frowning down at her weapon as she clicked on the safety.

I do, Clint wanted to say, but stopped himself.

She'd been acting squirrely around him since last night and if he could've kicked his own ass for his stupidity, he would have. He couldn't blame her for the kiss. She was under enormous stress and wasn't thinking clearly. He should've stopped it, no matter how amazing it felt to hold her at last.

"Maybe you need a different instructor, little lady?" Devin suggested as he strolled past. "I'm available." He'd been shooting in the end lane for the past half-hour. As a matter of fact, he was around pretty often whenever Leila was shooting.

Clint's customer and semi-friend had more than his usual swagger going on. And he was going to lose some teeth if he didn't back away slowly. Clint glared at him, but Devin didn't notice. He had focused his attention on Leila, a smile on his face.

"I could give you some pointers while Clint here minds the store," Devin said. "I own a couple of Lugers. Happy to show you the ins and outs." Devin did a fancy twirl with the revolver he carried before sticking it in his holster.

Clint was seriously going to punch the guy, customer or not. He'd determined months ago that Devin was a decent guy, despite his player tendencies. But knowing that didn't make Clint unball his fist. He was opening his mouth to tell Devin to go the hell home when Leila spoke first.

"Thanks," Leila said, narrowing her eyes at Devin. "But I think we've got this."

"Anytime, sweetheart. Clint's got my number for whenever you need it." With that, Devin went on out the door.

"Sorry about him. He can be a jerk," Clint said. He'd make sure Devin understood to stay away from Leila.

“Yeah. I see that,” she said, unfazed. “He’s not the first jerk I’ve dealt with.”

Did Leila think that was one of those jerks? Their kiss had been off the freakin’ charts, but it shouldn’t have happened. And it was a jerk move to kiss a woman living under his protection.

“Try shooting again,” he said. While she loaded the weapon, he glanced through the door that led to the store to check on Suzie, who was watching Thomas again. Usually, Leila had her lesson before they picked Thomas up for the night, but an accident on the road ahead of them had meant they’d had to miss their usual time slot, so they’d come after getting Thomas instead. The kid still had Clint’s rabbit clutched tight in his hand. He hadn’t let it go since Clint gave it to him the night before. At the sight, warmth squeezed Clint’s heart, touching him deeper than he cared to admit. The thought that he’d made Thomas’s life a tiny bit happier and brighter had him feeling ten feet tall.

“I’m just wasting ammo,” Leila grumbled, popping out the empty magazine from her Luger to put in a fresh one. “This is ridiculous. I need to concentrate. I need to get this right, with Mike out there somewhere and Thomas depending on me and...”

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Her stress clawed at his chest, and he stepped closer to place his hands on her shoulders. “Hey, relax, okay? All this tension isn’t making the situation any better. Besides, I think we both know what is bothering us today.”

Leila looked up at him then, the heat and wariness in her dark brown nearly dropping him to his knees. “Yeah? And what’s that?”

Damn. She was going to make him say it. Fine. Clint cleared his suddenly tight throat. “The kiss.”

She licked her lips and he stared at the tiny movement of her soft pink tongue, mesmerized. Then she stepped back, away from him. He missed her heat immediately. “I’m fine. It was just a kiss. Not a big deal.”

There was a slight roughness to her words that told him her statement was a lie. She was every bit as affected by what had happened between them as he was. He’d have been wise to try and put the memory aside, like she was clearly trying to do. But every cell in Clint’s body was yelling at him to give in, to see where things went with her, to let nature take its course.

After all, this unresolved sexual tension was doing nothing but distracting them both and neither of them could afford it right now. Perhaps it was best to sleep together and get it over with. Get it out of their systems and move the hell on. Or maybe he was just rationalizing what he wanted to do. If wasn’t smart to be thinking that way. He needed to put some distance between them. Get his walls back in place.

But, damn, it was hard to do when she was looking at him like that.

“How about we give it up for today? We’re not accomplishing anything.” His tone was gruffer than he wanted it to be. “And I’m hungry. We’ll try again tomorrow.” He added the last because he didn’t want her to think he was giving up on her. He wasn’t. He just needed some perspective.

Leila studied him a long moment, and for a second, he feared she would tell him to get lost. But then she seemed to come to a decision within herself and she nodded. “Sounds perfect.”

Usually, Thomas ate dinner with them. But he’d been rubbing his eyes when they got back from the range, so Leila had fed him mac and cheese and put him to bed early. Which meant she was dining alone with Clint. There was a lingering tension between them ever since the kiss the night before and she wasn’t sure what to do about it. Whatever she decided, it needed to be dealt with quickly. She couldn’t have this thing between them messing with her mojo, not with so much on the line right now.

She cut into her perfectly cooked steak and took a bite, the delicious flavor of char-boiled beef filling her mouth. Unfortunately, she couldn’t enjoy it because Clint was currently sitting across the table from her, frowning down at his baked potato. She shouldn’t care about him and yet, she did. He’d been her rescuer, offering her and her son a safe place to hide out until they got their lives back together. He was teaching her not just how to use a gun, but how to trust other people. Heady stuff for a woman who’d never planned to depend on anyone else ever again.

But this tension between them was untenable.

“What’s wrong?” she finally asked, taking a sip of the bottle of ale he’d opened for her.

“Nothing,” he said, shoveling in another mouthful of his meal and avoiding her gaze. His dour tone suggested the opposite. “Just tired, I guess.”

Okay. Sure. The common-sense part of her brain said she should accept that and leave it alone. Her heart, however, compelled her to find out more, wanted to see that slow, sexy smile grace his lips again and warm his gorgeous blue eyes. Leila took another small bite of steak and tried a different route. “This meal’s delicious.”

Clint grunted in response, taking a long drink of his beer. He put the half-empty bottle down then narrowed his gaze on the living room behind her. “God, this place is a mess.”

“Oh.” She tracked his focus to the toys and kid laundry strewn over his formerly pristine floor and furniture and winced. They’d been so busy that day she hadn’t really had a chance to clean up after herself or Thomas. For a guy who’d basically lived in a monastery before she’d moved-in, that must be tough for him to deal with. He’d brought it up before, so it must really be bothering him. “Sorry. Life with a toddler is messy and it’s been more hectic than usual. I’ll clean it up right after we finish eating.”

“Whatever,” he said, his grumpiness persisting. He’d been a bit distant today at the firing range too. Then again, she’d been frustrated about her performance as well. Frustrated by that stupid kiss, truth be told. Not because she hadn’t enjoyed it. She had. Way more than she should. In fact, it had been all she’d thought about afterward. She’d even dreamt about it last night. Kissing him, holding him, making love to him until neither one of them cared about guns or her ex or anything but each other and making a new life for themselves and her son.

Nothing more than a fantasy. Again. But what a nice dream.

Leila looked up and caught Clint watching her, a shadow of stark need brooding in his gaze before he looked away. Cursing under his breath, he pushed away from the table and took his empty plate to the sink. The muscles between her shoulder blades knotted tighter, the frustration and want inside her brewing into a bubbling stew of

irritation. It wasn't rational, but to hell with it. He had no right to act like an ass. She was the one dealing with tremendous stress here.

She forced herself to finish the rest of her food while he fussed around at the sink then finally she stood and joined him at the counter, her annoyance over his behavior and her strengthening awareness of him pushing her closer to the edge, pushing her to be more reckless. If he was looking for a fight tonight, she'd happily give him one. "You know, Clint," she said, ready to hit all his buttons. "You're not in the military anymore. Maybe it's time to live a little. Stop being so fussy about your pristine space. Life's meant to be lived. Sometimes that comes with a mess or two."

Clint snorted. "Great. Yeah, please lecture me on how to live my life, since you're such an expert. Single, raising a kid on your own, with a crazy ex-con stalker on your tail. I know exactly what works for me in my life. Don't you dare come in here with your cute kid and your wild, colorful ways and try to change me. I don't like change."

Angry and hurt, she hip-bumped him out of the way to rinse off her own dishes, not caring that she was being rude. He was being rude too, saying deliberately hurtful things. When she replied, her tone dripped with sarcasm, as did her fake smile. "For a guy who's only thirty-five, you act like a stick-up-the-butt sixty-year-old."

"Hey!" He turned and glared at her, his arms crossed and his muscles bulging, all but bristling with testosterone. The air between them seemed to sizzle with electricity. "Why should I listen to you? Your track record on reading people sucks."

True, dammit. But boy was her radar going off about this situation. In the past, during arguments with Mike, she'd feared for her safety, knowing he wasn't above dominating her with his fists when his words failed. But with Clint, she knew he'd never hurt her physically. She also recognized the signs of extreme need within herself. Much as she hated to admit it, she wanted him—more than she'd wanted anyone ever. And it pissed her off. Or maybe that was passion. Hard to tell at this

point.

“No. You know what truly sucks here?” she asked, shutting off the water and turning to face him, her index finger pointing at the center of his chest. “The way you let your fear override the joy in your life. You keep your head down and your heart locked away, thinking that’s the best way to keep it safe, but in reality, all it does is make you a sad, lonely, miserable man when you could have so much more.” She’d seen the way he was with Thomas. He had a lot of love in his heart, but he refused to give it the place in his life it deserved.

“And what about you, huh?” He moved closer, his breath ragged and his high cheekbones dotted with crimson. His blue eyes sparkled with restless energy, and she felt an answering tug within her, urging her to stand her ground, to take what she wanted from this man and screw the consequences.

It was insane. It was terribly unwise. It was the only thing she wanted in the universe at that moment.

Clint continued his tirade. “You think you’re being so safe, so careful. But what you’re really doing is isolating yourself from the people who could help you—the people who could care for you, if you’d let them inside. When it comes to letting people in, you’re no better than me. In fact, you’re just like me, even if you refuse to admit it. You’re scared. You’re so scared I can smell it on your skin, hear it in that little catch in your breath...”

They were so close now that she could see his pupils blown wide, obliterating the blue of his irises until just a tiny rim remained. The connection between them vibrated like a tuning fork sending wave after wave of awareness through her until she tingled all over. She should step back; she should walk away.

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Instead, she moved closer still, ready to give in to her needs, give in to this crazy attraction between them. Ready to...

Buzz, buzz, buzz...

Her phone vibrated on the counter beside them where it was charging. It wasn't loud, but it was enough to jar her back to her senses. Clint too, it seemed, if the way he stalked off toward his bedroom was any indication. Good. Fine. She took a couple deep breaths before answering the call. Her mother's face smiled back at her brightly from the caller ID on the screen.

"Hey, Mama," Leila said, praying her voice sounded steadier than it felt. "How's things?"

"Good, good." Her mother proceeded to fill Leila in on all the happenings around Puerto Rico. Once she'd told her daughter all the latest gossip, and Leila was feeling much more relaxed than she had been earlier with Clint, Samantha Ortiz went in for the kill. "I think you should seriously consider moving down here, chica. I worry about you and Thomas up there all alone. What if that bastard ex of yours comes looking for you? How will you protect yourself?"

Leila sighed. She'd not told her mom about the slashed tire or damage to her car, nor was she planning to. Her mother had enough to worry about without adding her daughter and grandson to the list. And with Clint's help, Leila would be able to protect herself and her son just fine. Though it would be nice to have family closer to help out when she needed it. Ugh. She sank down into a kitchen chair and rubbed her forehead where a headache was starting to form. For the first time, she seriously

considered it. Leaving Vegas would get her away from Mike and away from her unwanted attraction to Clint. Plus, she could give Thomas a fresh start. At the moment, it sounded like not such a bad idea. But this wasn't the time to make such a decision, not with the mix of adrenaline and sexual tension still thundering through her system.

"I'll think about it, Mama," she said, leaving it at that.

10

Clint kept one eye on Thomas and the other on his phone, tracking where Leila was. He'd made her download the "find my phone" app so he could see where she was as a precaution and to give him some peace of mind when she was without him. He still didn't like that she'd insisted on going to the grocery store by herself, claiming she needed some space and time to think. But he understood why she needed it. After the tension, sexual and otherwise, between them the night before, he didn't blame her.

He had been acting like an ass. It was just that he felt torn and twisted and totally in lust with her with no idea how to handle it. Sure, he was no blushing virgin. That ship had sailed a long time ago. But he'd never been with a woman who appealed to him on as many levels as Leila did. He was frustrated, in more ways than one, and he'd lashed out at her.

Stupid move.

She was guarded, yes. But she was also smart and funny and kind and giving and she had good reason to keep her heartprotected. And then there was Thomas. The kid was adorable beyond measure. Clint had always imagined he'd stay a loner for the rest of his days, never considering the possibility he'd ever want a family of his own. After what had happened with his own parents and upbringing, he'd figured it was for the best he stayed alone. But being around Leila and Thomas had him rethinking those

long-held beliefs.

Maybe she was right. Maybe it was time for him to live a little. When she got home, he was going to apologize to her. He checked the app again and saw she was still at the store. He focused his attention on Thomas, who'd been happily playing, but was now looking sleepy. He was already in his pajamas. Maybe it was bedtime? If he got Thomas settled for the night, he'd be able to have the conversation he needed to with Leila as soon as she got home.

"Do you love that toy, buddy?" Clint asked as he picked up the boy. Thomas was clutching the stuffed bunny and rubbing it against his cheek. "It was my favorite too. You've got good taste. You can keep the bunny with you, but it's nighty-night time."

He took the boy into Leila's room and settled him in the crib. Thomas immediately sprawled out on his back and closed his eyes.

"See you in the morning, little guy," Clint said after watching for a minute to make sure he was asleep. He quietly crept from the room, leaving the door ajar.

He'd just returned to the living room when the front door opened and Leila walked in, looking upset. His heart dropped to his toes as he rushed over to take the heavy bags from her arms. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

She shook her head, looking out the door to scan the area before shutting it and locking it behind her. Leila leaned back against it and closed her eyes. "Mike's gang found me. In the parking lot at the grocery store."

Her breath hitched, and Clint's heart ached even as anger surged hot through his blood stream. Son of a bitch! If that fucker or his idiot friends harmed a single hair on Leila's head, Clint would go full SEAL on their asses and make them regret the day they were born. They might be in a gang, but nobody messed with a SEAL or those

he protected. Nobody.

He set the bags on the kitchen counter then rushed back to her side, guiding her over to sit on the sofa then crouching in front of her. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were wide with fear. Clint reached up as gently as he could to tuck her loose hair behind her ear, hoping to soothe her. “Did they hurt you?”

She shook her head. “Where’s Thomas?”

“Sleeping. He’s fine. Tell me what happened.” Clint didn’t like how weak her voice sounded.

“They just tried to scare me. Drove their car way too close, like they were going to run over me, then started calling me names. Whore, bitch, the usual.” She gave a sad little shrug, and it took everything Clint had not to pull her into his arms. From her troubled expression, he sensed touching her now would not go over well. So, instead, he moved into the seat beside her on the sofa and waited for her to continue. “They threatened me. Said they’d find me, find Thomas, and kill us if I didn’t go back to Mike. Said they’d hunt you down too. Ruin your business. Run you out of town.”

His hackles rose. It would take more than a carload full of punks to make him leave Vegas. This was his home now.

“I’m sorry,” Leila said, sniffing. “I’m so, so sorry. I never should’ve gotten you involved in all this.” She wiped the back of her hand across her damp cheeks then sat back against the cushions to stare up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry about last night too. I’ve done nothing but invade your space and make things so much harder for you.”

“No.” He reached over and took her hand now, unable to resist any longer. “It’s me who should be sorry. I said awful things to you last night. Those words should never have left my mouth. I have no right to judge you. You’re a great mother and a great

woman who's dealing with horrific things with more dignity and honor than anyone I've ever met."

"It doesn't feel that way," she said, turning her head slightly on the cushion to look at him. "Most days I feel like I'm barely holding on. Inside, I'm scared to death I'm going to screw everything up. I'm terrified that something will happen to Thomas... or to you."

"To me?" He looked over at her, realizing now how close they actually were. Close enough for him to smell her spicy scent, to see the tiny gold flecks in her brown eyes, to hear the hint of yearning in her tone. His body tightened in response and a different kind of longing filled him once more. To taste her, touch her, have her beneath him as he drove them both to the point of ecstasy. He tugged on her hand, drawing her closer. "Listen, I can take care of myself." His gaze flickered from her eyes to her soft, pink lips before returning to her gaze. "I'll take care of you too, if you'll let me."

Time seemed to slow as she closed the gap between them. "Will you? Take care of me?"

"Always," he whispered before kissing her. She gasped at the contact, and he took advantage, sweeping his tongue between her lips to taste her sweetness as he'd been wanting to do since that day at the gun range. She moaned low and his libido kicked a notch higher. He pulled back before he couldn't anymore, grasping her hips to set her aside then standing and extending his hand. "Let's take this to the bedroom, eh?"

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Leila bit her lip then smiled, before glancing toward the bedroom she shared with her son. “We’ll have to be quiet and leave the door open so I can make sure he’s okay.”

He smiled as he took her hand again to pull her up and into his arms. “We’ll keep the door open, but no guarantees on the quiet part.”

Leila couldn’t get enough of him. They fumbled their way down the hall, touching and kissing along the way.

Desperate for more, she took off her top as soon as they stepped into his bedroom and flung it aside before tugging up Clint’s T-shirt, the soft blue cotton obscuring his heated gaze as she pulled it over his head, then tossed it away to land on the floor near her top. Next went her bra, leaving her deliciously naked from the waist up. He cupped her breasts gently, flicking his thumbs over her taut nipples and making her groan with need.

She leaned in to kiss him again, deeper this time, filled with urgent want. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his hips, grinding the heat between her legs against his stiff cock. It had been so long since she’d let anyone inside her defenses in this way, so long since she’d even wanted to. And yes, it was bad timing. Awful, really, but dammit. She just couldn’t deny herself this pleasure.

The desperation within her grew so strong that by the time they bumped into his bed, all she could think about was getting those clothes off of him and ravishing him silly. He set her on the bed and climbed on with her. She shimmied out of her jeans and panties and smiled, feeling his heated gaze on her body. She helped him remove his clothing, taking the time to kiss, lick or nuzzle whatever part of him she could reach

with her lips and tongue. Clint groaned low and feral in his throat, and it was like a lit match to the gasoline of need in her blood.

“Hey,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and pulling back slightly, enough to meet her gaze, their breath panting between them, her hair clinging to his sweat-damp skin. “Leila. Are you sure this is what you want?”

More than anything in this world.

“Yes, I’m sure. You?”

“God, yes.”

“Good.” She pushed him back against the bed and straddled him, letting his cock rub against her clit. She slowed down then, enjoying the moment. He gazed up at her, his blue eyes wide with surprise and molten heat. He felt so amazing beneath her. When he put his hand on the nape of her neck and drew her down, they started a kiss that went on and on. She could have kept that up forever, but her body was crying out for him to be inside her. “Please tell me you have a condom,” she whispered against his lips.

Clint swallowed hard, hiking his thumb toward the nightstand drawer. “In there.”

She moved off him enough to get a small foil packet. She tore it open, then slid it onto his beautiful cock. The warmth and weight of him against her palm felt exquisite and she couldn’t resist bending down to place a kiss on the tip of his erection before straddling his hips again. She hovered there above him, taking him into her inch by inch and rocking slowly to pleasure herself. His eyes closed and his head fell back, his expression going lax with the incredible sensations racing between them.

Leila focused all her attention on the man beneath her, the man she intended to ride

all the way to her climax and back again. He was so beautiful. All those muscles, all that hot, smooth, tanned skin. He had scars, covering the left side of his torso, but they didn't mar his perfection—they enhanced it by showcasing his strength and resilience. She'd be asking him about those, though. Later, when those blue eyes of his weren't watching her, wanting her, worshipping her.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she sank down on him all the way, allowing her body time to adjust to his size. He filled her so completely, Leila imagined she could feel him grazing her cervix. So good. So, so good. When he was all the way inside her, she paused, just enjoying the connection with him before rocking upward and starting a rhythm that had him hitting all the right spots within her, pushing them both closer to the edge.

“Sweet Jesus, Leila,” Clint moaned, one hand holding her hips steady, while the other reached up to tease her taut nipples. “This is amazing. You're amazing.”

“So are you.” She leaned forward to kiss him deeply, her tongue delving into his mouth. He tasted of sinful desire. “I want this. I've been wanting this, wanted you, since the first moment I saw you.”

“Yeah?” He squinted up at her, a slow grin forming on his full lips. “Well, you got me, honey.”

“Yes, I do.” Words escaped her then as she zeroed in on the pure pleasure coming from her movements atop him, the sensual slide of his flesh within hers, the groans she was holding back to keep from bringing down the house around them.

Soon, they each drew closer to orgasm. Clint raised up on his elbows and she bent forward slightly to kiss him again, letting him rock up into her and guide her movements. He swallowed her cries of need and answered them with his own. Tightness coiled inside her to unbearable levels. Clint slipped a hand between them to

stroke her most sensitive flesh and boom! That was all it took. Behind her closed eyes, fireworks exploded inside Leila. She fell forward into him, her breasts rubbing against the crisp hairs on his pecs as her body convulsed around him. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over her and Clint thrust harder inside her, his movement growing more erratic until he too froze, coming deep inside of her, his face resting against her throat, his warm breath fanning her skin.

A short eternity later, they collapsed back onto his bed, a tangle of limbs. He gently withdrew from inside her, and though her eyes were closed, she could hear him taking care of the condom before rejoining her on the bed. Leila felt more relaxed than she could ever remember. She was unable to stop smiling. Yes, her day prior to this had been crappy. Yes, her maniacal ex was still out there somewhere, ready to strike. But for this moment, this one brief moment, all seemed right with her little world. Normally, that would scare her, put her on alert. At present, she was too tired and sated to care.

Leila had just closed her eyes and started to drift off when Thomas called down the hall, “Mama!”

Clint chuckled beside her. He leaned over and kissed her briefly before pushing off the bed. “You stay here, honey. I got this.” He tugged on his jeans and started out of the room, then turned back, giving her a heated perusal. “You are so damned sexy.”

She peeked open an eye and grinned at him. “You aren’t so bad yourself.”

11

The next day after work, Leila and Clint rode over to the day care to pick up Thomas. Rush hour traffic was heavier than usual, and the going was slow. She gazed out the window, then over at him. He’d been pretty quiet since they’d slept together the night before, and it made her nervous.

Though he'd seemed on board with her taking charge last night, perhaps she'd been too bold. Mike had never allowed her to revel in her own pleasure. He'd been far too selfish and controlling for that. It hadn't been until she'd gotten away from him and out on her own that she'd been able to fully accept who she was—a proud, confident, Latina woman who didn't need to depend on a man to give her what she wanted.

She'd thought Clint understood that, thought maybe he even liked her more because of it, but maybe she'd been wrong. With the silence pressing in on her from all sides, she searched for something to talk about. Her mind hit on something she'd been curious about the night before. She cleared her throat and asked, "Where did you get them?"

"What?" Clint frowned over at her, his expression confused.

"The scars."

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He blinked at her a moment then stared straight ahead again, inching forward in the line of traffic. Obviously, it was a sore spot with him, and she wished she could take the question back, but it was too late now. Finally, he said, “Kandahar. During a rescue mission. I was trying to pull a squad mate out of the line of fire when an IED went off.”

“I’m so sorry.” She reached over and put her hand on his thigh. “That must’ve been horrible.”

Clint gave a sad snort. “Worse for my friend. He didn’t make it.”

“I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled over at her and her whole world brightened. “It was a long time ago. I’ve had time to make peace with it. Shit happens.”

“Yeah, it does.” Leila swallowed hard as they turned into the lot at the day care at last. “I’m still sorry. I know what it’s like to live with the pain of failure. I sometimes feel like I’ll never be enough, you know? Growing up, I saw my father do awful things to my mother, and I was helpless to prevent any of it. That still bothers me. Then the whole sordid mess of my marriage to Mike. God.” She covered her eyes with her free hand and shook her head. “I wonder sometimes if I’m even fit to be a mother, after what I’ve been through, after the choices I’ve made.”

“Hey, stop thinking like that.” He pulled into a parking spot and cut the engine, then undid his seatbelt and leaned over to kiss her gently. “You’re a great mom. Never, ever doubt that. Thomas is a very lucky little boy to have you in his life.”

She leaned her forehead against his. “Thank you. And I’m sorry for everything you went through in your past, everything that hurt you. But I’m not sorry about last night.”

“Me neither. And I don’t regret my past.” He smiled and kissed her again before pulling away. “It’s what made me who I am today and what brought me to you.”

She wanted to ask exactly what he meant by that, but they weren’t ready for that kind of conversation. So she wiped her eyes and checked her reflection in the mirror on the visor before walking into the reception area of the day care with him.

“Hey, Sarah,” Leila said to the woman working the desk. “We’re here to pick up Thomas.”

The older lady stood, a serious expression on her face. “I tried to call you about twenty minutes ago. Someone else tried to pick up Thomas.”

Leila’s blood froze in her veins, and she glanced over at Clint, who’d stiffened as well. “Who?”

“He wouldn’t give his name. He was a big guy, all tatted up.” The woman led them around the desk and back into the locked, secured play area.

“You didn’t?—”

“Of course, we didn’t let him see your son,” the woman reassured her as she swiped her key card and a tiny red light on the door lock switched to green. “But he did ask for Thomas by name. I thought you should know.”

Bile burned the back of Leila’s throat and her feet seemed stuck in cement. As if sensing the chaos now roiling inside her, Clint stepped into the play area and picked

up Thomas.

“Thanks for not letting anyone else in,” he said to the woman, then took Leila’s hand and tugged her back toward the front doors. “Have a good evening.”

Leila followed him back out into the parking lot, her mind whirling and her steps clumsy. Obviously, Mike knew where to find Thomas during the day. What would he do with that information? What if Mike took her son? What if he ran off with him and she never saw Thomas again? What if all of her efforts—the shooting lessons, the moves, the security—wasn’t enough? While Clint got Thomas loaded into his car seat, Leila just stood there, frantic.

“I should go,” she whispered.

“We’re leaving now, honey. Please don’t panic. We’ll talk about this when we get home,” Clint said to her over his shoulder. “Get in the truck.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I mean Thomas and I should go. Leave Vegas. Leave the country and go to Puerto Rico to stay with my mom. It would be best for us. Best for you too. We should’ve left as soon as Mike got out of jail.”

Clint finished with Thomas then walked over to her, putting his hands on her shoulders and forcing her to meet his gaze. “Stop it. You’re not thinking straight. You need to get in the truck and out of the open. Then we need to get back to my place. We’ll talk about all this there, okay?”

Numb, she got into the truck and buckled into her seat. The ride back to his house passed in a blur of terror and self-recrimination. Funny how such an ordinary day could turn on a dime with one appearance from her ex.

The moment all the color had drained from Leila’s beautiful face back there at the

day care, Clint's gut had twisted. This was bad. Very, very bad. He ushered them inside his house and took Thomas from her shaking hands, hoping to calm them both down. Her nervous panic seemed to be rubbing off on the normally good-natured boy, who was now fussing and crying, his little cheeks flushed and damp with tears. "Sit down for a few minutes. Try to relax," he told Leila.

"Thomas needs me, I should?—"

"I've got him. You're not in this alone," he said, hoping to reassure her, before he turned his attention to Thomas. "Hey, hey, hey, big guy." Clint bounced the little boy in his arms as he carried him to the kitchen. "Are you hungry? Because I'm starving."

Thomas blinked at him, his long dark lashes glittering with moisture and wailed anew. Perfect. So now Clint wasn't just a failure at keeping them protected. He was a failure with kids too. With a sigh, he put Thomas in his booster chair and gave him some Goldfish to snack on. The food seemed to help since Thomas stopped crying and started to eat. When Clint was satisfied the kid was content, he set about finding something to make them for dinner. Because of the upset at the day care, they hadn't stopped to pick anything up as he'd originally planned.

Luckily, there was a package of chicken breasts thawed in the fridge and the makings for a salad. There were even a couple of slices of apple pie left over from his favorite local diner, Irma's Pie House. While he cleaned and prepared the chicken for grilling, Clint couldn't help glancing over at Leila every so often. She was slumped down onto the sofa in the living room and was currently staring at the blank TV screen across from her, her expression troubled and her dark eyes sad.

Thomas and I should go...Leave Las Vegas. Leave the country...

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Those words slashed through him like a scalpel. He berated himself for so many things. At the top of the list was not adequately protecting her and Thomas against Mike. He should have been proactive and hunted the man down. His options for what to do with him once he found him were limited, but surely he could have figured out something to get the man to back down.

The other thought that was beating around in his head was about this relationship he'd started with Leila. What had made him think it would be different, that it would last—unlike all the previous ones in his life? He'd been an idiot since the day Leila and Thomas had walked into his gun range and she'd asked for his help. Stupid for letting them get deeper and deeper into his life and his heart when he damned well knew better. People left. That was exactly why he chose not to get attached. When things got messy or difficult, people bailed. She was already talking about it.

After prepping the chicken breasts, he carried the platter to the patio doors. "I'm going to throw these on the grill."

Leila only nodded and stood up to join Thomas at the table. She didn't even look at him. She was pulling away from him already.

Good. Fine. That was what needed to happen. They'd shared one incredible night together. Nothing more. The sooner he got his head out of his ass and remembered that, the better. He needed to keep his heart out of this equation and his head in the game to protect them from her ex.

But as he stepped out into the cooler night air and fired up the gas grill, Clint couldn't seem to shake off the ache in his chest when he thought about Leila and Thomas

walking out of his life forever.

12

Later, after dinner, Leila sat across from Clint at the table and toyed with the dessert in front of her. Usually, she was a girl with a big appetite, but tonight Mike and his stalking had ruined what hunger she'd had. She poked a piece of apple with her fork and swirled it around in a little puddle of cinnamon-flavored goo. Poor Clint. She felt bad for dragging him into all this. Felt bad about messing with his life and his feelings. Felt bad for pretty much everything at this point.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, sighing.

Clint looked up at her, halting mid-bite, and frowned. "For what?"

She gave a dismissive wave, her fork glinting beneath the light over the table. "For all of this. Mike's a violent man, and I never should have brought that kind of trouble into your life. I know you faced danger in the military, but it's different to have it here in your home. You don't deserve to have any of this mess land on your doorstep."

He watched her for a few seconds, chewing slowly then swallowing. Clint sat back and narrowed his gaze. "What makes you think I've never been in trouble in the civilian world before?"

Now it was her turn to stare at him in disbelief. "You're kidding, right? You're like a boy scout compared to Mike. You were a SEAL, a decorated military veteran. You own a business. You help protect people. There's nothing that sounds like trouble there."

"I wasn't always such a good guy though," he said, toying with his bottle of ale. Next

to him, Thomas loudly chomped on his pie. “We don’t know each other that well, but when I was younger, I did my share of bad things.”

“Really?” She raised a brow at him, her tone doubtful. “Sorry. I can’t see it.”

“Ask any of the judges in town who were on the bench back then. They’ll tell you.” Clint shook his head and picked at the label on his bottle. “I was acting out. Teenage rage and rebellion. You know, residual anger about my parents’ deaths and being in the system. I vandalized a bunch of public properties. Almost burnt a house down setting off fireworks inside. The only reason I considered going into the Navy was because the last juvie court judge who sentenced me sat me down and explained it was either that or jail.” He shrugged, the tiny movement tugging at her heart. “I chose the military. Best decision I ever made. It helped me turn my life around. But not everyone’s so lucky. If that judge hadn’t talked to me that day, who knows how I would’ve ended up. I could’ve just as easily gone down the same path your ex did. I’m not condoning what he’s done, but I can understand how it happens.”

“No.” She stood and took her dishes to the sink. “You’re nothing like Mike. Nothing. He’s a selfish, self-centered, hurtful bastard. I won’t believe you’re like him. I can’t.” She turned on the water and rinsed her plates, even as her vision blurred.

Because if you’re like him, then everything I feel for you is wrong. And if I still can’t trust myself and my instincts, even after everything I’ve learned, who can I trust?

Well, shit.

Clint hung his head and stared at the table top. He hadn’t meant to make her cry. He’d only wanted her to know that he wasn’t perfect. No one was. That he’d made mistakes too, but he’d overcome them. At least most of them. Was letting her go without a fight another mistake? Felt like it. What if... what if he could open his heart to her, open his life? That would take a shitload of courage. But putting himself out

there was better than dealing with the shitload of regret he'd be left with if he didn't try.

He exhaled slowly. "You're right."

"What?" Leila said, not looking at him as she closed the dishwasher.

"I said you're right. Other than having issues in my past, I do try to be a better person now." He rocked back on the rear legs of his chair, a nervous habit he'd picked up in his youth. "The hardest part for me is my temper. I still lose it sometimes, but I can feel when it's happening and most times, I can stop myself from blowing up. I've never taken that anger out on anyone though, so don't worry about that."

"I wasn't. I know you'd never..." She turned slowly to look at him, and he righted his chair before reaching over to take her hand. There were faint lines of strain at the corners of her mouth and her eyes held shadows of fear. He wanted to do whatever was necessary to bring the light back into her life.

"Listen, honey." He twined his fingers with hers and tugged her closer. "Like I said, we don't really know each other that well. But I hope I've shown you that I'm a good bet. Dependable, trustworthy, safe. With everything that's happened to you and Thomas, I don't expect you to accept me into your life completely, but please give me a chance. I'll be here for you." That was as clear as he could make it. He knew instantly from the sad smile on her face that it wasn't enough.

When she pulled free, it was like a sucker punch to his heart. Leila walked over and picked Thomas up out of his chair. "I need to give him his bath and put him down for the night. See you in the morning."

Clint watched her walk away, the words begging her to come back to the kitchen teetering on his lips. But he swallowed them down with another swig of ale. Every

fiber of his being screamed at him to go after her, to convince her that he was different, that this thing between them could develop into something more, if they both wanted it. But that was the whole point—she didn't seem to want it. Not enough to stay.

She already had one foot out the door. Defending himself would only make it worse for both of them.

He'd been right about one thing though. They didn't really know each other that well.

Perhaps it would be best if they stayed that way. It was just going to take him some time to accept that. He busied himself cleaning up the kitchen. Then, he picked up the toys scattered around the living room, each one of them a reminder of Thomas and his mom. Soon, they'd be out of his life and his house for good.

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With nothing else to do, he went into his bedroom and watched an old movie. He barely saw the actors or heard the dialogue; he was too caught up in his own head. Finally, around three, he fell asleep. Despite that, Clint woke early to the sound of someone talking on the phone in the hallway. Leila. Her tone was quiet, but after years of getting up before the butt-crack of dawn in the Navy, he was a light sleeper.

“I don’t know, Mama,” she said, her voice tense. “We don’t have much but there will be a few boxes I’ll need to have shipped. I’ll need to check rates and schedules and all of that.”

Clint stared up at the ceiling, a knot of stress forming between his shoulders. She was serious about leaving then. His protective instinct railed at the thought of her out there on her own without him. It was irrational, but that was how he felt.

Grumbling to himself, he got up and pulled on a pair of loose sweatpants then padded to the door. He spotted Leila standing in the door to her bedroom, holding Thomas on one hip. Her sleep shirt stopped mid-thigh, giving him a nice look at her long, tanned legs. His body tightened with desire despite his wishes. Now wasn’t the time or place. Her face was turned away from him and he cleared his throat to get her attention.

Leila turned and saw him, her gaze giving his bare torso a quick once-over before she said into the phone, “I need to go, Mama. Love you. I’ll call you later.”

“Everything okay?” He asked, crossing his arms and leaning one shoulder against the doorframe.

She nodded. “Yes. Thomas was fussing, so I was up. My mother doesn’t always

consider the time difference.”

“Hmm.” He could tell from the way she was avoiding his eyes there was more to the story. Not to mention what he’d just overheard. Never one to beat around the bush, Clint lifted his chin. “You’re planning on leaving.”

It wasn’t a question.

With a sigh, she nodded. “I’m sorry. I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for me, especially letting us stay here, but I really think this is the best option.” She gave him a weak smile. “Maybe the only option.”

He wanted to tell her it wasn’t. That he’d protect her, protect Thomas. But he knew there were limits to what he could do, what she would let him do. Given that her ex had managed to track down the kid’s day care, who knew what the man might do next? Maybe she was right to go. It was her life, her kid. She had to make the choice that was right for her. He had no right to interfere in it. So, instead, all he did was give a curt nod before retreating back into his bedroom. “If that’s what you want.”

Leila watched him disappear into the shadows of his room then heard the shower start in his attached bath. She carried Thomas back into her bedroom and put him down on the center of her bed. He could play there while she packed. She was glad to have the task. It gave her something to focus on so that she didn’t dwell on the loneliness and resignation she’d seen in Clint’s sad blue eyes. It broke her heart, but what else was she supposed to do?

Her top priority now had to be protecting her son. Yes, there was a chance Mike would follow her to Puerto Rico and bring danger to her mom and grandparents, but she knew he was a danger to her here in Vegas. At least he’d have more of a struggle finding her in Puerto Rico. He didn’t speak the language, wouldn’t have his gang to back him up. And maybe he’d consider it victory enough to have chased her out of

town—maybe once she left, he'd finally leave her alone.

With a sigh, she pulled her suitcase out from the closet. Besides, Clint had been right earlier. They didn't know each other that well. How could she trust him to keep them safe when there was still so much they didn't know about each other? Even if his intentions were good—and she believed they were—he was only one man and Mike had who knew how many aggressive gang members waiting to help him. She shivered at the thought.

She sank down onto the edge of her mattress, her mind swirling and her heart aching. Moving home would mean uprooting her son, giving up the job and career she loved at the dental clinic, losing the few friends she'd made here in Vegas. All of the things she'd worked so hard for, everything she loved.

Tears stung her eyes before she swiped them away. Her old doubts and fears resurfaced. What kind of mother did this make her, that she would tuck her tail between her legs and skulk off at the first sign of danger? Her own mother would never have been such a coward. No. Samantha Ortiz would have fought to the death to protect what she cared for when Leila and her brother had been growing up. She would never have backed down. She would've fought like hell to save what was hers.

God, Leila felt like even more of a loser than she had before.

Dammit.

Feeling sorry for herself wasn't in her nature. Neither was hiding away from her problems.

Time for her to stand on her own and take action. Stop counting on other people to solve her problems. If living with a single mother all her life had taught her anything, it was to be self-reliant.

Decision made, she stood and changed into jeans and a sweater, then she began packing up their things.

Time to go back to her apartment and prepare to stand her ground. Alone.

Just the way it should be.

That's what I want, right?

Doubt crept in, but she pushed it aside. Yes. It was what she wanted. Because it had to be. She couldn't be dependent on Clint. She couldn't be dependent on her family either. In order to reclaim her self-respect, she would have to figure out how to depend solely on herself. She'd protect her son with everything she had inside her. She checked to make sure that the gun she'd purchased was in her purse. Clint had taught how to use it, and she had the necessary permits. It was a last resort, of course. She wasn't looking for trouble, but if it came to her, she'd do what she had to.

Now, she just wanted to get leaving over with. If she hurried, she could be out of there before Clint was done with his shower. This would all be easier if she didn't have to face him again. She'd leave him a note to thank him and say goodbye.

More tears fell, but she couldn't give in.

She was on her own now.

For better or worse.

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Leila sat in the parking lot of her apartment building for ten minutes, watching her surroundings. She was trying to be cautious, get the lay of the land. She was also using the time to try to figure out her next steps. On the drive from Clint's house, she'd changed her mind a hundred times about what she should do. She could try to stay in Vegas and tough it out. See where the situation went. But that seemed so risky. If it was just her, she might consider it worthwhile to stand her ground, but...

She glanced in the rearview mirror to where Thomas sat in his car seat. No, she couldn't risk him. She opened a travel app on her phone and searched for airplane tickets to Puerto Rico. There were flights later that day, but she needed a little time to settle her business, so she selected a morning flight the next day.

Okay. She'd go into her apartment, gather up the things she needed, and get out. She'd find an inexpensive motel near the airport and get on the plane tomorrow. A little risky, but overall a sensible plan. If she needed to, she'd leave Thomas with her mother, and return to Vegas to deal with Mike. Somehow.

Time to be brave. She got Thomas out of the car and walked quickly to her door on the first floor. She unlocked it and breathed a sigh of relief when she entered. Nothing had been disturbed. Mike hadn't broken in. She slid the deadbolt into place and put Thomas in his crib so she was free to move around. It wouldn't take her long to pack.

She was tossing extra clothes into a box when a fist pounding on her door startled her. She held perfectly still, hoping whoever it was would go away.

"I know you're in there, Leila. Open the fuckin' door. Now." Mike yelled.

Oh, god. She thought she'd been cautious enough, sitting outside her apartment for a while before going inside to make sure no one was lurking around, but someone must have been watching her place who she hadn't noticed. Someone who had told Mike that she'd come home. And now, here he was. She glanced through the open door of Thomas's room. He was contentedly playing. How could she have put her sweet boy in danger?

She had to get through this, had to protect him. She closed his bedroom door, hoping to spare him the worst of what was coming. The pounding continued.

"You got ten seconds and then I'm breakin' it down."

She pulled her phone from her pocket and sent a quick text to Clint, hoping he'd see it. She was just about to dial 911 when the door burst open. She jumped, accidentally dropping her phone, as he came toward her.

Her purse with her gun in it was on the other side of the room. Why hadn't she grabbed that?

"Bitch," Mike greeted her. He looked meaner than she'd ever seen him, but she held herself in place, ready to fight him with whatever she had, ready to protect her son.

Clint's bathroom was full of steam by the time he finished his shower. He didn't usually dawdle like that, but damn. He'd needed to take some time to get his head straight. He'd been berating himself for sleeping with Leila, for allowing himself to believe that they might have a future together after all this was over. He should have known better.

And yet, he hadn't been able to help himself.

With a sigh, he stepped out onto the warm tile floor and wrapped a towel around his

waist, yanking another towel off the rack nearby to scrub over his wet hair, then wipe a small spot clear on the mirror to stare at his reflection. “You’re such an idiot,” he said to himself. “A dumbass.”

The smart thing to do would be to put some emotional distance between them, as Leila had been doing. Keep her and Thomas at arms-length until all this was over to prevent his heart from being broken. Well, broken worse than it already had been anyway. It was too late now to mind his own business, but he could treat this like any other mission he’d been sent on in the SEALs. Do the work, protect the assets, then send them on their way. Yep. That’s what he’d do. Keep it strictly professional from here on out.

After shaving and brushing his teeth, Clint wandered back out into his bedroom to change. A glance down the hall showed light pouring through the open doorway of the guest room. Determined to stick to his plan, he tugged on a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then headed down to Leila’s room to apologize for acting like such a jerk earlier.

Except when he reached the doorway, he found the room empty. The bed was neatly made. The portable crib was empty.

Shit.

The bottom of his stomach dropped out.

“Leila?” he rushed to the living room but there was no one there. He ran to the kitchen. The kid snacks were gone from the counter. He staggered back to the living room. The basket of toys that had been there, including Clint’s rabbit, was gone.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He yanked his phone from its charger and prepared to dial her number when a note on the coffee table caught his attention. Cursing, he picked it up and read the words scrawled across the paper.

I'm sorry to go this way, but I think it's best for everyone. Thank you for taking Thomas and me in and thank you for teaching me how to protect myself. I'll always be grateful. Take care. L

Clint stared at the words for a moment, struggling to take them in. Leila was gone. She and Thomas were out there somewhere, on their own, with her ex after them. That was bad. So, so bad.

And it was his fault.

If he hadn't acted like such a dick to her before, if he'd kept his feelings out of the situation, if he'd done his job the way he should have, then she wouldn't have left. Wouldn't have put herself and Thomas in such danger.

"Fuck." Think. He needed to think. Despite the fear churning through him, Clint forced himself to concentrate on the facts. She couldn't have been gone from his house for long. He opened up the browser on his phone and checked flights out of McCarren Airport. Nothing to Puerto Rico until this afternoon. Okay. Maybe she didn't go straight to the airport. But if not there, then where?

The answer only made the nausea bubbling in his gut worsen. Her apartment. The exact worst choice she could've made. He'd bet good money her ex had his eyes all over that place. With his gang buddies involved, they'd be casing the apartment complex twenty-four-seven. Dammit.

He rushed back to his bedroom and grabbed his Sig, plus two extra clips of ammo, while he jammed his feet into shoes. He stopped by the kitchen to grab some zip ties,

just in case he had to take Mike down and keep him restrained until the cops showed up, and then he headed out. He'd just about made it to his truck when a text dinged on his phone. The message hit him like a slap in the face.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 3:46 am

At my apartment. Mike's here. Help.

Clint's brain immediately switched into crisis-mode, the same way it did when a mission went to hell back in the SEALs. His emotions switched off and he ran like a machine on pure adrenaline, all thoughts distilled down to clear directives. Get to Leila. Get her and Thomas safe. Get that bastard behind bars again where he belonged.

As he peeled out of his driveway and headed toward Leila's address, he put in a call to 911 telling them the situation while taking the backroads to avoid traffic. He arrived at the complex ahead of the cops and was out of his truck with his weapon drawn, about to walk up to Leila's door, when he heard the shouts coming from inside.

"Stop this, Mike!" Leila's voice was firm and strong. "I'm not your property. You don't own me. And you sure as hell don't own our son."

"You're mine, bitch," Mike's angry voice responded. "The minute you said 'I do,' I put my mark on you. You either return to me, or I'll make sure you never belong to anyone else again. That includes your pretty-boy protector. I'll skin him alive if I ever see him again."

Clint swallowed hard, his mouth desert dry. He wasn't scared for himself, but he was terrified for her and Thomas. He clicked the safety off of his weapon and kept his back pressed to the brick wall beside the entrance to Leila's apartment to conceal himself as best he could until he was ready to make his move. He needed to know where Leila and Thomas were so he could ensure they didn't get caught in the

crossfire.

A sinisternickechoed near his ear and Clint froze. Son of a bitch. He'd been so focused on what was going on inside that he'd forgotten to keep track of his own surroundings. He raised both hands slightly, to show he wasn't a threat as the cold barrel of a gun pressed to his head, right behind his ear.

"What the fuck you think you're doing, eh?" a man growled. Clint glanced back over his shoulder to see the guy. No one he recognized, but those tats marked him as part of the same gang as Mike. "Put the gun down, asshole, and step back."

He did as the dude asked, going as slowly as possible to give the cops time to arrive. The man shoved Clint back, then picked up the gun and tossed it out of sight, behind some overgrown bushes. Clint waited, pretending to play along while looking for his opportunity to take this guy out. No way was a cocky gang banger taking him down.

"Okay, fucker." The guy said, forcing Clint around to face him then placing the barrel of his gun directly between his eyes. "Time to die."

No, time to act.

A sudden crash sounded from the apartment. That, along with the sirens wailing in the distance, gave Clint the distraction he needed to make his move. He grabbed the guy's wrist and twisted downward until he heard a satisfying snap. With a howl, the guy released the weapon, and Clint kicked it away. Within seconds, he'd kneed the bastard in the groin and elbowed him in the nose before securing both arms behind the gang member's back. He smashed the guy's cheek against the brick wall of Leila's apartment building.

"Any more of you assholes out here?" Clint asked the guy, putting more pressure on his injured wrist to get him to talk. "Tell me!"

“Just me,” the guy finally growled. “Get the fuck off me! You broke my goddamn wrist. My nose, too.”

Clint used one of the zip ties to fasten the guy’s wrists together, then tossed him aside, leaving him for the police to deal with. He thought about trying to find his Sig but decided that getting to Leila as fast as he could took priority. He charged for her apartment. One threat neutralized, one to go.

Through the smashed open door, he spotted Leila huddled in a corner as Mike brandished a pistol in her face. The place had been trashed and Mike was still ranting about all the injustices done to him, but Clint only cared about Leila. He didn’t take the time to be cautious. He needed to get Mike’s attention away from her, immediately.

He entered loudly, knowing that Mike would spin around to face him, which was exactly what he wanted. He almost smiled when Mike turned his weapon at him.

“I’ll kill you, motherfucker. Don’t touch my wife,” Mike shouted.

Clint stilled, doing his best to keep his anger under control. He had to play this right, keep Mike focused on him and not on Leila until the cops arrived. Teeth gritted, Clint snarled at the guy. “She’s not your wife. And maybe if you treated her like the queen she is when you had the chance, she never would’ve left you. How about we settle this man to man? Or are you going to hide behind a woman?”

“Fuck you!” He cocked the weapon and pointed the barrel between Clint’s eyes. “She’s mine. She belongs to me. My wife. My kid. None of your goddamned business. Understand? And I don’t hide behind anybody. You best say your prayers cause you’re about to die, motherf—”

Time seemed to slow as Clint’s mind raced through the possible scenarios. He could

charge the guy and tackle him, but with a loaded gun in the mix there was no telling where the bullet would strike. No. He couldn't take that chance with Leila in the room and Thomas probably no more than a wall away. He could dodge to the side, but that was still taking the chance of a wild shot.

As the sound of sirens outside grew louder, closer, Clint watched the desperation rise in Mike's eyes and figured that distraction might work. Keep the guy talking until his route of escape was gone. But that might only make things worse. He'd bet that Mike would do anything to not go back to prison. He'd probably prefer death by shootout over a future behind bars.

"Whoa," Clint said, holding his hands up in the air. "Calm down, okay? Let's talk about this and no one needs to die tonight. Or go to prison."

From behind a closed door, he could hear Thomas calling for his mother, his cries getting louder and louder. The sound seemed to put Mike even more on edge. "I'm sick of talking." Mike scowled at Clint. "No one fucking listens anyway. Get on your knees, asshole."

Clint did as he asked, looking for a way out of this mess that wouldn't involve the risk of casualties, other than Mike. From the periphery of his vision, he saw Leila inch slowly toward the corner where her purse sat. What the hell was she doing? She was moving in the opposite direction of Thomas's room. Was she trying to draw attention away from her son?

Mike noticed the movement and snapped his attention back to Leila. "Stay right where you are. Don't move. You think I'm fucking stupid or something, bitch?"

She froze in place, defiance sparking in her dark eyes though she didn't respond. Mike swiveled back to Clint. "Hope you enjoyed your taste of my wife, asshole, cause she's the last woman you'll ever have. Gonna have to beat her good for

steppin' out on me too. Maybe I'll kick your ass too, just for the hell of it. Then I'll put a bullet in your brain."

Clint fisted his hands at his sides and glared up at Mike, ready to unleash a whole can of whoop-ass on this ignorant son of a bitch. Threatening him was one thing. Threatening the woman Clint loved and her child was another. No one would hurt Leila. An icy calm descended over Clint's mind, the same one that hit before each battle he'd fought overseas. One of them was going down and Clint was damned sure it wasn't going to be him.

He kept his gaze locked with Mike's even as he prepared to lunge forward, planning to go for the guy's ankles, hoping to sweep his feet out from under him and knock him to the floor. "Get out of the way, Leila!" he called in warning, praying she'd take cover before the bullets started flying.

"No." The sound of a round being chambered echoed loudly, and Clint's heart stumbled. "You get out of the way, Clint," she said. "This is my fight to settle."

Ashot reverberated through the small apartment and both men froze. Thomas screamed more loudly from the other room. Clint stared up wide-eyed at Leila while she pointed her Sig Sauer at her ex, her expression determined, her shooting stance perfect. The screech of tires and the wail of sirens reached the parking lot, followed by the shouts of officers outside, but Leila didn't budge, keeping her gun trained on her ex.

"For the last time," she said, her tone bristling with anger. "I am not your property. Neither is my son. You might be his father biologically, but you'll never be true family to him. Try to come after us again, and I'll blow your brains out." She leaned in closer just as the cops raced into the room. "And I won't miss, you bastard."

"Drop your weapon!" one of the cops shouted and Leila immediately complied, putting her gun on the floor and raising her hands. The officers frisked her, Clint and Mike. Leila gave the officer's a quick explanation of what had happened since Mike showed up at the apartment. With each word describing the things Mike had threatened to do to her and Thomas, Clint's gut knotted tighter. With each word, his pride in Leila also grew. Being confident shooting a paper target at a gun range was one thing. Having the balls to take down a human when necessary was something else entirely. Damn.

She was the bravest woman he'd ever known. He'd come here to save her, but she'd saved herself.

"Please, can I go to my son now?" she asked. An officer had opened the bedroom

door to check on Thomas, but the boy continued to wait for his mother.

“Go ahead.” When the cop gave her permission, she rushed to Thomas, picking him up and hugging him tightly to her. She tucked his face against her shoulder, and Clint saw tears streaming down her cheeks. He wanted to go to both of them, hold them, comfort them, but the cops were busy asking him questions that he was doing his best to answer.

A couple of the officers knew Mike on sight and were aware of his criminal record, so they quickly sorted out who the bad guy was.

“All right, you’re coming with us,” an officer said to Mike after slapping a pair of handcuffs on him. “Your parole officer’s meeting us at the station. He’s not going to be too pleased with you.”

Mike snarled and struggled against the cops holding him as they hauled him out, but Clint just breathed a sigh of relief that it was finally over.

Clint continued to answer questions, then showed his ID to prove his identity. When he was finally cleared, he walked over to where Leila stood near the corner, rocking Thomas in her arms. A female officer was with her, interviewing her, but the woman walked away when Clint approached.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his body still humming with energy. “Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she whispered, her face buried in Thomas’s hair. “I’m sorry I left earlier. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“None of this is your fault. Mike’s the bad guy here. Not you.” He wanted to hold her and comfort her but stopped himself. This wasn’t the time or the place. “You... you

were amazing.”

Leila snorted, then kissed the top of her son’s head. “I guess what they say is true. A mother’s love is the strongest force on earth. All I cared about was making sure Thomas was safe. I would have done anything to guarantee that.” She bit her lip before continuing. “I’m glad I didn’t have to shoot Mike, though. That would have been hard to live with.”

“It can be,” Clint said. He’d been there, and he knew that taking a life was traumatic, no matter how bad the guy was.

“I should thank you for teaching me how to handle a weapon. I was terrified, but your words about holding the gun and taking aim kept running through my head. They gave me courage when I needed it most.”

“I’m glad for that.” God, he wished he knew what to say to her. There was so much he wanted to say, but she was still visibly reeling from what had happened. So was he, truth be told. He’d faced some hellish situations, but none of them had hit him like this one had. Things had been a heartbeat away from going sideways.

“They tell me that I have to go down to the station to sign my statement,” she said, looking past him.

“Do you need a ride?” Clint offered, hoping she’d let him do that for her.

“No, it’s fine,” she said after only a slight hesitation. “I’ll go with the officers.”

His gut clenched, but Clint nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you there then.”

A moment later, he watched her walk out with one of the cops, Thomas still in her arms. Clint followed behind, feeling more alone than he ever had before and knowing

he had no right to expect anything more. Leila was a strong, independent woman. It was one of the things he loved most about her. She was making it clear that she didn't need him anymore. So the only thing he could do was let her go.

Leila finished up with the police about two hours later and went to find Thomas, who was being watched by yet another officer. She just wanted to take her son and go home. So much had happened in the last few hours that her head was still spinning. Mike was back behind bars where he belonged. She and Thomas were safe from him. One major problem in her life was resolved.

As for Clint, though... She sighed and stopped, leaning against the wall in the brightly lit hallway. That problem remained. She was grateful he'd shown up after the way she'd bailed on him, but she'd seen the hurt and anger banked in his blue eyes back at the apartment. Knowing his past and how she'd left, Leila didn't expect him to forgive her for leaving the way she had. He had issues with getting close to others. She'd broken through some of that, and then she'd burned him in the worst way.

Leaving him only to reach out minutes later, desperately needing his help to escape another man. She really doubted that that was the way to anyone's heart. Maybe it was for the best though. Her life was still a mess at the moment, even with Mike out of the picture. She had some rebuilding to do. And Clint deserved a woman without all her baggage, someone unencumbered by a kid and a past and a million other things that made Leila totally unsuitable for him.

No. Leaving was for the best. What had happened at the apartment only reinforced that. Seeing him in danger and knowing she was the cause of it had nearly been too much to bear. No. She needed to get away for a bit, take some time to think and figure out what was best for her son. Perhaps her trip to see her mother in Puerto Rico was still her best option. She checked the travel app on her phone for the ticket confirmation. Two tickets for the following morning. She had just finished texting her mother to let her know that she and Thomas were coming when another door opened

at the other end of the hall.

Mike was led out of an interrogation room and toward a sign that read Temporary Lock Up. One of the officers headed in Leila's direction to fill her in on what would happen next.

"Don't worry," the female officer who had stayed with her since the apartment said. "He'll be transferred from temporary holding to prison shortly. He's going away for a while this time. In addition to violating his parole, when we searched his car, we found a significant quantity of drugs."

"I want my attorney," Mike shouted to someone in the interview room, just before he disappeared around the corner. "We can work a deal. I'll tell you what I know about the gang in exchange for leniency."

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Leila shook her head and gave a disgusted snort. That was her ex all right. Always trying to work an angle. She hoped it turned around and bit him in the butt this time. His gang wouldn't take lightly to him turning state's witness against them.

"What about the other members of his gang?" she asked. She'd told the officers about the threats they'd made to her at the grocery store. "I don't want them coming after me, blaming me for him getting arrested."

"I don't think they'll be a problem," the cop assured her. "From what his cohort from the apartment complex was telling us in the interrogation room, he wasn't there to act as back-up. That dude was there to take Mike out himself. The drugs in his car were ones Mike stole from his gang. My guess is his former gang members will teach him a costly lesson in prison. There's a bunch of them at the place where he's going. He's going to have to watch his back."

The thought made Leila shiver. So much horrible violence. Mike had brought it on himself, but it still left her feeling ill.

"We'll keep an eye on your apartment for a while longer," the cop added. "Just to make sure there are no more problems. The place is pretty beat up though. You might want to stay somewhere else until you can have repairs made."

"No worries." She gave her a sad smile. "My son and I are flying to Puerto Rico in the morning."

"You're still going?" a voice said from behind her, and she turned to find Clint standing there. He must've walked up while she'd been talking to the cop. He looked

as exhausted as she felt, and his blue gaze was guarded. “Now that Mike is taken care of, you don’t have to leave.”

“Yeah, I do.” Leila pushed away from the wall, hating that she was hurting him but knowing it was for the best. “At least for a little while. I need time to think and decompress. Going to see my mother will give me that. Plus, Thomas will get to spend time with hisabuela. It’s all good.”

He watched her closely for a second, as if he wanted to argue, then nodded. “If that’s what you need, then you should do it. You and your son have been through a lot of trauma at the hands of your ex. You deserve every good thing now. I hope you do what makes you happy.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say thathecould make her happy. But her actions had ruined that. He wouldn’t trust her, wouldn’t let her in again. And she couldn’t blame him for that.

“I hope the same thing for you,” she said.

“What time’s your flight?”

“Just before noon,” she said, staring at her toes because it was just too painful to meet his gaze.

“Come back to my house for the night, and I’ll take you to the airport in the morning,” he said.

“I...” It wasn’t a good idea, and she was searching for an excuse, even though she wanted nothing more than to be with him. “I’ll get a motel room.”

“My place is familiar to Thomas. Wouldn’t that be better for him? He’s had a tough

day, too.”

He had a point. Thomas really would be more comfortable there. Her apartment was still a crime scene, and an impersonal motel sounded horrible. “Okay, I appreciate that. I promise we’ll stay out of your hair.”

“No need for that.” He gave her a smile that weakened her knees and almost, almost made her reach for him.

She was definitely going to have to keep her distance from him tonight.

15

Clint stood in his quiet gun range the following morning and did his best to concentrate on taking inventory. He’d fallen behind in his tasks what with all the other stuff he’d been dealing with. Lessons and life and Leila.

His chest squeezed at the thought of her and how they’d parted.

Dammit. It wasn’t supposed to end this way. He wasn’t supposed to feel like his world had ended when she’d gotten out of his truck and walked into the airport with Thomas.

He liked his solitude. Had always enjoyed his independence, at least until a certain Latina beauty with liquid dark eyes and an adorable son had dropped into his life out of nowhere. Now, it seemed, they were all he could think about. He’d hoped she’d come to him in the night. He hadn’t known how to tell her how he was feeling, but he could have shown her with his body and his touch.

True to her word, though, she’d stayed out of his way. They’d stopped and picked up sandwiches for dinner. Once they’d gotten to his place, she’d quickly fed Thomas and

put him to bedearly. Clint had expected her to come back out to the living room so they could talk, but she hadn't. She'd stayed in her room, only appearing that morning just minutes before they had to leave for the airport.

It all sucked.

Grumbling, he moved down the display cases, marking numbers and check boxes on his clipboard, stopping abruptly as the tip of his black work boot knocked against something on the floor that was half hidden beneath the display case. Curious, he reached down and picked up a tiny thunderbird toy. He squinted at it. How'd that gotten there? Then he realized. It must've been left over from the last time Suzie had watched Thomas during one of Leila's shooting lessons. The older woman liked to bring Thomas little gifts from her souvenir stand.

Shit. Clint scrubbed his hand over his face as he remembered the cute kid with the mischievous grin and dark, tousled hair. Clint sniffed the toy and found it still carried the boy's sweet scent—baby shampoo and fabric softener.

With a sigh, he set it on the counter and continued on with his work. He expected he'd spend a lot of time at work from now on. His house was too full of reminders of Leila and Thomas. He'd returned home briefly after taking them to the airport only to find a pair of her socks left in the dryer in the laundry room, Thomas's crackers in the cupboard, and a tube of Leila's rose and cinnamon scented hand lotion in the bathroom. He was sad to see his old stuffed rabbit back on the shelf in the closet like the past days had never happened. He would have liked the kid to have something to remember him by. He'd picked it up, carrying it around for a moment before forcing himself set it aside.

Gah! What the hell was wrong with him? He wasn't the guy who pined over a woman and a little boy. Was he?

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Before he could answer that for himself, the bells over the front door jangled and in walked Devin, talking on his cell phone. He gave Clint a small wave as he finished up his conversation then tucked his phone away.

“Hey, buddy,” Devin said, his drawl as slow as his steps. “What’s up?”

“Not much.” They were friendly, but not so friendly that Clint would spill his guts about what had gone on between him and Leila. Devin’s commentary on his situation was the last thing he needed. It was already bad enough that he couldn’t stop thinking about her and Thomas, reliving all the memories of the last few days like some sappy movie in his head on endless loop. He gave a one-shoulder shrug and kept on with his inventory. “You come to shoot today?”

“I did.” Devin grinned. “Hate to lose my touch. You got room in the range?”

“No one else here yet.” Clint set his clipboard aside and grabbed the keys from behind the counter. Devin followed him toward the back of the store. Flipping on the lights in the range, Clint gazed around taking a deep breath. It was probably all his imagination, but he swore he still smelled a hint of Leila’s spicy scent in the air. They’d been the last two people in here. Shoving that thought aside with great determination, he set up a stall for Devin. “Usual rate applies. Just let me know when you’re done.”

He’d almost made it back into the shop when Devin said from behind him, “Where’s the pretty lady?”

“Gone.” Getting out just that one word was hard.

“Gone? Like out of your life gone?” Devin asked.

“That’s what I said,” Clint gritted out.

“That blows. Wanna talk?”

“About what?” Clint scowled as he turned around.

“You know. Her.”

“There is no her. Not anymore.” He put his hands on his hips and stared down the other man.

“Uh-huh. Sure.” Devin pulled out his firearm from the holster at his waist and chambered a round. “Whatever you say, buddy. But she clearly meant something to you.”

“Fuck off,” Clint said to his friend, though the words lacked any heat. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know I’ve seen you in here with that woman every day for a while,” Devin said. “And now you say she’s gone. And you look like someone kicked your puppy. Moping around, sad and sorry. If those aren’t symptoms of a broken heart, I don’t know what is.”

The fact Devin was right didn’t improve Clint’s disposition any. “Whatever, man. I don’t need a woman in my life. I’m happy where I’m at. Love and kids only complicate things.”

Devin stared at him a long moment, then said, “Yep, you’re probably right. Guy like you, a lone wolf? You got no business with a wife and a kid. You’re better off

without 'em. Nothing but trouble, those two. Could tell it from the start.”

Frowning, Clint leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, feeling oddly defensive now. It was one thing for him to lament his time with Leila and Thomas. Quite another for someone else—someone who had no idea what had transpired or how deep their feelings went—to judge them. “She wasn’t trouble. Neither was Thomas. They were in a bad situation, and I helped them out of it. Everyone’s got problems to deal with. Don’t make her into something she’s not. Leila’s smart and funny and kind and?—”

Devin’s slow grin clued Clint into the fact that he’d just been played. “She is, huh? Sounds pretty wonderful. Like maybe a treasure. Dude, what you’re describing is what most guys, including me, want. Be a shame to let that go in my estimation, lone wolf or not.”

With a reproachful look at Devin, Clint walked back into the shop. Dammit. He hated to admit it, but maybe letting Leila and Thomas go off on their own without telling her how he felt was a mistake. He closed his eyes and remembered their goodbye when he’d dropped her off at the airport. She’d given him a quick, hard hug with tears in her eyes and yearning in her expression. At the time, he’d put it down as wistfulness for home and the stress of the day. But what if it hadn’t been that at all? What if she’d changed her mind about needing time away? What if she’d wanted to stay here, in Vegas, with him instead?

And he hadn’t so much as asked her to stay. Would she have considered being with him if he’d just had the balls to ask?

The knot between his shoulder blades that had been there since he’d first gotten her text about Mike’s arrival at her apartment tightened even further, sending sharp pains down his arms and sharpening his resolve.

He glanced up at the clock. Ten forty-five. Her flight was scheduled to depart at quarter to twelve. One hour away. He could make it. Just. It was a damn good thing being a SEAL had taught him to think on his feet—or behind the wheel.

Clint grabbed the keys to his truck from behind the counter then rushed back to push open the door to the gun range, catching Devin while he reloaded his magazine. “Hey, can you watch the shop for me for a while? I have someplace I need to be.”

His friend gave him a nod and a smile. “Sure thing, buddy. Go get her.”

Leila sat at the gate for her flight at McCarren Airport, doing her best to keep Thomas occupied. The air smelled of coffee from the kiosks nearby and the sounds of slot machines jangling echoed off the walls. She felt almost as restless as her son was and had to prevent herself from jumping up and pacing. She missed her mother, but honestly, she’d miss Vegas, with its lights and excitement and belief that luck was just around the corner even more.

Most of all, though, she’d miss Clint.

As if reading her thoughts, Thomas held out the plastic car he’d been running over the seat next to her to point at one of the numerous happy couples strolling by on the concourse. One man with a muscular build and light brown hair had caught his attention. “Sint, Sint,” Thomas chanted.

Her heart fluttered. That was the way he said Clint’s name. It hit her like an arrow to the chest. They’d known him such a short time, but it seemed she wasn’t the only one who’d gotten attached. Leila’s eyes stung with unshed tears. It was stupid. So, so stupid. She’d thought she’d wanted to get away from it all, but now...

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Clint had been so incredibly kind and decent to them, keeping them safe when they'd needed his protection the most. Maybe that was why she was hesitating to leave him. It wasn't like she was going away forever. Just for a few weeks. But neither of them had suggested seeing each other when she returned. Her chest ached and her gut felt tied in knots, probably the result of stress and left-over adrenaline, along with some emotions running seriously high.

She sighed, watching more happy couples and happy families around her. They only served to remind her what a mess she'd made of her own life. She'd tried so hard not to screw things up for her son, and yet it seemed that was exactly what she'd done. Months ago, back when it had been just her and Thomas before Mike had been paroled, she'd considered herself happy. She'd been making her way in the world, doing well at her job and bringing up Thomas the best she could.

But then she'd met Clint and spent time with him in his home, almost like a real family, and she'd realized that what she'd considered happiness before paled in comparison to what it felt like being with Clint. Having him there, as a partner and a friend, showed her that loving, respectful relationships were possible between men and women. Showed her how lovely thing could be with someone in her life.

Well, crap.

Was she just hiding from reality again, as she'd done with Mike when she'd thought he was a better person than he was? She'd refused to see Mike for what he was until she was in deep with him. She was older and wiser now, more in tune with herself and her desires. And Clint was nothing like Mike. He was real and honest, but was it worth taking a chance on staying here and finding out what they could have? Inside

her, everything felt discombobulated and disconnected, in complete disarray.

When she closed her eyes, though, and centered on one thing—Clint—all the pieces came together. A sense of calm and resolve came over her. Suddenly going home to Puerto Rico sounded like the worst idea in the world. She wanted to see her mother and grandparents again, yes, but this was her home. She could go to Puerto Rico later, for a visit, when she was happy and perhaps with Clint in tow, if he'd have her and Thomas back in his life. She was determined to find out if he would. She had to. She owed herself that.

"Change of plans, sweet boy," she said to Thomas, and strapped him in his stroller.

She gathered up their things, took the handle of Thomas's stroller with one hand and grabbed the handle of her suitcase with the other before heading back down the concourse toward the security checkpoint.

"Attention Air Carib passengers. Flight 3560 for San Juan, Puerto Rico now boarding at Gate 7E," the announcer said over the PA system overhead. "Repeating. Air Carib flight 3560 for San Juan now boarding all rows, all passengers at Gate 7E. Thank you."

Leila's heart thudded in her chest as she continued forward, away from her plane and toward whatever might happen with Clint. Even if he didn't want her and Thomas, even if he chose to remain alone, she wasn't ready to leave her life here behind. The police had assured her that Mike and his gang were no longer a threat to her, and she believed them this time. She could start fresh here. Build a new life, a better life, the one she'd always dreamed of. Hopefully, with Clint as a part of it.

She'd just about reached the end of the concourse when she heard a familiar deep voice call to her from behind the security checkpoint. Her pulse pounded loud in her ears and her throat dried.

Time slowed as she approached him. Thomas started shouting from his stroller. “Sint! Sint!”

He was here at the airport. Had he come back for her? She felt a surge of hope, but she wouldn’t let herself trust it yet.

16

Clint felt out of breath, hot and bothered, but wasn’t sure if it was because of the gorgeous woman and her child in front of him or the fact that he’d raced to get here. After driving at top speed and sprinting into the airport from the parking garage, he’d spent the past ten minutes begging the TSA agent to let him through without a boarding pass. He’d gotten a firm no and had been feeling desperate when he’d spotted her.

Leila stopped, standing there, separated by that damned yellow tape of the security lines, looking like his every fantasy come to life. Her dark hair rippled over her shoulders in messy waves and there were slight shadows under her eyes, but she was there and that’s what mattered.

He swallowed hard then said, “Hey.”

Smooth move, idiot.

“Don’t move.” He retreated as fast as he could through the security line and went to her.

“Hi, Clint,” she said when he was in front of her. Her expression was guarded, but she’d been leaving the gate area rather than boarding her flight. That had to mean something. “What are you doing here?”

“I...uh.” He felt tongue-tied and twisted in the worst possible way but somehow managed to get the words out. “I didn’t want to leave things like we did. I thought you should know some things. About me. About us.”

She kept her dark gaze on him as another announcement echoed overhead. “Passengers for Air Carib flight 3560 to San Juan, Puerto Rico, please board at Gate 7E.”

His heart battered against his ribcage and his throat felt tight as a fist.

Tell her, dumbass. Tell her before it’s too late.

But too many years of isolation took their toll and those old walls he’d built around his heart didn’t come tumbling down so easily. Instead of dropping to his knees and begging her to stay like he should have, he proceeded with more caution. “That’s your flight, isn’t it? Do you need to get going?”

“I thought you had things to tell me first,” Leila said, her beautiful lips trembled slightly as she spoke. “What do you need to say, Clint?”

“Right. Yeah.” He wiped his damp palms on his jeans and prayed for eloquence. “Listen. I know you think going back home with your mother is the right choice for you and Thomas, but what if it’s not?”

“Are you suggesting a better alternative?” she asked. And there it was, that same hint of yearning he’d seen earlier when he’d dropped her off. A spark of hope lit within him, spurring Clint on with his confession.

“I am.” He took a deep breath and squared his shoulder, determined to see this through no matter how fear was shredding him up inside. Just because everyone else in his past had been temporary didn’t mean this woman had to be. “Everything you

need is right here in Vegas. A job you love. A home for you and Thomas. A man who...a man who loves you and will protect you no matter what.”

The words hung between them as she just blinked at him.

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Oh God. Please don't let her walk away, too. Please.

Her small, sweet smile nearly killed him. "And who would this man be?"

His breath caught in his chest, and he forced himself to breath and relax. "Me. I want you, Leila. All of you. Your messy past, your messy life now, whatever your future brings. I want it all. Thomas, too. I want to share everything with you. I'll be an open book, if you want me to be. Just please don't leave. Move back in with me and stay. Stay forever."

Stunned, Leila just looked at him. Wow. She'd expected him to maybe ask her to delay her flight so they could talk. She'd not expected him to hand her everything she'd ever wanted on a silver platter.

She tamped down the burgeoning excitement within her, the crazy thrill that wanted her to blurt out an enthusiastic "Yes!" immediately. She couldn't just follow her instincts—not when she still didn't trust them completely. She needed to think this through, make a rational decision. She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "Maybe we could find a quieter place to talk?"

"You're staying?" He looked like an eager puppy trotting through the airport lobby beside her.

"Final call for boarding, Air Carib flight 3560 to San Juan. Repeat, final call. Thank you," the announcer said.

"I guess I am. For now." Leila swallowed hard, doing her best not to run over

anyone's toes with the wheels of her carry on. She stepped onto a moving walkway and struggled to keep her balance. Between the ground moving beneath her and the man she'd fallen in love with standing close enough beside her for his heat to penetrate her thin cotton shirt, it was difficult to feel steady.

At least Thomas was happy, chattering on. Not all of his words made sense, but that didn't seem to matter. Clint was leaning over, talking to him like they were having a real conversation and looking totally adorable while doing it too, but she had to be smart about this.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder and ignored the overwhelming urge to burrow into Clint's arms and let him share her burden. He would. She knew he would. And he had asked her to stay. More than that, he'd claimed that he wanted to be a part of her and Thomas's life, even promising to share his home and his life with her.

It was far more than any other man had ever given her.

When the moving walkway ended, he took the stroller from her, keeping up his conversation with Thomas as they rounded a corner into the sunny atrium on their way outside into the dry desert heat and over to the short-term parking lot.

"Leila?" Clint said, catching her arm as they arrived at his truck. "Please. Tell me what you're thinking."

She was thinking so many thoughts. Some of them were hopeful and amazing. Others were more cautious. "I'm staying. Obviously." She gave him a small smile. "At least for now." She put Thomas in the car seat that was still in Clint's truck while he loaded her suitcase and the stroller in the back. When she was sitting next to him on the front seat, she felt compelled to be completely truthful with him. "But that doesn't mean I'm agreeing to the rest of it. I just got out of one situation with a man I had very deep feelings for, at one time. I'm not sure I'm ready to rush into another one."

Dammit. Why had she said that? What was wrong with her? Back in the airport, before Clint had shown up, she'd been all about exploring a relationship with him, having a fresh start right here in Vegas, giving the connection between them a chance to grow into something more.

Now though, with him there, beside her, offering her exactly what she wanted, Leila hesitated. It seemed that her old fears weren't quite conquered yet.

As they headed back toward his house on the outskirts of the city, she called her mother and told her there'd been a change of plans and that she'd talk with her more later. Then she spent the rest of the drive staring out at the arid landscape blurring past and saying a silent prayer, asking for a sign that this was the right decision for her.

Please God, don't let me screw this up again.

Once they arrived at his house, she got Thomas out of the backseat while Clint retrieved her luggage and the stroller. They walked up the sidewalk to the front door together. Together, like a family would. Clint stopped on the porch, fumbling with his keys, his movements oddly stilted as if he was nervous. She found the thought endearing and found herself falling for him a little bit more, if that were possible.

He finally fitted the key in the lock and pushed the door open. Just inside, he turned to face her, the warmth and sincerity in his eyes making her heart ache. "I left the crib up and there's still some of Thomas's food in the kitchen, too, if he's hungry. I'm really glad you're here. Both of you."

"Me get down," Thomas commanded, and Leila put her son on his feet. He immediately dashed off to get the stuffed bunny that was sitting on the coffee table.

That wasn't where she'd left it earlier. Clint must have put it there. Did that mean

he'd been walking around his house, thinking of her and Thomas? It must. You wanted a sign, chica? Here it is.

"I'm glad we're here, too." Her pulse was racing, and her mouth was dry, but her nervousness was mixed with excitement. Before she could stop herself, she closed the distance between them and hugged Clint tight, burying her face in his neck and inhaling his scent. "And if you'll have me, have us, I plan on staying this time."

"Thank God," he said, giving her a long and lingering kiss. When they broke apart, he smiled down at Thomas. "Hear that, little man? You and your mom are moving in. Maybe you guys can help me make this place a real home."

She smiled up at him. She couldn't seem to stop herself. There was nowhere else she wanted to be than with him. Together, they'd make this a beautiful and loving home. "Yes. We will."

If she told the truth, though, it already felt like home to her.

17

Six months later...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Leila squinted down the lane at Ask Questions Later gun range as the machine dragged her used paper target toward her. She'd kept up her lessons and was now pretty damned good, if she did say so herself. Actually, Clint agreed with her. The machine stopped in front of her, and she surveyed the three bullet holes in the target. Chest, stomach, and pelvis. Centre mass, just like Clint had taught her. Take down the threat first, ask questions later.

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They'd been so happy since she'd made her decision to stay in Vegas and move in with him. She thanked God each day for the second chance she'd been given with him. Thomas was growing by leaps and bounds, too. He was talking in full sentences these days, most of which even made sense. Clint read to him each night and she was working with him on his coloring skills and basic counting. Before she knew it, it would be time to get him into pre-school. Time was going so fast.

Her job at the dental clinic was going well, too, and she was up for a promotion to staff leader. She loved her clients and her work and was considering going back to school at night at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas to become a full-fledged dentist. It would mean lots of hard work and tons of studying, not to mention more student loans, but she was done avoiding risks—especially when there was a chance of such great rewards. Look at the rewards she'd gotten from the last risk she'd taken. A life she loved, a son she adored, a loyal, generous, kind-hearted man who made all of her dreams come true. She'd been truly blessed, and she knew it.

Speaking of that kind-hearted man...

Clint peeked through the door then entered the gun range, walking over to her and slipping his arms around her from behind, pulling her back into his chest, his breath warm against her ear. "Look at that beautiful target work. No wonder I love you so much, honey."

"Aw, thanks, sweetheart. I love you, too." She turned slightly to kiss him over her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Nothing much. Store's been busy, but I wanted to let you know that I saw the news

at noon.”

Leila’s heart gave a little skip and she moved away to face him. “Did they have anything on about the trial?”

Mike’s old gang had been rounded up one-by-one over the last few months and taken into custody. The media had said that her ex had turned state’s witness and would be going into Witness Protection after testifying. Good thing for Mike, since if any of those bastards caught up with him, he’d be dead in no time. The gang members didn’t take well to betrayal.

Good for her too, since it meant the threat to her from that quadrant was finally over. WitSec would hide Mike somewhere far away from here—and he’d know better than to return. There had been no trouble for her from Mike’s gang since his arrest, so she believed the police officer had been right in saying that they’d leave her alone.

“Nope. Just that it’s going as expected and the whole thing should be wrapped up by the end of this week. It’s almost over.”

She’d gotten the fresh start she’d wanted. Finally, she and Clint and Thomas could focus on the future.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Um, there is something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Clint said, reaching into the back pocket of his jeans. He was acting nervous, his normally graceful movements stiff and shaky. Her chest squeezed. Uh-oh. Things had been so good. Maybe too good. What if he’d decided taking on her and her kid wasn’t what he wanted after all? What if...

Then he went down on one knee in front of her and all Leila could see was the sincerity in his beautiful blue eyes and the sweet smile on his handsome face and oh

God! She covered her mouth with a trembling hand as her tears began to flow.

“Leila, honey. I love you, and I love Thomas. If I’m honest, I have since the first day you walked into my gun range and asked to buy a gun.” She snorted and he grinned. “You know I have a thing for independent women who can take care of themselves. Well, at least for one woman in particular. Over the last six months, you and Thomas have become my light, my world, my everything. Please say you’ll be my wife and that we can live as a true family for the rest of our days.”

Through her sniffing, she smiled and knelt before him, nodding as he slid a glittering diamond solitaire engagement ring on her finger. It was beautiful, but not as amazing as the man in front of her. She hugged him close and kissed him long and deep, then rested her forehead against his. “Yes. Yes! I love you, Clint. I always have, and I always will. You’re part of my true family, now and forever.” She kissed him again and laughed. “I never expected a happy ending like this, not for me, but I’m so....so...”

“Happy?” he suggested with a grin as he rose and pulled her to her feet with him.

“Yes. Let’s call my mom right away and tell her.” Leila knew that her mother was going to be over-the-moon excited. “She’s been eyeing you as a son in law ever since we went to San Juan on vacation last month.”

He raised a dark brow at her. “Does that mean I get to enjoy your mama’s amazing tostones and empanadas whenever I want?”

“You know it!” Leila chuckled, happier than she could ever remember being. “She loves you almost as much as I do. You’ll never starve with her around, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not starving now,” he said, pulling away slightly. “In fact, I’ve never felt fuller. Full of love and joy and peace and contentment. And it’s all thanks to you. You and

Thomas. Thank you.”

“No.” She traced her fingertips over his lips, her heart near to busting with emotion for this man. “Thank you. Thank for taking us in and for showing us how a real family should be. I love you, Clint.”

“And I love you, Leila.” He kissed her again sweetly then stepped back. “Now, let’s go call your mom.”