



Knight's Journey

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Category: Romance

Description: His heart belongs to someone he can't have. But danger has a way of changing everything.

Zane Wilder had never run from a challenge, but the woman he loves is planning to marry someone else — and he's the one who will give her away. When the need arises for someone to go undercover to take down a sinister arms dealer, Zane volunteers, hoping to get the time and space he needs to move on. Then someone brings a knife to a gunfight, and Zane has a whole new challenge he never sees coming. She changed her entire life for her family. Too bad it may not be enough. Bridget Kincaid has always lived her life for her. Then her sister and brother-in-law are killed, and she finds herself becoming mother and father to her niece and nephew. She moves them to Grayson Cove for a fresh start, but this new adventure has a rocky beginning for all of them. They're just trying to find their way, but when others attempt to break up the fragile little family, Bridget is ready to do whatever it takes to protect them. When push comes to shove, they rely on each other to keep the ones they love safe. Zane is a complication Bridget doesn't want, but he's always around when she needs him. Bridget is a distraction for Zane — a way to kill time until he can get back to work. Neither is prepared when the complication and distraction morphs into desire and attraction. But nothing is what it seems, and threats arise from all directions. Bridget and Zane don't know what to believe or who to trust. Can their new relationship survive when the truth is revealed?

Total Pages (Source): 80

Chapter One

Bridget Kincaid carefully pulled the plate from a layer of bubble wrap and placed it into the cupboard. She used a box cutter to break down the now empty cardboard box and tossed it on top of a stack of others. Then she turned and faced what was now her kitchen...in her new home in a sleepy town called Grayson Cove.

Her heart ached. The decision to move had been the right one to make, but she wondered how much time had to pass before she felt like this was home. Her apartment in Charleston had been perfect for her — a two-bedroom with an open floor plan and a gorgeous view from a balcony overlooking a picturesque part of the city. The neighborhood was safe for a young nurse who worked long shifts and enjoyed an active night life on her evenings off. With her family spread out in Georgia and Florida, she was close enough to make regular visits to see them but not so close as to keep their noses in her business.

That life was behind her now. She missed her apartment, her friends and her job at the medical clinic, but her life was no longer just about her. She had gone from being single to being a foster parent to her niece and nephew within the span of an evening, so unexpected life changes were her new normal.

She once thought she had plenty of time before she assumed the responsibility of a parent, but when she had to step into that role unexpectedly, she revamped her entire way of living. Her only regret was not for the lifestyle she left behind. It was for the reason for the transformation.

She heard footsteps before she saw her nephew pop in the doorway to the kitchen.

The sight of his five-foot, nine-inch frame, clad in basketball shorts and a faded graphic T-shirt made her smile. Mathias had that effect on her. He was her rock and, these days, her best friend. She thought of how proud her sister would have been of Mathias. At sixteen, he should be enjoying his high school years of playing sports, hanging out with his friends, dating girls and dreaming of colleges. Instead, he had stepped up to support his family despite his own grief at losing his parents.

A pang of guilt hit her in the chest at all her nephew had lost and how she leaned too heavily on him. The death of Dean and Jennifer Williams had rocked them all, and while Bridget attempted to figure out her new role as guardian of her niece and nephew, she counted on Mathias' maturity that went beyond his years to help her make tough decisions for their family.

But then he returned her smile, and she pushed all of her doubt and guilt away to focus on him.

"How's your room coming along?"

Mathias settled on a barstool at the kitchen counter. "Pretty good, I guess."

As far as answers, this was typically as good as the teenager gave her unless she asked more pointed questions. Right now, she was too tired to push him for more details.

"I think I've got the kitchen about the way I want, but I need a break. I'm wiped."

"I'm starving." His smile widened at her exaggerated eye roll.

"You're always starving."

He shrugged. "It's almost seven. Way past time for us to eat."

Her eyes flew to the LED clock display on the stove, amazed that time had slipped by her. Considering her nephew seemed to eat twenty-four-seven, she was surprised he waited this long to seek her out.

“Wow, I didn’t realize. I thought we could go out to eat, and I had planned to scope out some places online. I got busy and completely forgot. I hope something is still open. Businesses in small towns tend to close earlier than we’re used to.”

“There’s a diner we passed in town. It didn’t look like much, but it’s gotten good reviews online.” He pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his shorts and tapped the screen a couple of times before turning it around for her to see.

Nodding as she skimmed the reviews, she remembered passing the diner. The exterior had a run-down appearance that would turn many people away, but the parking lot had been full, indicating it was a favorite among the locals. If the natives liked it, then it was a safe bet the diner had good food.

“It’s still open. Hopefully, they won’t care that we’re all dusty and sweaty from unpacking.” Bridget glanced down at her spandex leggings and oversized T-shirt reaching to mid-thigh. She made a face at the unflattering picture she presented. “Where’s your sister?”

He jerked his chin in the direction of where he came. “She found one of her boxes of books.”

Bridget nodded. “Well, if I can get her nose out of whatever book has caught her attention, we’ll get something to eat.”

“Good luck,” he called sarcastically as she set off down the hall toward her niece’s room.

The door was ajar, and she leaned against the door jam for a moment to watch the thirteen-year-old. Marlowe was settled on the carpeted floor, her back against the pale blue wall with her legs crossed. Her neck bent forward, her ponytail slipping over her shoulder, as she stared at the paperback in her hands. The cover was cracked, and the edges of the pages slightly up turned from all the times it had been read. Bridget recognized it as one of her niece's favorites.

Marlowe didn't glance up from her book even when Bridget settled on the floor beside her. Bridget placed a finger over the center of the open book and pulled it down enough to get the young girl's attention. Marlowe blinked her wide green eyes as if disoriented, and Bridget smiled warmly. She loved how engrossed her niece could get in her books – to the point of forgetting where she was or what she was doing.

“Get ready. We're going out to dinner.”

“Where?”

“The diner we passed on the way in.”

“A diner? Really? Is it one that serves breakfast all day?”

Bridget chuckled, always amused at her niece's obsession with breakfast food. “I don't know, but worst-case scenario, I'm sure they would make you a grilled cheese.”

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Marlowe's grin widened, and she scrambled to her feet before carefully setting her book on her nightstand. She had yet to put away most of her belongings, making the bedroom a disaster area of teenager proportions, but she had started to line her books on the special bookshelf which survived the move. It was one Marlowe's father had built, and Bridget had paid someone to secure the tall, wide bookcase safely to the wall.

Marlowe always treated her books with the utmost care, like they were sacred treasures. It seemed she managed to fill half the shelf before becoming lost in an old favorite. It would probably take her several days to focus enough to put away the rest of her belongings, but Bridget didn't push her. Right now, Marlowe's books were keeping her sane with all the changes going on in her life.

Bridget wandered to her own room, where the only thing she'd taken the time to do was make her bed. It was something her mother instilled in her and her sister at a young age, and it stayed with them through adulthood. Audra Kincaid believed even if every room in her house was a cluttered mess, all was in order as long as the beds were made.

Bridget lingered long enough in her room to brush out her sweat dampened tresses and stare at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, trying to decide if she should do more to make herself presentable. There had been a time when she would never have considered leaving her house without every hair in place, without a comfortable outfit to show off her petite figure, and without carefully applied makeup emphasizing her caramel eyes, high cheekbones and pert nose. When her life had shifted on its axis, she realized spending too much time on what she looked like wasn't a priority anymore.

She almost missed those carefree days, but going back would mean giving up the most precious gift she'd ever received. She didn't think she could ever do that.

With her keys in hand and her wallet hanging by a strap on her wrist, Bridget ushered her charges out of the house, setting the security alarm and locking the door behind her. The sun had set, but the street was adequately lined with streetlamps. The hour was still early for neighbors to be outside walking their pets, getting some evening exercise, taking out the trash or other tasks. The neighborhood was part of the appeal for moving to their house. She'd felt she'd stepped onto the set of an old '50s sitcom, and the idea of having Marlowe and Mathias surrounded by this type of atmosphere had been too tempting to pass up.

She drove out of the neighborhood and turned toward downtown Grayson Cove. They'd passed through the area earlier on their way to the new house and was surprised to find it more of a hub of activity than Bridget would have suspected. Little shops lined the main street while other staple businesses – grocery stores, a hardware store, and eateries – occupied the rest of the square.

Their house was twelve minutes from the downtown area, but the stretch of road between their house and the diner was lined with trees and the occasional home, making the drive seem longer. Traffic was light, and the number of streetlights diminished once they left their neighborhood, making the two-lane road a little trickier to navigate as dusk drifted into night.

“Car trouble,” Marlowe piped up from the back seat, drawing Bridget's attention to the car on the side of the road under one of the few streetlights. The car's hood was raised, and as Bridget drove passed, she saw a woman sitting in the driver's seat. She appeared to be alone, stranded on the roadside.

“We have to help, Aunt Bridge. I can fix it,” her niece said with all the confidence which comes with being a thirteen-year-old genius.

“She’s a stranger, Marlowe. It can be dangerous to stop for a stranger on the side of the road,” Bridget cautioned, even as she kept glancing in the rearview mirror at the motorist.

“There’s three of us, and only one of her, Aunt Bridge,” Mathias pointed out quietly. “Marlowe’s probably right too. She’s never met a car engine she couldn’t take apart, put together or figure out how to make it run.”

“Someone could be hiding in the trees, waiting to ambush anyone who stops to help.” She glanced at her nephew and realized he wasn’t buying her excuse.

“You need to stop binge-watching all of those crime shows.”

She wanted to argue that truth sometimes provided the basis for those streaming TV shows she loved, but the way his face was set told her he wasn’t going to be swayed. With a sigh of resignation, Bridget pulled over to the side of the road before giving her nephew a meaningful stare.

“Hang back with Marlowe while I talk to the driver, okay? If something looks off or I get jumped, you get behind the wheel and haul ass. You make sure Marlowe’s safe before you get help for me. Understood?”

Once he nodded in agreement, Bridget slipped her canister of pepper spray from her key ring and climbed out of the car. The other woman stepped out of her car under the beam of the streetlight. Bridget almost changed her mind but forced herself to move slowly toward the woman. Her hair hung in a thick braid over her shoulder, the light dancing in the fiery red tresses. Dressed casually in jeans and a purple T-shirt, the woman flashed a tentative smile at Bridget.

“Looks like you could use some help,” Bridget called inanely as she paused a safe distance away. The two women eyed each other warily.

“Yes, but I have help on the way. My fiancé should be here any minute, and he’s already called a tow truck.”

“Oh, good. Well, we wanted to stop and offer some help if you needed it. Um, I think we’ll be going then since you don’t need anything.”

“That’s sweet of you to offer. Did you say ‘we’?”

“My niece and nephew are waiting in the car, so I’ll get back to them.” Bridget started to turn, but she realized she couldn’t leave yet. “On second thought, if it’s all right, we’ll hang out at our car until your fiancé gets here. I know it seems weird, but I can’t stand the idea of leaving you out here alone with a broken-down car.”

The woman regarded her curiously. “It’s really not necessary, but if you want to wait, I can’t stop you. What’s your name?”

Bridget hesitated, not usually quick to share personal information with a stranger. Something about this woman made Bridget want to relax her guard. Being a nurse, she’d honed her ability to read people, and she was starting to believe this woman was harmless and possibly in need of a friend.

“It’s Bridget.”

“Nice to meet you, Bridget. I’m Sydney Reede. And thank you. For offering to wait with me. My fiancé shouldn’t be much longer.”

Not sure what to say, Bridget finally nodded and walked back to the car. As she reached the driver’s door, she realized Marlowe had opened the window to listen.

“What’s wrong with her car?”

Bridget shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't ask, and she didn't say."

"Does she want me to look at it? I can probably fix it. Would you ask her, Aunt Bridge?" Marlowe entreated.

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“You could save her the cost of a tow,” Mathias piped up from the front seat. “Lowe could probably fix it for free.”

As much as Bridget hated to admit it, in this instance, her nephew was right. Marlowe had a particular gift for all things mechanical, something her father fostered in her at a young age. Many of her books provided detailed information on the inner workings of machines and appliances. Hell, Marlowe had even repaired Bridget’s car on more than one occasion.

With a sigh of resignation, Bridget turned on her heel and approached Sydney again, stopping the redhead before she climbed back in her car.

“I don’t know what’s going on with your car, but if you want, my niece can take a look. Save you a repair bill.”

“Your niece?” Sydney asked incredulously.

Bridget grinned, the woman’s response not surprising. Many people were often shocked at Marlowe’s talents and interests. “Yeah, she has a thing for engines. Well, anything mechanical, really.”

The woman returned her grin. “How old is she?”

“Thirteen. My nephew is sixteen, and he helps her out. I promise they know what they’re doing, but it’s okay if you’d rather not let a couple of teenagers work on your car.”

Sydney hesitated, and then her eyes lit up. “Well, I’ve always been one to support girl power. How can I refuse?”

Bridget nodded and turned to head back to her car, but the kids were already climbing out. They immediately retrieved Marlowe’s toolbox from the trunk before walking to Sydney’s car. They politely bid Sydney hello, and then their heads disappeared under the hood. Mathias used his phone’s flashlight to illuminate the areas his sister indicated.

Bridget stepped back to watch over them, and Sydney moved to stand beside her. Bridget saw the apprehension on the other woman’s face, and Sydney had the grace to seem sheepish when she caught Bridget watching her.

“Thank you for this. I don’t know if they can really fix it, but I appreciate the effort and the fact you waited with me.”

“Honestly, it was all them. I’m too suspicious of people to be so selfless. I promise Marlowe knows what she’s doing. More than most people.”

“I think it’s awesome that she knows about cars and she’s willing to help a stranger. I know it’s not always safe, but it’s nice to see young people wanting to do the right thing. I understand your protective instincts though. You sound like my fiancé and his friends. They’ve seen too much in their line of work to trust people on face value.”

“What do they do?”

“They’re veterans from different branches of the military, but now they work in private security and investigations. Actually, so do I. Only I do the computer work, and they do the boots-on-the-ground work. What about you?”

“I’m a nurse. I used to work in an emergency department at a hospital and then at a

medical clinic, so I've seen some stuff too."

The sound of tires crunching gravel had Bridget staring warily at a dark truck with tinted windows pulling in behind Sydney's vehicle.

Sydney flashed her a reassuring smile. "That's my fiancé Cole."

The tall, muscular man stepped from the driver's side, and Bridget tensed. The guy was huge and oozed intimidation. As sweet and innocent as Sydney seemed, this guy appeared dangerous.

"You all right, Syd?" he drawled as he walked up. His beefy arm encircled her waist, and he dropped a kiss to her lips.

"Yes. Bridget and her niece and nephew stopped to help," she explained, inclining her head toward the front of her car. His eyes narrowed as he watched Mathias and Marlowe work.

"What the hell..." His voice trailed off as if not believing what he was seeing.

At that moment, Marlowe popped up from under the hood. "Got it! Do you want to see if it's running now?"

If Bridget didn't want to let her guard down, she would have chuckled at the comical expression of shock on Cole's face.

"How old is she?" he demanded.

"Thirteen," Bridget supplied.

He studied her, his eyes narrowing. Bridget raised her chin, unconsciously extending

a challenge. If he thought for one minute he would question her niece's ability to repair the car, she was ready to set him straight. But his demeanor changed, almost as if he admired her protective instinct toward Marlowe and decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

He held his hand out to Sydney. "Give me your keys, and I'll see if the car turns over."

The keys jingled as she passed them off. He jogged over, adjusted the driver's seat to afford him more leg room, and settled inside to put the key in the ignition.

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Bridget glanced over at Sydney, a knowing smile curving her lips. “Just wait.”

The sound of the car firing to life deepened her smile. Bridget beamed as she watched Mathias fist bump his sister before moving to put the toolbox back in their car’s trunk. Marlowe walked over to Sydney with a maturity well beyond her years.

“There were some loose connectors, and they’re showing signs of corrosion. I was able to clean them up a little, but you’re going to need to replace them. It’ll happen again if you don’t get it fixed.”

To Sydney’s credit, she talked with Marlowe with the same respect afforded any adult. “Thank you, Marlowe. I’m going to have Cole follow me to the garage first thing tomorrow to get it fixed. I appreciate you telling me what to have them check out. I’m always afraid they’ll take advantage of me because I don’t know anything about cars.”

Sydney smiled as Cole and Mathias joined them. “I want to say thank you to all of you for stopping to help and for being so nice. I would love to invite all of you over to have dinner with me and Cole. Just to show our appreciation.”

Bridget blinked in surprise. “I appreciate the offer, but it isn’t necessary. We’re happy to help.”

Cole wrapped an arm around Sydney’s shoulders and pulled her close to his side. “It may not be necessary, but it’s something we want to do. I’m glad you stopped to help Sydney. I didn’t like the idea of her being stranded on the side of the road alone.”

Sydney playfully punched him in the stomach. “I can take care of myself.”

His grin broadened. Bridget felt her heart clenched as she noted the obvious affection the couple held for each other. She cleared the sudden lump in her throat and motioned for Marlowe and Mathias to move on to the car.

“We should be going. We were on our way to get some dinner when we saw you.”

“Listen.” Cole reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed her a white card. “I hope you consider taking Sydney up on the offer to come to dinner, but either way, here’s my contact info. If you guys ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call. It would give me a chance to return the good deed.”

Even though she knew she’d never call on him and would probably never see either of them again, she smiled and pocketed the card. “I appreciate it. Enjoy your evening.”

Bridget ushered her kids back to their car and climbed inside. One eye on the rearview mirror as she pulled out onto the road, she saw the couple watching them.

“They seemed nice.”

Her eyes shifted to glance in Mathias’ direction and then back to the road. “Yes, they did. I’m glad we stopped to help. You did a good job with the car, you two.”

“Thanks, Aunt Bridge. Do you think they meant it? Inviting us to dinner?”

“I don’t know, Lowe. Even if they didn’t, it was nice for them to offer.”

Mathias sighed. “I think they meant it. Do you think they meant it when they said we could call on them for anything?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. Thought it’d be nice to have somebody to call if we needed them. Just in case. No big deal.”

Bridget let the matter drop. She was feeling bemused herself at what happened. A stop she didn’t want to make resulted in a dinner invitation with two strangers. Something about Sydney and Cole, though, told her they were genuine. Bridget suspected they were good people to know.

The small family finished the ride to the diner in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

Chapter Two

He sat in the shadows of the beat-up pickup truck, his hard stare trained on the warehouse across the street. The neighborhood was sketchy at best, and he’d already witnessed a drug buy and a hook-up between a john and a prostitute in the short time he’d been here. He didn’t care about any of that, but he would be foolish if he didn’t take note of what was going on.

And if there was one thing Cane Black was not, it was a fool.

Though his truck didn’t stand out in the low-class neighborhood, Black wasn’t dumb enough to believe his presence went unnoticed. After a year of working with the De la Peña crime family, he learned nothing he did went unnoticed. The family trusted no one outside of their inner circle, and despite the number of times he proved he was one of them, he was still watched like a hawk.

Even now, though he was invited to this meet, he’d already spotted lookouts positioned all around him. He’d seen the glints of gun metal in windows and on

rooftops of buildings surrounding him. They were lower-level members of the crime family, watchdogs who probably didn't know what was going down but was doing what they were told. They weren't very good at being lookouts unless staying out of sight was not part of their orders.

He did figure the lookouts alerted the people he was here to meet to his early arrival. He wanted them to. He wanted them to be curious about why he arrived early only to sit in his truck and wait. For once, he wanted Armando and Elian De la Peña to be on edge.

There was a reason the father and son had built a criminal empire in their home country of the Dominican Republic but also in the states. Armando had been forced to flee the Dominican when one of his enforcers led a revolt bent on taking over the De la Peña enterprise. His wife was killed during the uprising, and he brought his family to America to escape the danger. His mistrust of anyone outside of his immediate family was well-earned, and it was likely why he was able to build a bigger empire in the states which reached from larger areas like New Jersey to small town locations like Grayson Cove, South Carolina. Here he made his mark in gun-running and drugs with his sons, Elian and Oscar, by his side.

Of course, their distrust didn't make Black's job any easier. He wasn't used to his every action being questioned under a cloud of suspicion, not after a year of working for them and proving he was good at his job. He suspected their distrust worsened after Armando lost his younger son Oscar last year. He couldn't risk outsiders creating more problems for his plan to return to his home to reclaim his position in the Dominican.

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Black waited several minutes longer, wanting to draw out the anticipation of those watching. The more unnerved he made them, the more he gained the upper hand. That's what he needed going into this meet. No one would have his back inside, and he had no clue as to what he was about to walk into.

Squaring his shoulders, he finally stepped from the truck. The skin on the back of his neck prickled from the eyes watching him. He rounded the front of his truck and paused. He turned and scanned the buildings behind him until he saw a faint glimmer of something reflecting in a window. His eyes trained on the spot for two beats, a silent message to the ones standing guard. He knew they were there, and he wasn't afraid.

Jogging across the street, he slowed when he neared the warehouse. His instructions were to go to the rear entrance. He noted the front roll-up doors were padlocked, so he rounded the corner to the alley leading to the back. The alley was deserted, the night was still. Hearing nothing put him more on edge than hearing any bumps in the night. He saw a side door, which was also padlocked. No wonder they told him to come to the back. Every other entrance or exit he'd seen were not options.

His steps slowed the closer he got to the back, and he unconsciously reached at his side for the weapon he didn't carry. The De la Peñas had a hard and fast rule that no one in their presence carried weapons outside of their own enforcers, and Black wasn't considered one of those. He'd had to resort to an ankle holster to hold his Sig Sauer inside his boot and to a hope they wouldn't search him when he went inside.

He turned the corner at the end of the alley and drew up short when he came face-to-face with the only two people the De la Peñas trusted who didn't carry the family

name. Black knew them as Thumper and Singer. The men trusted no one, including Black, but the lack of trust went both ways. The two enforcers raised his danger radar exponentially anytime they were close.

“Where’ve you been?” Thumper mumbled. Tall as he was big around, the man had a unique accent that made his words seemed slurred. A conversation with him wasn’t easy, and it had taken Black the full part of the year to decipher his speech.

“What do you mean? I’m early. Are we going inside or what?”

“Not yet.” Singer’s voice sounded like he’d been gargling asphalt his whole life, and it grated on Black’s nerves. Tall and lanky, the man seemed like a strong breeze could tip him over. But Black knew he was shrewd and dangerous. Each time he regarded Black with his beady eyes and hard expression, Black felt his guard raise a notch, and he had to fight the urge to reach for his gun.

“Relax.” Thumper blocked Black’s path toward the door. “The boss said to wait here, so we wait here.”

Black stared over Thumper’s shoulder to hold Singer’s stare until the man turned back to his post in front of the back door. He moved to put some distance between him and the two enforcers, the prickling at the back of his neck getting worse. Since his eyes were accustomed to the dark, Black did a quick scan of his surroundings, noting only a dumpster and a couple of rats, but nothing else. No cars. No people who could possibly be customers. Nothing appeared like any of the other meets he’d observed.

He started tapping a finger against his thigh, like he was mimicking the drum beat of a rock song. He paced the length of the back lot as he silently debated whether he would wait them out or cut his losses and leave.

His gut was churning. Something was off.

He shifted the direction of his steps to head back down the alley. “No one’s covering the front. I’m gonna check it out, make sure nothing’s here to compromise the meet.”

Singer blocked his path again, so close this time Black could smell the man’s foul breath. “We’ve got people watching the front. The boss wants you here.”

“So what are we doing out here if there are people watching already?”

“Hey, man, haven’t you learned by now to not ask questions,” Thumper spoke up before Singer could snap at him. “It’s better to just follow orders.”

Black fell quiet. He thought he was here as back-up for a meet with customers wanting to buy some firepower. For him to be stuck outside instead of at the meet wasn’t a good sign.

Someone tapped on the back door from the inside, and Singer reached behind to open it. Singer led the way inside, and Thumper motioned for Black to follow, a curious move. If they didn’t trust him, then why have him come in behind them, putting themselves in a vulnerable position? Nothing was adding up, and it increased his unease.

He moved with measured steps. Stacks of crates crowded the warehouse, creating a maze with lots of blind spots ideal for an ambush. Nothing on the crates indicated what was inside, but from what he’d observed being in the De la Peña organization, he guessed it was a combination of guns and drugs hidden among legitimate merchandise. As he followed Thumper and Singer further into the warehouse, he could hear voices, men speaking in measured tones loud enough to carry in the open space but not with enough clarity to understand their words.

When he finally reached the end of the line of crates, he drew up short. Armando De la Peña shook hands with three men in suits. Two of them carried duffle bags big enough to contain assault rifles. The third handed a briefcase over to Armando, and the three suits turned to disappear among the crates. Black had two very clear realizations in that moment. One, there had to be another exit somewhere he had missed since he didn't figure the clients were going to wait in another part of the warehouse. Two, the meet was done, and he'd been purposely kept from it. It had to be a substantial buy for both Armando and Elian to be present to close the deal. Armando typically let Elian handle the more routine buys, thereby keeping his hands as clean as possible should a meet go wrong.

Black noted the presence of more enforcers, but they weren't up high enough in the organization for him to learn their names. He focused more on Armando and Elian. Thumper and Singer joined the bosses, leaving him standing alone to face them all. The air around him buzzed with an instant rise in tension.

He hadn't been invited here for a meet. He'd been invited to his own execution.

"Smoke show," he murmured, setting his stance. If they came after him, he'd be ready to fight to the death. He needed to hold them off for a short time until the cavalry arrived. And he hoped they arrived before this crime family took him out.

Well, they'd likely torture him first— not for any kind of information he may have but strictly for the hell of it. Then, once they were satisfied he'd suffered enough, they'd kill him.

Black schooled his reaction so all Armando, Elian and the enforcers saw was someone cool and stoic, watching them closely but with a quiet reserve.

Elian flashed a menacing grin, his pearly white veneers almost sparkling against his olive skin. He moved until he was within arm's reach of Black. He drew in a deep

breath and released it with a loud exhale.

“This day is turning out to be better than I expected. Don’t you agree, Papa?” Though he spoke to Armando, his eyes remained focused on Black.

“That remains to be seen.” Armando’s voice was cultured with a heavy accent giving evidence of his heritage. His eyes pierced Black with a direct gaze. “You were early tonight. Why didn’t you make yourself known when you arrived?”

Black shrugged. “Just thought I’d wait in my truck until time for the meet. But the meet apparently was moved up, so I waited for nothing.”

Armando regarded him silently. Though Elian was invading his space, Black kept his gaze on the senior De la Peña. His gut told him nothing would happen unless Armando called for it, so maybe he still had a chance to save his hide if he could show the elder De la Peña he’d done nothing to betray the family.

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“I’m sure you’ve heard we’ve had a run of bad luck with moles in the organization.” Armando paced a few steps to the left before turning to go back to the right. “I have to be very cautious. You understand.”

“No one has told me anything about moles. But considering I was told the wrong time to be here tonight, I can believe you have some problems. Maybe you should investigate the ones who wanted you to be here without back-up.”

“No.” Armando stopped and pierced Black with his dark stare. “I’m looking at you.”

“So I noticed.”

“You’re not a cop or a fed. I would know if you were. I have eyes everywhere. That means only one thing. My enemies sent you to spy on me.”

“Who sent you here?” Elian stepped directly in front of him, baring his teeth in anger. Black snarled.

“You told me to be here. Cut the bullshit.”

“It has to be Russo,” Elian taunted. “Si? He’s been after us for years, and he would send in an...amateur.”

Black didn’t move. He refused to be baited, so he waited. A few more minutes were all the time he needed to stall.

“No, not Russo,” Armando said curtly. “He doesn’t have the balls to take such a

risk.”

Elian’s responding smile was cool enough to send a chill through his blood. “That leaves Morrison.”

Black was familiar with the drug dealer Cal Russo, but the name Morrison was a new one on him. It didn’t matter. Neither applied to him, so he didn’t react. But someone did.

He saw it out of the corner of his eye. Standing to the side close to the boss, Thumper jerked at the mention of Morrison’s name. He wasn’t within anyone else’s line of sight for the reaction to be noticed. But Black didn’t miss it. Father and son were on a fishing expedition, but they were casting in the wrong pond.

Elian stayed in Black’s face, trying to unnerve him. “You’re going to tell me everything.”

Black detected a note of insanity in the depths of Elian’s eyes. The man was unafraid, convinced no one would touch him — the great chosen son of the De la Peña organization. Black’s hand twitched with the urge to punch the man to show him how vulnerable he really was.

“I can tell you that you’re an idiot. One of the strongest crime organizations in the country, and you can’t even spot a traitor among your ranks.”

“We’re familiar with this tactic,” Armando replied. “Pointing the finger at someone else to take suspicion off you. It won’t work.”

“How could it? When you’re too stupid to see the truth.”

Elian whipped out a gun and placed the muzzle against the center of Black’s

forehead. “Keep talking, and this will be over before I’ve had my fun.”

“Shoot me. No one’s going to miss me. No one’s going to hunt for me. But your problem will still be here. I’m telling you, you’re looking at the wrong man.”

He saw Thumper move closer to Singer and give his partner in crime a nudge in the side with his thick elbow. Singer’s response was narrowing his eyes as he stared at Black.

Black stiffened and tried to guess what was running through the enforcer’s mind. Was he in on the double-cross with Thumper? Or was Thumper using the man to cover his ass? Singer didn’t seem like he could be easily duped, especially by someone like Thumper who was more follower than leader. The two had to be working together.

“Elian!” Armando voiced his command expecting it would be obeyed. Though indecision flashed across Elian’s face, he lowered his weapon.

“We may be looking at the wrong man,” Armando addressed Black this time. “But I don’t believe you are innocent. And as you said, no one will come searching for you. I figure I can kill you and cover my bases. You know, just in case I’m wrong about your guilt. Don’t you agree, Elian?”

“As long as I get some time with him first.” Elian’s sneer twisted his face to seem more monster than man.

“No! We still have business that needs our attention. Let Singer handle this.”

Black narrowed his eyes, his hatred for the man in front of him shining through. “You’d better go, Elian. Follow Daddy’s orders like the little bitch you are.” His words were low and measured, earning him the response he was hoping for.

Known for his temper, Elian's outrage soared. He whipped out his gun in a surge of fury, and Black took advantage of the crime lord's loss of control. He leaned to the side and twisted at the waist. He grabbed Elian's arm and jerked it over his shoulder, throwing Elian off balance until the man fell against his back. Black flipped him over to the ground, unarming him in the process. He whirled around with the gun pointed to find Singer had closed the distance between them.

Before he could react, Black felt a shocking pain in his stomach. He shoved Singer away enough to take aim and fire a shot he meant to hit the man's chest. As he felt the intense heat spreading through his abdomen, he saw how his hand shook, causing the gunshot to strike Singer's shoulder instead of imbedding in his coldblooded heart. Singer dropped what was in his hand, and Black barely registered the blood-covered knife clanking against the cement floor.

Adrenaline pounded in Black's ears, drowning out the sudden shouts bouncing around the warehouse followed by the boom of a flash grenade. He fell to his knees. The hand holding the gun tried to protect his ear while his free hand touched the wound in his abdomen. Everything around him seemed to fade into a blurry mess, his gaze fixed on the sticky red liquid staining his hand when he pulled it away. He swayed and fell to his side on the ground.

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“Zane! Zane! Can you hear me?”

He tried to focus on the face swimming above him and the voice calling his real name, but his vision wouldn't clear. Before his pain brought on blissful unconsciousness, he had one thought swimming through his foggy mind.

Who the hell brings a knife to a gunfight?

Chapter Three

Jay Colter hated hospitals. The smell of antiseptic, urine and sickness stirred memories he'd rather leave buried. The days after his sister escaped the man who kidnapped, raped and tortured her were spent in a hospital. Then there was the time his friends, Sydney Reede and Cole Atwood, were sent to the hospital after an automobile accident which had been no accident. And, not too long ago, there was the time when his wife Payton and their foster daughter Davi were in the hospital. The irony was they wound up hospitalized after escaping the men sent to harm them by the very people who took down his teammate.

As with each of those times, a hospital waiting room had been commandeered, thanks to the connections his boss Tristin Knight had at the medical center and...well, everywhere in Grayson Cove. The room overflowed with the Knight Security and Investigations family. Tristin closed the business so everyone could be at the hospital to wait together for news on Zane Wilder's condition.

Gathered in the small room, Jay was struck with how much their numbers had grown from the handful of people who worked to get the company off the ground. Tristin

had hired him and Brick Coffey to help him staff the two key components of the company. The private security and investigations portion of the business, supervised by Brick, was the bread and butter and the public image KSI presented to the community. Then there was the covert side, supervised by Jay, and employing two elite teams to handle off-the-books operations for government and law enforcement agencies which were prohibited from taking the missions themselves. That side of the business had changed the most, employing two five-men teams known as Alpha and Delta. He led the Alpha Team — which included Cole “Panther” Atwood, Zane Wilder, Griffin “Wings” Tyler and Brennan “BB” Beckett.

Add to those numbers the support staff and families of employees, and they filled the waiting room to capacity. They supported each other as they waited somewhat impatiently for news on Zane’s condition. When Jay and the rest of the Alpha Team had gotten their teammate to the emergency room, a trauma team was waiting, thanks for a heads up they’d gotten from Tristin’s wife, Kat. The prognosis had been bleak even before they found out he needed surgery.

Jay stood in the corner of the waiting room, stoically staring off into space. He replayed tonight’s operation on a loop in his mind, pinpointing all the ways it had gone wrong and landed Zane on an operating table fighting for his life. Jay insisted on planting an ear wig on Zane, so they could listen and record the meet to add to their evidence against the De la Peñas. They went into action the minute Zane had given the distress call, “smoke show.”

The problem was the Alpha Team had been too far away to respond in time. Because of the lookouts planted around the warehouse, they set up a couple of blocks over where they would go undetected. Jay had thought they would put Zane in danger if they were too close, and instead, he was in danger of losing his life because they had been too far away. If he’d had more back-up going into the op, they could have neutralized the lookouts the minute Zane was inside, so when he gave the signal, they could have gone in sooner, guns blazing, and stopped his teammate from being

stabbed in the abdomen.

To make matters worse, the op had been a bust. They had let the customers leave since they weren't the real targets. Elian's bodyguard had ushered him and his father out an exit on the other side of the warehouse, while Thumper and Singer took care of Zane. Then the two enforcers disappeared. Somehow they escaped in the chaos of their breach even though the Alpha Team had been hot on their heels.

"You need to stop that right now."

He shook himself out of his troublesome thoughts and lifted his eyes to his wife. Just studying her face — big brown eyes, clear luminous skin, full kissable lips — lifted some of the pressure off his chest. He reached to caress Payton's cheek with the back of his finger. He should send her and Davi home, but they refused to budge until Zane was out of surgery. And truthfully, he was thankful to have her there where he could touch her and reassure himself that while the rest of his world was in turmoil, she was there to ground him.

"I'm just standing here, sweetheart. Waiting like everyone else."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and drew herself close to him. "You're blaming yourself for what happened."

Jay squeezed her tightly with one arm. The woman knew him too damn well. Davi called it her social worker Zen, the way she could read people and know what they needed.

"We shouldn't have sent him in. The feds haven't been able to pull off any undercover operations, so we were dumbasses to think we could. We were sending Zane into a suicide mission."

“His cover was solid enough to keep him in for a year. Kat listened to the feed and said they were only guessing he was the leak. They had no proof, so they were hoping he’d break his cover under pressure. He didn’t.”

Jay rested his chin against the top of her head, her hair tangling in his beard. He should have guessed Payton would talk with Kat who worked as a technical analyst for KSI. She provided computer support to the Alpha Team whenever they were on an op, so she was the one recording the meet when it went down. He wished Kat’s account of the op would lessen his guilt over how it went down.

“He gave us the distress signal. He tried to stall, but there was too much lag time in our response. We should have found a way to be closer, to cut down on our response time.”

“You’re not the one who stabbed him, Jayson. He volunteered for the assignment. He knew what he was walking into, and he’s good at his job. None of this happened because of a wrong move made by you or by Zane. It’s a risk of the job. If you hadn’t had his back, he would have been dead on arrival. You guys gave him a fighting chance by stabilizing him and getting him here so quickly. So stop beating yourself up.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He planted a kiss on the top of her head, smiling at how she chastised him. Payton and his mother were the only ones to use his full name, and Payton used it these days when she was making a point.

His gaze returned to Davi, sitting beside Sydney and holding the redhead’s hand. Sydney was a wreck over what happened. Zane was the closest thing to a brother she had in her life. She even put her wedding on hold until he could be free to walk her down the aisle when she married Cole.

And Davi was consoling Sydney with a strength belying her fifteen years. The first

few months she'd been with Jay and Payton had been rough at times. She was a teenager who discovered the identity of her birth mother, Marisol, only to lose her after she was shot by Davi's birth father, Oscar De la Peña, the youngest son of Armando. Oscar tracked Davi down and kidnapped her, but Jay and his team rescued her, killing Oscar in the process. The relatives she had left were a Dominican crime family who disowned her because they disapproved of Oscar and Marisol's relationship. She was uprooted from the only life she'd ever known and came to live with Payton and Jay.

Davi was a special young lady, but there was still a transitional period for all of them. She was starting to find her place among their family. Jay's parents doted on her as if she'd been their granddaughter since birth. He and Payton were hoping to talk to her very soon about formally adopting her. He had hoped Zane's undercover operation would give them what they needed to shut down the De la Peñas, so he didn't have to worry about them possibly coming after Davi or seeking revenge against him and his team.

Payton followed his line of sight and smiled at their daughter. "I called your parents. They're coming to take Davi home with them. She's exhausted, but I didn't feel right having her home alone with all this going on."

"You should go with her. I can call you with any updates."

Her head whipped back around, her eyes fierce. "I'm not leaving you. I can help. Kat got in touch with Zane's mother and sisters. They'll be here any minute. I want to be here for them."

Jay relented. "You're right. We could use your help. Thank you. For being here."

Her gaze softened, love shining in her eyes. "Always."

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Jay's parents arrived, but he spoke to them briefly before they left with Davi in tow. He was glad to see her safely in their care, so he could focus on being there for his team. He'd already drank enough bad coffee to float a passenger ship, and the caffeine was starting to make him jittery. Hours had gone by with no word on Zane's condition, and he was close to busting into the operating room to demand answers.

A rush of activity occurred when four harried women burst through the door of the waiting room, each trying to talk over the other. They all had the same dark hair, tanned skin and blue eyes as Zane, instant indicators of their identities.

"Oh my." Maggie Wilder drew up short, her eyes taking in the full waiting room. "I'm sorry. The nurse said we should wait here. I didn't realize..."

Kat stepped forward with a slight smile. "Mrs. Wilder, it's all right. We all work with Zane. My name is Kat. I'm the one who called your daughter."

Maggie stood eye-to-eye with Kat. Her dark hair held shimmering streaks of gray and framed her face as the ends brushed against her neck. Her skin showed signs of age around her eyes and mouth. She was flanked on all sides by her daughters, who hovered protectively even as their eyes clouded over with worry.

"Please call me Maggie. Is there any word?"

"No, not yet," Kat answered gently. "He's still in surgery."

Tristin, Wings, Brick, and Rock, the team leader for the Delta Team, all stood and offered their seats to the ladies, who accepted them gratefully. Tristin knelt in front of

Maggie and rested a hand on her arm.

“I’m very sorry this happened, Mrs. Wilder. Please know we are here for all of you and for Zane. Whatever you need, all you have to do is ask any of us, and we’ll do it.”

“You can shoot and kill the son of a bitch who did this,” one of Zane’s sisters spat out before her voice choked on her emotion.

“Sweetheart, please,” Maggie admonished her daughter as she clung to the young woman’s hands like a lifeline. “Mr. Knight, maybe you can explain exactly what did happen.”

“The name’s Tristin, ma’am. No need to be formal with us. We consider Zane part of the family, and that extends to all of you as well.”

“Thank you. Tristin. I insist you call me Maggie. And these are my daughters. Zoe.” She pointed to the outspoken one with wild curly hair barely subdued in a high ponytail and lush curves barely hidden under her flowy top and distressed jeans. “Zaida.” The woman on the end, with thick, shiny hair falling in slick strands down to her waist and heavy makeup highlighting her eyes and pronounced cheekbones, nodded at her mother’s introductions. “And Zaylee.” The third sister had her sister’s unruly curls but her mother’s soft, round face and timid smile.

“Nice to finally meet you all. I’d introduce you to all of our crew, but it would take way too long. I trust they’ll introduce themselves to you as they get the opportunity. Now to answer your question, Mrs. — Maggie. Zane was working a highly sensitive case for our company when he was attacked. His attacker stabbed him in the abdomen. He’s in surgery, and we’re waiting for the surgeon to finish so he can update us on Zane’s condition.”

“The person who stabbed him...” Maggie’s voice trailed off expectantly.

“Got away. But we have a lead on tracking him down. We’ll get him.”

“Why was Zane working a case alone?” Zoe demanded. “He told us you guys work in pairs, like partners. Where was his partner in all of this?”

“And the stabber...is he going to come after Zane again? Is he even safe here?” Zaylee’s raised an octave as her fear for her brother seized her.

Jay tensed, hating the Wilders were feeling so afraid and helpless. They deserved to know what happened, but the nature of the job prevented any of them from sharing specific information about what they did. Though the company’s private security and investigations services were common knowledge, the activities of the covert ops teams had to remain top secret. Outside of KSI employees, spouses and, in his case, children were privy to the truth.

Though his parents had suspicions, he’d never told them about his job, and he knew Zane had never shared the information with his family either. Jay had never asked, but he wondered how he explained to them his absence while he spent the last year under deep cover.

Jay moved over to stand behind Tristin, his height and breadth drawing the women’s attention. Their eyes studied him curiously. He tapped a hand to his boss’ shoulder to let Tristin know he was there. He cleared his throat, hoping to find the right words.

“I’m Jay Colter. Zane’s, um...supervisor. I understand you have a lot of questions, and I wish I had answers for you. What I can tell you is Zane is getting the best medical care possible. Tristin has seen to that. I’m sorry we weren’t able to keep him from being hurt, but Zane is part of our family. This room is full of brothers and sisters who will do whatever it takes to watch out for him and make sure no one

comes for him again.”

“And because he’s part of our family, you’re family as well,” Tristin reiterated. “So when I said all you had to do was ask if you need anything, I meant it.”

Maggie nodded before sweeping her eyes around the room, taking in all of the concerned faces watching her. Her eyes finally landed back on Tristin. She straightened her spine, blinking away her tears.

“Thank you. To all of you. I know Zane cares for all of you, and I don’t know how we would deal with this without you here.”

“How bad is Zane’s condition?” Zaida asked.

Payton nodded once at Tristin and Jay, so the men knew she would field the question. “My name is Payton. I’m Jay’s wife. Zane’s condition is serious. From what we know, he has extensive damage to his intestines requiring surgery. The doctor warned us the surgery could take some time, so the fact we haven’t heard any news yet is not unusual.”

Maggie nodded but pierced Tristin with a steady stare that she must have passed on to her son. “Please don’t sugarcoat things for my benefit. I want to know the truth. I promise you I’m stronger than I look.”

To his credit, Tristin didn’t crack a smile or appear condescending to the woman. His expression was grave, his tone serious. “I have no doubt. I promise you, everything we’ve said is the truth. You now know everything about Zane’s condition that we do. I hope you will be open to us being in the room when the doctors speak with you when they tell you about Zane. We’d like to know more about his condition as well.”

“Of course,” Maggie returned. “Thank you. All of you.”

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“Momma, why don’t I get us some coffee since it may be a while?” Zaylee stood, and Payton followed suit.

“I’ll go with you. The vending area is down the hall.”

The women were stalled when a woman wearing blue scrubs stepped inside the waiting room, pulling a surgical cap from her head. She seemed startled at first to see so many in the tiny space, but she recovered quickly.

“Who’s here with Mr. Wilder?”

Maggie stood and stepped forward. “I’m Zane’s mother. How is my son?”

“I’m Dr. Hallmark. We can speak privately outside.”

“No, please, you can speak freely. We’re all here for Zane.”

Dr. Hallmark nodded. “Of course. First of all, your son came through the surgery and is in recovery. The knife penetrated his peritoneum, which is the lining in his abdomen that protects his organs. We were able to repair the damage to the lining and his intestines. His condition is stabilized, but I’ll be honest. He’s not out of the woods. There’s a serious risk of infection, but we’ll keep him in the ICU to monitor him. The next twenty-four hours are critical.”

“What is the likelihood he’ll get an infection?” Zoe asked.

“The risk is high, but we have him on IV antibiotics and close monitoring. We’ll do

all we can to keep the infection at bay.”

“May we see him?” Maggie clasped her hands tightly in front of her.

The doctor hesitated. “He’ll be in recovery for a bit longer, and then we’ll move him into Intensive Care. I’m afraid I can’t authorize all of you a visit. He needs rest. Immediate family may see him, but limit it to one or two at a time for just a few minutes. I know you want to see him, but this is best for his recovery.”

“I understand. Thank you, Dr. Hallmark.”

The doctor shook Maggie’s hand and hurried out of the room. Jay murmured in Payton’s ear before sending a silent communication to the KSI crew. Payton moved to Maggie’s side.

“Maggie, we’re going to step outside and give you some privacy with your family. Sydney and I will bring back some coffee for all of you. I know you all must be exhausted. Please, just sit and take a few moments. We won’t be long.”

“Yes, I think it’s a good idea. Thank you.”

Maggie seemed to sink back into her chair, Zoe and Zaylee moving to sit on either side. Zaida caught Payton’s arm as she started turned away.

“Sydney?”

The redhead stepped forward. Her eyes were bloodshot and her skin splotchy from the tears she’d shed. “That would be me. Sydney Reede. I work at KSI with Zane.”

Zaida stared at Sydney in silence for several minutes. Sydney regarded her curiously before sending Payton a confused expression. As if she sensed everyone’s

discomfiture, Zaida suddenly smiled.

“It’s nice to meet you. Zane has talked about you. It’s nice to put a face with the name.”

Zaida turned away, and Jay motioned for everyone to clear out. Once they were out of earshot of the Wilders, Jay faced Tristin. “We need a place to talk.”

“I took care of it. This way.” Tristin motioned for everyone to follow him down the hall past a row of offices. He pushed open a door to a conference room, and the motion-activated lights kicked on. It wasn’t large enough to accommodate all of them, but they managed to squeeze inside, except for Payton and Sydney who went in search of refreshments for Zane’s family.

Jay pushed his way through the group to the front of the room, his hand running through this hair with enough force to send the spiky strands standing straight up. “Are we any closer to finding out what the hell happened tonight?”

“Zane’s cover was blown.” Wings’ voice boomed out over the room, its tone unmistakably his.

Kat took a seat at the table and pulled her laptop from the bag she carried with her. “No, I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?” Tristin occupied the seat beside his wife. “We heard them call him out. He never dropped cover, but they still suspected him. After a year undercover, this was the first time they even questioned his identity. Someone had to tip them off.”

“I think someone did, and they assumed the mole was Zane. But I don’t think they knew for sure. I also think Zane figured out who it actually was. I have the audio feed

cued up. Just listen.”

She replayed a portion of the recording from the warehouse. Jay forced himself to pay attention to what was being said and not what was going down. His guilt had no place with how they had to work the case. He heard Zane tell Armando and Elian to scrutinize deeper in their organization for the leak. At the time, Jay believed this was a stall tactic, but now he heard what Kat clearly detected — the conviction and confidence lacing his tone. Kat switched off the audio and eyes Tristin and Jay expectantly.

“Did you hear it? He figured it out, and he almost had them convinced when things went wrong. I think the leak was someone at the meet tonight. If we can figure out which one it is and who they’re working for, they could be the key to getting the evidence we need.”

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“It’s a place to start at least,” Cole said. “Until we can talk to Zane, it’s the best lead we got.”

“Rock, was there any evidence at the scene?” Jay asked.

The Delta Team had been dispatched to the warehouse not long after Zane was transported to the hospital. Tristin had wanted them to search the space for any clues to help the case.

Rock moved where Jay could see him. “Nothing helpful. There was some blood at the scene, most of which we already know probably belongs to Zane. There were some spatter and directional drops suggesting someone else in the room was hurt, but we don’t know who or how. There’s nothing in the recording indicating Zane gave as good as he got before he went down.”

Kat regarded Jay. “Could one of you have hit someone during the breach?”

Cole was the one to answer. “It’s possible. We got off a few rounds when they were escaping. I didn’t think we were close enough to get any of them, but who knows?”

Jay released a growl of frustration. “I want this case closed for good. We’re not letting them get away with hurting one of our own. We work it until we take them down.” Jay’s tone broke no argument, and Tristin nodded his agreement.

“We’ll work in shifts. Brick,” Jay called for KSI’s lead investigator. “You and Rock coordinate the shifts. We need protection on Zane while he’s here, and just in case, let’s put a detail on his mother and sisters. Let’s run down De la Peña’s known

enemies and match them up with the names we got on tape. Let's narrow down the identities of everyone who was at the meet and start investigations on each one. If Kat's right and Zane suspected one of them of being the leak, I want all the intel on them we can get. Kat, you and Sydney are going to need some help, so see if you can recruit Travis to pick up the slack."

As Tristin's twin brother, Travis Knight often used his skills as a computer analyst to fill in at KSI when the need arose. Though he owned his own business, the Knight and Day Fitness Center, his background in law enforcement made him an asset in working difficult cases.

"He's already offered and has been working at the command center the last few hours. He's supposed to check in with me soon," Kat confirmed. The command center was more than the place where KSI's computer analysts worked. It was the base of operations during critical missions.

Jay continued. "Everyone check in with me, Tryst or Brick every hour with updates. If you're not running down a lead or working protection, I expect you to be getting rest. I know we all want to work this case for Zane, but he deserves us at our best. Which means we take breaks, eat, get some sleep, and then cover for each other. I know Tryst got us access to this conference room, but let's keep the investigation outside the hospital. We don't want to draw unwarranted attention. De la Peña may have suspected Zane, but he never used anything but his alias when talking to him. If he's looking for him, he's going to be searching for Cane Black. Zane is listed as a patient under his first and last name, Daniel Wilder, so he should be harder to pin down."

Brick raised an arm to get everyone's attention. "Let's regroup at KSI in 20. We'll sort out assignments and shifts then. Lex, you and Gennessy have the first protection shift, so you'll stay behind."

Lex Bishop and Gennessey Croft muttered a “copy that” and slipped from the room to take up posts close to the ICU. Lex had been one of the original investigators with KSI before joining KSI’s Delta Team, but Gennessey was new. She proved herself to be a valuable member of the family when they were tracking Oscar De la Peña to stop his threat against Payton and Davi.

Jay sent Tristin and Kat with the rest of the group as they left the hospital en masse. He made his way back to the waiting room to take his place beside his wife as they tried to offer support to their teammates’ family.

Chapter Four

“Will you marry me, sweetheart?”

Bridget bit back a smile as she examined the flow on the IV bag and checked the vitals on the heart/BP monitor. She’d been warned about her frequent flyer patient, 71-year-old Marvin Stutler. Over the years of being treated for everything from the flu to kidney stones, he’d managed to propose to every doctor, nurse and tech in the hospital — more than once. She had been officially indoctrinated to the staff at Lenfield Medical Center when she’d been assigned Marvin’s nurse on her first twelve-hour night shift.

“You’re breaking my heart. I can give you a good life, sweetheart. Anything you want. Ask and it’s yours.”

She made a fuss of straightening his bed covers where they stretched across his chest. “Well, now, you make a tempting offer, but I can’t accept unless this proposal is for me and my children.”

The wide smile dropped from his face, his sagging skin making his face appear long and gaunt. “Children?”

“That’s right. A girl and a boy. Thirteen and sixteen. We’re a package deal.”

Marvin grunted. “I don’t believe you’re old enough to have two teenage children.”

Bridget grinned. “You’re half right. I am definitely old enough to be their mother, but I’m not. They’re my niece and nephew. They’re pretty great kids, but I can’t accept a marriage proposal without including them.”

Satisfied she shut down his flirtations, she moved to fill his water pitcher and straightened his bedside tray so he would have all he needed within reach.

“You’re raising your niece and nephew?”

Her smile was soft as her thoughts shifted to the two waiting for her at home. “I guess it’s more like we’re raising each other, but yes, I’m their guardian.”

She was aware of his eyes thoughtfully watching her, but since she ran out of busy work to keep her in his room, she made for the door, tossing out one last question before she left.

“Anything else you need, Mr. Stutler?”

“May I ask what happened to their parents?” His tone was gentle, but she took a moment to push past her surprise at his question.

She was used to being asked about her sister and brother-in-law, and she never shied away from talking about them. But sharing about them didn’t make the grief easier.

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Mr. Stutler must have sensed her hesitation. “You don’t have to answer that. I’m sure you probably can’t share personal details with patients.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine. My sister Jennifer was their mother. Her husband was Dean. They were married twenty years when they were killed by a drunk driver on their way home from celebrating their anniversary less than a year ago.”

“I’m sorry. I hope the children know how lucky they are to have you as their aunt.”

She forced a smile even as her heart squeezed painfully. “I’m the lucky one, Mr. Stutler. I promise you that. Can I get you anything?”

“I’m good, sweetheart. Thank you.” This time he said the endearment less like a man flirting and more like a father figure showing affection.

She flashed him a parting smile and moved out of his room, shaking off her melancholy. Stepping behind the nurses’ station, she settled in the only unoccupied chair and logged into the computer in front of her. She tried not to dwell on how laid back and uneventful her shift had been. Having once worked as an emergency department nurse in a large metropolitan hospital, she had often spent entire shifts on her feet, moving from one emergency to the other. There was never time to have conversations like the one she had with Mr. Stutler. The medical care needs had never stopped; the seriousness of the cases had never let up.

Bridget thrived on the chaos, on the thrill of never knowing what the shift would hold. The job was stressful, and she enjoyed an active social life to help blow off steam. Some might view her lifestyle as unhealthy with her burning the candle at both

ends. But up until her sister and brother-in-law's death, it had been just her, no husband, children or even pets to protest the crazy schedule she kept.

Her shift at Lenfield Medical Center was boring by comparison, and she realized she welcomed the change. She liked having time for breaks and for getting to know her co-workers. She liked feeling as though she had a relationship with her patients extending beyond their medical care. She could leave work at work without the need for a few drinks and an evening of dancing to relieve stress. Even though she loved the different vibe at this hospital, she did wish she didn't have to work the evening shift, leaving Marlowe and Mathias alone at home.

"So how many marriage proposals did you receive today?" The floor nurse and supervisor, Charlotte Russell, patted Bridget's shoulder as she passed by, heading toward the coffee stand behind the nurses' station.

Bridget chuckled. "Just one so far, but the shift is early."

"I think you're becoming Mr. Stutler's favorite. You have the patience to deal with his antics. He's driven the other nurses crazy."

Bridget smiled her thanks when Charlotte handed her a fresh cup of coffee with her preferred dosage of sugar and cream. Charlotte was one of the first people she met when moving to Grayson Cove, and the two hit it off right from the start. She'd seen Charlotte wield a firm hand when necessary, but her personality veered more toward friendly and easygoing.

Bridget sipped the coffee. "He wants a little attention, but he's harmless. I think he's lonely. I don't know if he's had any visitors since he's been here."

"He never does. I think he lives alone. He has a friend who picks him up whenever he's released from the hospital, but the guy never shows up until then. As often as

he's admitted here, I don't really know a lot about him. He is nice, even if a little inappropriate," Charlotte added.

"If he's not careful, somebody's going to sue him for sexual harassment with all his 'sweethearts' and 'honeys'. I don't care if it is a throwback to his generation. It's chauvinistic." Amy Niven spoke up from her seat next to Bridget. The young nurse reminded her a lot of herself in her carefree days — outspoken, outgoing and outrageous. She made no secret of the fact she was hoping to snag a successful doctor for a husband, and in the meantime, she kept herself distracted with one meaningless relationship after another. Amy was nice enough, but Bridget hadn't really warmed up to her.

Bridget and Charlotte exchanged a glance, communicating their thoughts without voicing them aloud. They didn't agree with Amy's assessment of Mr. Stutler. Even with his frequent marriage proposals, he was a gentleman, never disrespecting the nurses. His harmless flirtations were more about finding something to smile about while being hospitalized.

A buzz from the panel at the nurses' station showed one of the patients called for nursing assistance. Amy answered the buzz, offered to handle the patient's request and then disappeared down the hallway, leaving Charlotte and Bridget alone. Charlotte took the seat Amy vacated.

"So how are you doing really? Are you settling in all right?"

Bridget shifted her swivel chair so she could face her supervisor. Charlotte's mouth was curled in a reassuring smile, causing crinkles at the corners of her warm, hazel eyes.

"Working the night shift is an adjustment. I know Mathias and Marlowe are fine on their own until I get home, but I still feel anxious about leaving them. I feel like I

should be there to help them with their homework and make sure they go to bed at a decent hour. It's silly to feel this way with teenagers. I just..."

Charlotte nodded when Bridget's voice trailed off. "You miss them. My children are adults, and I feel the same way toward them. It's natural."

Bridget's brow furrowed. "Technically they aren't my children."

"They are, Bridget. Your sister and brother-in-law entrusted you with Mathias and Marlowe because they felt you would do a great job raising them. And you are."

"Thank you, but you've only met them once, Charlotte. You can't know from one introduction how I threatened them within an inch of their lives to be on their best behavior while I'm at work."

Charlotte laughed. "I've seen a lot of children during my career, not to mention raising my three. Trust me, I know they didn't have to be polite when we met because you said so. You have nothing to worry about with those two."

Bridget smiled. Her friend was right. Mathias and Marlowe were smart, polite, and responsible — everything she could have hoped for in children of her own. But they weren't her own. Not really. And though she loved them more than her own life, she constantly worried if she was doing right by them. First with the custody hearing, then with the move and the change in schools, putting Marlowe in high school with her brother despite her young age, allowing Mathias to give up his sports career though she knew the reason he did so was to help her...

Would Jennifer regret choosing her as their guardian if she could see how Bridget was raising them?

"Go."

Bridget pulled herself out of her troubled thoughts to stare bewildered at her boss.
“What?”

“Go. Take fifteen minutes. Call your niece and nephew. Make sure they’re doing their homework. Remind them when they need to go to bed. Tell them you love them. Go. I’ll come for you if we get busy.”

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“Are you sure? I can wait until my meal break.” She was allowed rest breaks and one meal break during her shift, but she wasn’t due for any of them.

Charlotte waved her hand as if dismissing her. “Go. Tell them I said hi.”

Not needing to be told again, Bridget pulled her phone from the pocket of her scrubs and half-walked, half-jogged to the stairwell, where she knew she could find privacy. The number to Mathias’ cell was already dialing when she sat on a step leading down to the next floor. He answered on the second ring.

“Hey.”

“Hey. How is everything?”

“Good. I’m watching a movie. Lowe is reading. What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I wanted to check in while I had a quiet moment. Nervous about starting school tomorrow?”

She could almost see her nephew’s indifferent shrug. “I don’t know. I suppose a little. I think Lowe is. She keeps coming out of her room every few minutes to ask me questions about what she should wear. She’s never cared before.”

She felt her heart squeeze. “I can facetime during my supper break, so if she wants me to see the outfit she picked out, I can. I wish I could be there to help her choose.”

“You’ll be here for breakfast.”

Her twelve-hour shift went from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., so she would be able to make it home in time to make sure the kids ate breakfast and made it out the door on time. Their breakfast would have to consist of easy things like cereal or pop tarts because she had no time to prepare anything. At least not until her five-day break which came after she worked three shifts.

“I know,” she finally told him. “It’s just not the same.”

The phone got silent, and Bridget’s teeth worried her bottom lip as she waited.

“It was the right thing to do. You know that, right?”

She blinked back tears. “What are you talking about?”

“The move. The house. The new school. It’s not easy starting over, but it was the right thing to do.”

“So you don’t regret it? Living with your wild and crazy aunt?” Her attempt at levity fell flat.

“Nope. Do you? Living with your boring niece and nephew?”

“Hey, now, nobody talks about my kids that way.” She sighed. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.”

“Rough shift?”

“Are you kidding? This place is a dream compared to my last job. I’ve already gotten a marriage proposal. It was from a dirty old man, but still.”

Mathias chuckled. “Do I need to kick his ass?”

“Language, Mat,” she admonished. “And no. I can handle him, but I appreciate the offer.”

She heard the slam of a door closing and footsteps pounding on the steps, the noise echoing in the stairwell. “I’ll let you get back to your movie. I need to get back to my patients. Talk to you later?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks, Mat. For listening. Love you. Your sister too. Make sure the doors are locked and the alarm is set, okay?”

“It’s taken care of. We love you too. Later.”

She ended the call as the footsteps stopped behind her. Rising to her feet, she twisted to see over her shoulder, an apologetic smile on her face. The man waited on the landing, one hand on the railing. He wore the navy scrubs and white coat of a physician, his stethoscope hanging from around his neck and hiding the name embroidered next to the lapel.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” His smile was charming, reaching his gray eyes to make them sparkle.

“No, no,” she said, pocketing her cell. She stepped on the landing to give him space to descend. “I was finished. I have to get back.”

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“You’re working the third floor? I wonder why our paths haven’t crossed. Lenfield is not a big hospital.”

Bridget’s hand rested on the door handle as she turned to answer him, her smile frozen on her face. “It seems big to me, but I just started as a floor nurse. I had a few minutes before I needed to check on my patients, so I thought I would call to check on my kids.”

She wasn’t sure why she was explaining herself to the doctor who didn’t seem to understand the concept of personal space. She wasn’t sure if he was nosy or if he was flirting with her. Either way, mentioning she had kids would likely send him running in the opposite direction either way, as it did most men.

“Worried your husband is feeding them ice cream for dinner? My son always tries to pull that one on me during the weeks he’s with me. I promise we typically choose pizza over ice cream.” He turned to prop his frame against the railing, his arms crossing over his chest as a lock of brown hair fell on his forehead.

Wow, she thought. In three sentences, he managed to appear innocent as he asked if she was married while sharing he wasn’t scared away by the idea she was a mother and he was either separated or divorced from his son’s mother. This guy is good.

“Definitely not worried about what they’re having for dinner. I’m usually the one choosing ice cream, and I’m here, so there’s that. Anyway, have a good night.”

Bridget disappeared through the door to the third floor before the doctor could reply. She pushed her conversation with Mathias and the doctor from her mind. Keeping

herself busy with small tasks, she tried to not count down the minutes until the end of her shift.

Chapter Five

Zane barely registered the moan leaving his throat as he stirred from a deep sleep. He released a long breath as he waited for the pain in his gut to subside. His eyes fluttered open, taking in his surroundings in one slow, sweeping glance. As he took in the beige walls, gray counter, monochromatic dispensers on the walls, and the rolling stands with bags of fluids he couldn't identify, he realized he was no longer in the intensive care unit.

He vaguely remembered being moved to a private room sometime during the night, but the pain killers the nurses gave him kept him half-unconscious most of the time. He didn't like feeling out of control, but considering the damage the knife did to his gut, he tolerated the sleep-inducing drugs for the relief they provided.

He heard movement to his left before he saw her. Dressed in scrubs and comfortable sneakers, the nurse stood at a laptop affixed to a cart. Her eyes were transfixed on the screen as she typed notes into what he figured was his patient file. She was one he had not yet seen, and though there wasn't anything about her that stood out, he couldn't stop watching her.

She was petite. He guessed she stood no taller than five-five and probably weighed one-forty soaking wet. Her scrubs hinted at the curves lying beneath. Her face was long, with high cheekbones and a full mouth. Her skin held a light application of makeup, he noticed, enough to make her complexion appear translucent and her tawny eyes appear wide. Her chestnut hair swung about her face when she moved, the ends caressing her jawline. The top strands were twisted away from her face and secured with a bobby pin, showing off the gentle slope of her forehead.

“There are a lot of people who are going to be happy to see you awake.”

She surprised him by speaking without lifting her eyes from the laptop screen. He would have guessed she was too preoccupied to catch him watching her. He didn't respond right away, savoring the huskiness of her voice which sounded more like it belonged to a sexy siren on the other end of a phone sex hotline than to a nurse.

“You mean I still have people here waiting?”

“Oh, they've been popping in and out all day asking for updates. We couldn't even get you to stay awake long enough to eat. You must be starving.”

His brow furrowed. “How long was I asleep?”

The nurse finally glanced at him, and Zane suddenly cared very little about the answer to his question. Her eyes mesmerized him with its swirls of rich browns reminding him of the chocolate mousse marble cheesecake his mother was famous for.

“No idea. My shift just started, but the nurses on the early shift said you slept the day away. Would you like to try to eat some broth? Sorry I can't offer you more. The doctor said liquid diet for now.”

His stomach ached at the idea of eating, so he shook his head, which was more of an effort than he expected. He felt as weak as a kitten, even though his surgery had been a couple of days ago.

She went back to her laptop, typed for a few minutes and then closed it, facing him. “Are you up for some visitors, Mr. Wilder? We've kept them confined to the waiting room while you were resting.”

“Zane,” he replied automatically. “Who’s here?”

“You said Zane? I have you in the computer as Daniel.”

He grimaced. “That’s me, but I go by Zane.”

“Oh. Um, I don’t know who’s here. I’m just sure someone is. They’ve been coming in shifts, so someone would be here when you woke. And a couple of the more intimidating ones have kept a vigil outside your room. I didn’t ask why, but after reading in your file about your stabbing, my imagination sort of took over.”

He smirked. “It’s probably not near as exciting a story as what you’ve imagined.”

She grinned, and her irises swirled into a warm golden hue. “Then don’t tell me what really happened. I’d rather believe my exciting version. So should I send your visitors in?”

“Sure. I’m surprised you’ve kept them out for this long.”

This time she chuckled, and he felt his pain ease as the sexy sound tickled his ears. His lips curved into a slight smile.

“They’ve been pretty determined, from what I hear, but the supervisory nurse on the first shift is not one to mess with. Can I get you anything before I leave?”

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“Your name would be good,” he answered smoothly. “So I know who to ask for should I need anything.”

“All you need to do is press the call button on the side of your bed there, and any one of us will be able to help you.” She turned and pulled the cart behind her as she made for the door.

“I can’t keep calling you nurse, though, every time you come in here. And I’m guessing you’ll come back when it’s time to check my vitals or whatever it is you need to do.” He didn’t know why he was pushing, but finding out her name had suddenly become a challenge. And he didn’t back down from challenges.

She pulled open the door, pushed the cart into the hallway, and then gave him an indulgent glance over her shoulder. “Bridget.”

The door closed behind her, so she missed his triumphant smile. She oddly reminded him of someone, but he couldn’t pinpoint who that was. He puzzled over it until his door opened a few minutes later. His mother and sister, Zaida, stepped inside, their smiles letting him know how pleased they were to find him awake.

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Bridget rolled the laptop cart behind the nurses’ station, told Amy she was stepping away for five minutes, and retreated to her favorite spot in the hospital — the stairwell.

Holy Smokes! She’d been a nurse long enough to have seen her fair share of attractive

patients. Most of the time, she'd been so focused on their healthcare or emergency needs, she thought little of their good looks. Today had not been the case.

Daniel Wilder or Zane or whatever his name was had thrown her for a loop, something she hadn't experienced in a long time. She'd thought him handsome when he was sleeping, his expression peaceful, the dark shadow of stubble over his jawline, his thick lashes fanning against his cheeks. Then when he opened his piercing blue eyes and flashed his sexy smirk, she struggled to maintain her professionalism. He had complication written all over him, and she didn't need or want it.

Well, maybe she did want him, but she definitely didn't need him.

She pulled out her phone, firing a text off to her niece and nephew to take her mind off her inappropriate hormones. As she hit the send button, the door above her closed with a slam, and footsteps echoed through the stairwell as they jogged down the steps pausing at the landing where she was.

And there was Dr. Flirtatious, grinning at her like the Cheshire cat when Alice crossed his path in the Wonderland.

"Well, hello again. We have to stop meeting like this."

Bridget suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. "And good day to you, Doctor. I hope you're having a pleasant shift."

"It's definitely looking up. And you can call me Seth. Seth Masters."

"Good to meet you, Dr. Masters. I have to get back. I promised I'd be gone a couple of minutes."

Her hand was on the door handle when she felt his hand lightly tap her arm. "Wait.

Aren't you going to tell me who you are? I mean if we're going to keep bumping into each other like this, it would be nice to know each other's name, don't you think?"

This was the second time a handsome man asked for her name, but with Zane, she felt a thrill when he asked. With Seth Masters, his attempt felt phony, but she flashed him an indulgent smile anyway.

"Of course. I'm Bridget. Since I'm new, I've met so many people that I hope you'll understand if I don't remember your name the next time I see you. It's a lot to process sometimes."

He returned her smile, dimples deepening in his cheeks, his eyes flashing with interest. On any other occasion, the effect would have been charming, maybe even a little dazzling. But after encountering the delicious Zane Wilder, Dr. Flirtatious lost a bit of his appeal.

The door suddenly opened, forcing Bridget to step back closer to Dr. Masters to avoid being hit. His hands came to rest on her upper arms to steady her, and she quickly shrugged them off when she realized Charlotte peered at them, judgment evident in her stare.

"Do you need me for something?" Bridget hastily asked.

"Hello, Dr. Masters. Sorry to interrupt, but I need Bridget to process Mr. Stutler's discharge papers."

"Nice to see you," Dr. Masters returned, and Bridget wondered if his failure to call the charge nurse by her name was an oversight or deliberate because he'd forgotten what it was.

"I was on my way back, so I'll take care of it right now." Bridget stepped around her

supervisor and exited the stairwell without a parting word to the doctor.

“Bridget. Just a minute.” Charlotte caught her at the nurses’ station, and she braced herself for what was coming.

“I didn’t realize you knew Dr. Masters.”

“I don’t. I’ve bumped into him in the stairwell once before tonight,” Bridget explained.

Charlotte nodded. “I just...well, if you...”

Bridget had never seen her supervisor struggle to say what was on her mind, so Bridget beat her to the punch. “I’m not here to bag a doctor. I’m here to do my job. That’s all.”

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“Of course. I never believed you were searching for a husband. But I guess I wanted to tell you... Be careful around him. He has a lot of influence at the hospital, and though he’s very friendly, I’ve heard some things from other nurses saying he’s not very nice.”

Bridget wasn’t surprised by the news. She’d gotten the impression there was more false than genuine about the good doctor’s attention. “Thank you, Charlotte. I’ll definitely be on my toes if I run into him again.”

Charlotte smiled, obviously relieved when Bridget understood her meaning. “Good. Well, I’ll let you get to Mr. Stutler’s discharge. Let me know if I can be of any help.”

Bridget thanked her again and then focused on the task at hand, grateful for the distraction. Even when his constant marriage proposals, she found Mr. Stutler to be sweet and considerate. She was glad he was well enough to go home, though she realized she would miss his teasing and harmless flirtations.

And he was definitely a welcomed break from her odd interaction with Dr. Flirtatious and her overactive libido with Daniel “I-Go-By-Zane” Wilder.

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“So are you going to tell me what happened?”

Zane’s mother had stepped out to get coffee for her and Zaida, leaving him to face his sister’s interrogation alone. His relationship with his sisters varied between the three. He was closest in age to Zaylee, which made her his partner in crime growing up.

Zoe, as the oldest, was always looking out for him and shielding him from trouble. But Zaida was his best friend. She was the one who called him on his shit and helped him sort out his life whenever he hit a crossroads.

She encouraged him to join Knight Security and Investigations when Tristin approached him about the job. She didn't know the nature of his work with the Alpha Team. He wished he could tell her, but he never wanted his work to touch his family. He hated that getting hurt now caused them pain, but he couldn't tell any of them the whole story. Answering his sister's question was tricky, since he would never outright lie to her, but he couldn't allow his job to taint his sister's innocence.

"There was nothing to tell. I was stabbed while working a case."

"The case which kept you MIA for the last year. Exactly what kind of PI takes on a case where he can't contact his family for months at a time? This reminds me too much of when you were in the Army."

Zane turned away. As an Army sharpshooter, he had been often deployed with his unit or occasionally solo on missions which were sensitive enough, he could never share the details with anyone. Then, his family understood the nature of his military service. Though they weren't happy not knowing when he placed his life in danger, they appreciated his service to his country. Now, they were aware of what typical PIs and security personnel did for a living, so anytime the Alpha Team was called away for operations, they had a hard time understanding how this fit with what they knew of his job. And he had no clear explanation for them.

"All I can tell you is we were providing some extra bodies for a federal case. It was for your protection that I didn't contact her for so long. I couldn't risk the case blowing back on you or Mom, Zaylee and Zoe. As far as the stabbing, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Zaida settled back against her chair. A storm brewed in her bright blue eyes. She flipped her long raven hair over her shoulder, and Zane braced himself for the explosion which was forthcoming.

“I was not born yesterday, and I am not a dumbass. I know you better than you know yourself, and I know you’re lying to me. You never lie to me. So if you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to kick your ass so hard, you’ll be back in the ICU before your head stops spinning.”

Zaida’s temper was legendary in the Wilder household. She could erupt in a shouting fit, complete with throwing any object within arm’s reach to emphasize her point. This time, her voice was calm, as if she was talking about the weather or what she had for lunch. It was the calm which masked the white-hot anger underneath that was the scariest.

“What do you want me to say? That you’re right? That I am keeping something from you? If that’s the case, then you know I would only do it if it was necessary.”

“You could have been killed. We were out living our lives while you were put in a dangerous situation that almost took you from us. Where were the feds or others working this case while you were on the business end of a knife? Where was your protection? If something had happened to you, it would have killed us. I hope you know that.”

He did, and the thought was more of a sharp pain to his gut than the knife wound. “Zaida, the fact my backup was there is the reason I made it to the hospital without bleeding out first. No, they weren’t able to prevent me from being stabbed, but they prevented me from dying.”

Zaida fell silent for several moments, watching him as she struggled to control her wayward emotions. Finally she sighed. “Why? Help me understand. Why put

yourself in danger in the first place?”

It was his turn to struggle, but more with how to answer her question than what he was feeling. The secrecy of his work at KSI was paramount for his and his team's protection. Because they were able to hide behind the private investigations and security side of the business, they flew under the radar, accomplishing a lot without drawing unwanted attention. As much as his sisters and mother worried about him now, it would increase if they knew the truth. He couldn't be the cause of anxiety for them.

“Zaida, what I do is important. I can't always talk about it, but I promise, I'm not taking unnecessary risks. But without me and the others, a lot of bad things would keep happening, and a lot of bad people would go unpunished. I know I haven't answered your question, but I'm hoping you trust me and love me enough to let this go.”

Her tears fell, and she swiped at them, annoyed. “Dammit, Zane. That's not fair. Now I feel selfish for wanting my baby brother home in one piece while he's out saving the world. Jerk.”

He grinned. When Zaida resorted to curse words and name-calling, he knew he was forgiven. “I've been called worse.”

“Oh, and I'm calling you worse. In my head. I can't have Momma come back and hear me say this stuff out loud. She'd ground me for life.”

He shifted his position in his hospital bed and grimaced at the shooting pain in his abdomen. “You're an adult. She can't ground you anymore.”

Zaida gave an unladylike snort and rolled her eyes. “You try telling her that and see what happens. And I hope I'm there when you do.”

As if their conversation summoned her, Maggie Wilder pushed open the door to his room with her hip and stepped inside, carrying two to-go cups of coffee. She passed a cup to her daughter and went to her son's side. Settling her own cup on the bedside table, she gripped his hand tightly in hers, her keen gaze studying his face with the astuteness of an FBI profiler.

“Do you want me to have the nurse bring you some pain meds?”

The mention of a nurse brought a flash of the petite brunette who had been in his room earlier. He almost said yes just to have a reason for her to return, but surprised by the thought, he ultimately shook his head.

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“The pain meds keep me drowsy. I’d rather be awake while you’re here, and the pain is tolerable.”

Maggie smiled. “That’s my boy for you. Always the tough one.”

“You should be smacking him upside the head for scaring us to death,” Zaida grumbled.

Maggie’s laugh was light with a hint of sadness behind it. “I’m too grateful he’s all right. I did get to meet your friends. All of them. I’ll never remember all of their names, even the strange ones.”

“The strange ones are nicknames, Momma, but it doesn’t matter. You can ask them their names every time you see them if you want. They won’t care.”

“Well, I’ve decided. Once you’re out of the hospital, I’m inviting them all over for dinner. Do you think they’ll like pasta? Or I could make a variety of things, so everyone has something they like.”

“All of them? Momma, it’s not necessary. They can eat a lot, and there’s no way you can cook so much food by yourself.”

“Daniel Zane Wilder, I saw how your friends care for you. And they were very sweet and supportive to your sisters and me. Cooking a feast fit for a king is the very least I can do to thank them, and I’ll not have you convince me otherwise.” Her tone was stern, but the words were said with love. It was how his mother approached everything, with a firm hand and a loving heart. She often said it was how she raised

four children on her own after his father died, and Zane knew he and his headstrong sisters never made it easy for her.

“Have it your way. Those guys never turn down a free meal.”

“Hummph,” she grunted. “‘Those guys?’ Seems to me there were some women in the bunch.”

Zane bit back a smile. “You’re right. I’m sorry. But even the women won’t turn down a free meal.”

“And I noticed the women were very pretty.” Zaida wiggled her eyebrows, this time eliciting an eye roll from her brother. “Especially Sydney. She’s been very sweet. I can see why you talk about her so much.”

An image of Sydney Reede crept into his mind’s eye. The beautiful redhead, with her quiet strength, sweet spirit, and sharp intellect, would fit in very well with his family, though he’d never introduced her to them before. He wanted to, but he knew the minute his mother and sisters saw him with Sydney, they’d know he felt more for her than friendship. He did talk about her a lot, and he tried to make it seem more like they were friends. Obviously from Zaida’s teasing, he did a piss poor job of hiding it, despite the fact he never gave those emotions free rein. Sydney belonged to his teammate, and Cole made her happy, which is all Zane wanted for her. Even if it meant keeping his feelings locked inside.

“Oh my God! You’re blushing!” Zane winced at his sister’s girlish excitement. “Mom, do you see it? The last time I saw him blush like this was when Angie Buckley said yes when he asked her to prom.”

“Now, Zaida, leave him be. Even Zane deserves to have his secrets.” Maggie flashed him a knowing smile, and he realized he never hid anything from his mother. He

shouldn't be surprised. He and his sisters never got away with anything when it came to their mother. She saw all and knew all.

"I don't date people I work with, and those in the waiting room who don't work with me are already spoken for. So whatever is in your head, forget it. I have no plans to be in a serious relationship or to be married any time soon."

Zaida frowned. "It's just as well. I don't want you married before me anyway. No way am I going to be the spinster sister."

Zaida was far from being a spinster sister. The only one of them who was close to being married was Zoe, though she wasn't engaged yet, but she had been living with her boyfriend, Michael Gibbs, for a couple of years now. His sisters often tried to play matchmaker, and he knew his mother secretly wanted all of them to give her plenty of grandchildren. But if it was going to happen, it would be far into the future.

Zaida and Maggie stayed another fifteen minutes, and the conversation was light and easy. Maggie was the one to break up the visit when she saw her son starting to tire. She kissed his forehead and placed a hand to his cheek. She said nothing in parting, but the love which shone in her eyes spoke volumes. When they left, Zane felt his energy leave him all at once. As much as he wanted to stay alert, he could no longer fight off sleep.

Chapter Six

Jay tapped on the door before striding into Tristin's office at Knight Security and Investigation. Since the two were more friends than co-workers, they didn't stand on ceremony, so Jay thought nothing of barging into the office without invitation. Tryst — the nickname which was a throwback to his player days — barely raised his head from the accounting report on his desk to acknowledge Jay. He'd been reviewing the report since he'd stepped into his office that morning, and his head was pounding

from the hours spent pouring over numbers.

“Hey,” Jay said to get Tryst’s attention. “I’m going to check in on Zane. I thought you’d want to tag along.”

Tristin pushed the report from him and leaned back in a languid stretch against his chair. “I need to finish going through this report from the accountant, but I also need a break. My eyes are crossing.”

Jay chuckled. “Well, I have to insist on it. I have a feeling he’s going to ask about getting back on the case, and he’s not ready. This case is too risky for him to come back before he’s one hundred percent.”

Tristin released a long breath. “It’s too risky for him to be back, period. My contacts at the ATF got word late last night that there’s a hit out for Cane Black. The De la Peñas want his head on a platter. Literally.”

“But your contacts don’t have intel indicating Zane’s cover ID was blown?”

Tristin shook his head. “No, but I don’t think we can rule out the possibility. Not until we figure out why they ambushed him at the warehouse in the first place.”

“If they connect him to Payton and Davi...” Jay didn’t voice his fears because a part of him wondered if he’d jinx the situation – say it out loud, risk it coming true.

“There haven’t been any threats against Payton and Davi. They don’t seem to be on De la Pena’s radar.” Tristin’s conviction in his answer made Jay wonder if he’d had the ATF examine the possibility as well.

“I’m not trying to borrow trouble, but why aren’t they? Why aren’t we? Armando trusts no one outside of his inner circle, and when we killed Oscar to rescue Davi, we

threatened his circle. Hell, Armando's built an entire empire in the U.S. so he can get revenge against the ones who betrayed him back in the Dominican. Why wouldn't he come after us?"

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Jay was feeling the same dread he felt the first time they'd been approached to infiltrate De la Pena's organization, back before he had met Davi or reconnected with Payton. The FBI had tried to launch their own undercover investigation, but their agent had been compromised and found dead. When KSI was asked to step in, Jay refused the op because the intel on the crime family wasn't solid enough to build a proper back story. He couldn't send in one of his Alpha Team to work a case that was a suicide mission. But then the case turned personal because his little sister's best friend needed his help.

He'd not seen Payton since Addison's funeral. She'd reached out to his mother during a moment of weakness when she ran into a bit of trouble while trying to help a client. As a social worker, Payton was in over her head trying to help Mary, who'd been involved with Oscar De la Peña and had his baby, Davi. All of it came to a head when Oscar shot Mary and kidnapped Davi. Jay led the Alpha Team in the rescue which led to the shooting death of Oscar. When Mary died, Payton offered to be Davi's foster mother.

Jay couldn't believe how much his life had changed since reconnecting with Payton and learning how she'd been in love with him for years. It didn't take him long, after seeing her strength and her love for other people, to fall in love with her. Having Payton in his life meant including Davi, but the fifteen-year-old won him over with her strength and sass that reminded him of Addison. He and Payton wanted to adopt Davi, but he was apprehensive about moving forward with the process when it would call De la Peña's attention to them.

Their discussion was interrupted by another knock on Tryst's door. He turned to see Brick Coffey squeezing his large frame through the doorway, a file folder clutched in

his hands. The former green beret was an intimidating figure, standing well over six feet with a muscular frame which would be the envy of any professional bodybuilder. He often stepped in to assist the Alpha and Delta Teams on ops when they needed back-up, and Brick was good at what he did. He was solid and reliable. And though he was the size of a brick wall, he was surprisingly light on his feet.

“Hey, I need you two to consult on a case. I want you to talk to the clients to see if you get the same vibe I am.”

Jay studied his friend, surprised by his request. “You’re bringing in a new case now? We’re all hands on deck until we take down De la Peña.”

“I know, but I scheduled this appointment before we knew about Zane’s meet. The clients are from Georgia, and they didn’t want to make the trip here without knowing they could talk to us first.”

“Georgia?” Tristin sat up a little straighter. “Why are they coming here for a PI or security? There are plenty of firms between here and there who can help them out.”

“I mentioned that to them. They said we came recommended as the best, and they didn’t want to take any chances with a second-rate firm.”

“But you’ve talked to them already? Are you thinking we should take the case?” Jay studied his friend closely, sensing something was off with how Brick was reacting about this case.

“Well, no. I don’t know. I need a second opinion.”

“Since when does your gut instinct need a second opinion? What’s up?”

Brick shook his head. “I’d rather you talk to them first. I don’t want to cloud your

judgment with my opinions.”

“You want both of us?” Tryst asked.

“Well, I was coming to ask you, but yeah, it would be helpful to have both of you. I have them in the smaller meeting room.”

Tryst stood. “I was about to take a break and go with Jay to the hospital. Jay, you go ahead. I’ll take this meeting.”

Jay shook his head as he stood. “Nope. I’m too curious to let you shut me out. I’m in.”

Brick shrugged. “The more, the merrier. Just follow my lead.”

They followed the investigator down the hall and passed the larger conference room, dubbed the War Room because it was reserved for their strategy meetings, and the Command Center, where their technical analysts worked. The small meeting room was reserved for the investigators to use when meeting potential clients. It kept the clients away from the inner workings of the business while maintaining the public appearance.

The couple in the meeting room were older. The man had a long face lined with wrinkles which made him seem older than what he probably was, in Jay’s estimation. He wore a simple collared shirt and slacks, his weathered hand clutching tightly to his wife’s. She held herself regally though the rims of her soft eyes and the tip of her nose were tinged with red as if she’d been crying. She wore a demure green dress complimenting her graying platinum hair.

“Mr. and Mrs. Williams, I’m sorry to keep you waiting. These are my coworkers I wanted you to meet, Jay Colter and Tristin Knight. Guys, this is Oran and Ivy

Williams. They're originally from Georgia. I'm going to let them tell you in their words about why they want to hire us."

Brick settled in a seat at the head of the table, leaving Jay and Tryst to greet the couple and settle in seats across from them.

"You're a long way from home just to hire a private investigator," Tryst began. "I could recommend a couple of reputable firms closer to home if that would help."

"We realize this is unorthodox, but we felt it better to have someone local handle this," Mrs. Williams explained, glancing at her husband to continue.

"Our grandchildren just moved to town with their aunt, and we want to hire you to watch them. Make sure our grandchildren are safe, and document anything you see that the court might deem unfit or dangerous."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Maybe you should start at the beginning." Tristin leaned forward to rest his forearms on the table.

"Of course. This is a bit difficult to talk about, so you'll have to forgive us if we...become emotional." Mrs. Williams' voice cracked as if to give credence to her words.

Mr. Williams cleared his throat. "Our son, Dean, and his wife were killed in an automobile accident almost a year ago. They...um, they had two children, a son Mathias and a daughter Marlowe. We...we never expected to, um, outlive our son, and I'm certain he never expected it either. So when Dean and his wife made arrangements for the children in the event of...their death, they, uh, awarded custody of Mathias and Marlowe to Jennifer's sister, Bridget Kincaid."

"And you suspect she's unfit to care for them," Jay said. "Why not report her to the

Division of Children and Family Services?”

“We have. We even sued for custody, but we lost,” Mrs. Williams explained, two rosy spots of color appearing on her cheeks. “I believe we’re being penalized for our age, but I can assure you, gentlemen, we have the means to care for our grandchildren that their aunt does not have. She is single and works long hours as a nurse. Instead of Mathias being able to enjoy his high school years, he’s left to care for his sister in his aunt’s absence. She’s been known to go to the bar scene and get carried away — drinking too much, one night stands, staying at clubs all night. Once she won custody, she uprooted the children from their home and all they’ve ever known to bring them here, where they have to start over. They don’t know anyone, they don’t have any friends, no one to watch out for them.”

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Mr. Williams placed a reassuring hand on his wife's arm to calm her tirade. "We want our grandchildren to have a normal, happy life, as much as possible with their parents gone. Mathias had the makings to be a star athlete, like my son, but he dropped out of all his extracurricular activities to be able to take care of his sister because his aunt is not capable. He's already been dealt an unfair hand. He shouldn't have to give up everything he loves because of a situation the court forced on him."

Tristin's brows furrowed, forming a point at the bridge of his nose. "Let me see if I understand correctly. You believe your grandchildren's legal guardian is unfit. Because the court found in her favor in the custody battle, you believe your only resource is to hire private security to protect them and investigators to find hard evidence to reverse the custody agreement. Is this correct?"

When the Williamses nodded in agreement, Tristin continued. "You realize we cannot provide protection without the guardian's consent? She has to okay us being around your grandchildren."

"We're not asking you to be their bodyguards, per se," Mr. Williams elaborated. "We were thinking more along the lines of round the clock surveillance. Make sure they get home from school all right, make sure no one tries to break into their house while they're home alone. Make sure no one tries to kidnap them or hurt them until we're able to bring them home to Georgia with us."

Jay leaned forward. "How often are they left alone?"

The husband and wife exchanged a glance before she answered. "We found out the job she accepted here is a second shift position. She works twelve hour shifts from 6

p.m. to 6 a.m. They are left alone several days a week all night long. No one is there to make them dinner or make sure they do their homework. This is not what my son had in mind for his children.”

Jay leaned forward, unable to stay silent any longer. “May I ask how old your grandchildren are?”

“Mathias is sixteen. He had just gotten his driver’s license before he was forced to move here,” Mrs. Williams responded, regarding her husband. “And his sister is...”

“Twelve or thirteen,” Mr. Williams supplied when his wife faltered. “I can’t remember for sure. She’s not as active as her brother. She always has her nose buried in a book and doesn’t really talk very much. She needs constant supervision because she’s always breaking things or trying to make things. She once set our kitchen on fire while she was visiting. She said she was trying an experiment and wanted to work while we were all asleep and the house was quiet. If I hadn’t gotten up for a glass of water, who knows what might have happened?”

Mrs. Williams covered her husband’s hand with hers and picked up the explanation. “She’s shy and...awkward. She’s very intelligent, but her social skills are lacking. Quite common for someone her age, you understand, but without a reliable female role model in her life, I’m concerned. She’s at a very delicate stage in her life.”

Jay shifted in his seat. “If your son was aware of the care his children needed, why would he agree to award guardianship to his sister-in-law?”

Mrs. Williams clenched her jaw until her lips were a thin line. She took a deep breath. “It wasn’t his idea. We’re the only family Dean had. His wife’s parents are in poor health and retired to Florida because the weather better suited their needs. That left Jennifer’s sister. When you’re young, you don’t expect your life to be cut so short. I’m sure Dean thought he’d live to see his children marry and have children of their

own. I don't believe he ever thought the children would need a guardian, and he agreed with Jennifer's suggestion to keep the peace in his marriage. Jennifer could be very stubborn."

Tristin crossed his arms over his chest. "Typically in custody disputes, when they involve older children, the judge gives the children a chance to say who they would like to live with."

Mr. Williams nodded, but seemed reluctant to answer. "He did in this case as well."

"You have to understand, the children are hurting, and they've always been close to their aunt. It's easy for them to be charmed by someone like her, young and carefree without responsibilities or people to tell her what to do. With their state of grief, they were not in any position to make a long-term decision about their future. Someone needs to watch out for them, and it seems we're the only ones prepared to do this."

A look passed between Tristin, Brick and Jay. Tristin nodded to Brick. Since he was the lead person in talking with the Williams', he needed to be the one to break the news. "Mr. and Mrs. Williams, we appreciate how much you care for your grandchildren, but I'm not sure how we can be of help to you. We can certainly do some basic surveillance, but we can't actively protect Mathias and Marlowe without permission from their aunt. Otherwise it would be considered stalking and cause us a lot of legal hassle. Without having close enough contact to provide adequate protection and complete an investigation, I'm afraid you may be wasting your resources."

"We have the resources to waste," Mrs. Williams insisted. "We want them to be safe, but we aren't in a position to watch over them ourselves."

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Coffey is right. We don't believe we can provide you with what you're wanting, and we couldn't take your money for a job we're not able to do,"

Tristin added.

As if a switch had been flipped, the couple went from concerned grandparents to angry customers upset they weren't getting their way. Mr. Williams slammed his fist on the table and stood, his hardening as if made of granite. Mrs. Williams also stood, a fiery storm raging in her eyes. Bright spots of color stained her cheeks.

“You should know we have been in conversation with another company who has assured us they can provide exactly the services we're asking for. We wanted to give you an opportunity because you came highly recommended, but we are not above taking our case and our money elsewhere.”

Mrs. Williams stood ramrod straight, so stiff that Jay wondered how her spine kept from snapping.

As if they'd practiced their reaction, Jay, Brick and Tristin stood in unison. Brick moved to open the door and motioned for someone in the hallway to come to the meeting room. Jay moved to stand on the other side of the couple to corral them toward the door once Tristin had his say.

“I can't stop you from taking your business elsewhere. We will not be accepting your case, and I have to question the ethical work behavior of a company that would when their hands would be tied by what they could lawfully accomplish. I believe the two of you are still grieving the loss of your son, and I am truly sorry for your loss. I do not believe the right move is challenging their guardian's custody when you could reasonably offer help. You could use your funds to pay for a nanny to stay with them while their aunt is working instead of using what you call your considerable resources to destroy her reputation. I'm sorry you wasted a trip here, but I believe it's time for you to leave.”

“Young man, don't you understand we have the means and the power to destroy your

little company?" Mr. Williams fired back.

"You're welcome to try, Mr. Williams, but I can assure you my resources and friends have more power than yours."

Brick spoke up from the door, motioning toward the operative he flagged down in the hall. "This is Lex Bishop. He will escort you to the lobby."

The couple stormed out and almost left Lex behind as they headed straight for the elevator. Brick closed the door behind them and turned to face his friends, his expression grave.

"So my gut wasn't wrong."

Tryst settled into the closest chair with a long-suffering sigh. "They seem to care a lot about their grandchildren to be lying through their teeth. Was I the only one who got the impression they didn't like their daughter-in-law?"

"They never said her name when I first talked to them," Brick said.

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“I have a feeling I know who else they’ve been talking to,” Jay added.

“Tarrant,” Brick and Tristin said in unison.

Tarrant Security was KSI’s business competition in the area. While Tristin employed military special ops veterans to work for his firm, Tarrant hired men who loved violence and war too much. They were more mercenaries than security guards, and they recently began touting PI services as a new side to their business.

“They could have been bluffing. Threatening to take their business elsewhere to move us to take the case,” Brick pointed out.

Tristin shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think they are people who aren’t used to being told no. They’re used to having the best, and they were pissed they couldn’t hire us when their sources told them we were the best. I’ve run across a lot of people like this. They’ll stop at nothing to get their way, and right now, they want their way when it comes to their grandkids.”

“Did you notice how they spoke about their granddaughter?” Brick added.

Jay nodded. “I couldn’t tell if they were proud of her or disappointed. They definitely have warm and fuzzy feelings for their grandson.”

“I want to know what’s really going on here,” Tristin said. “I have a hard time believing the parents would appoint a guardian to their children who is unfit, and the court ruled in the aunt’s favor. I don’t think they would do that if there was evidence of neglect on the aunt’s part.”

“The children also chose her over the grandparents. They didn’t want to admit it, but I find it telling,” Jay added.

Tristin nodded. “I know we have a lot going on, but I hate the idea of Tarrant going the extra mile to prove this woman is unfit when she really isn’t. These kids lost both of their parents. I don’t want someone coming along to break up what little family they have left.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’m going to have Sam check into the case. He’s already told me Monica is giving him grief for being involved in some of the Alpha Team cases lately. I think he’d like to stay on the sidelines with the De la Peña case as much as possible,” Brick explained.

Sam Montgomery was one of the original members of the Alpha Team but stepped down to the role of investigator after an undercover op almost resulted in his death. His girlfriend, Monica, had convinced him to take a less dangerous role with the company so he would be there for her and their son Aidan more. He would resume his special ops role when KSI launched rescues for Sydney and Payton. When it came to the ones they loved, their family had each other’s backs no matter what.

“Sounds like a good idea. Have him use Travis for his technical support,” Tristin added. “I think this will free Travis up to work at the gym when he needs to while helping us out. It shouldn’t split our resources for the two of them to check into it.”

Jay used his hand to absently smooth his beard. “We could also assign Zane to the case when he’s released from his doctor. It would keep him busy and possibly out of our hair while we’re working the De la Peña case.”

“No way he’ll agree to that,” Tristin said.

“He won’t have a choice,” Jay insisted. “I’m ready to put Armando and Elian away

for good. I'm done with watching over my shoulder in case they come for Payton or Davi or even Zane. For once, I want our KSI family to be able to live in peace, without the threat of some psychopath hanging over our heads."

"Agreed. I've got Sydney and Kat running down intel on Cal Russo and whoever this Morrison person is. I wanted to know why Armando is so sure Zane was working for them." Tristin pushed back up to his feet and motioned for Jay to follow him. "Let's go check on Zane. Now's as good a time as any to let him know he's been benched for the time being."

"Glad it's you guys and not me delivering the bad news." Brick chuckled. "I'll get with Sam and Travis about this case. Are we meeting later to discuss next steps for De la Peña?"

Jay nodded. "Yeah. I'm not sure what those are yet, but it's time we get ahead of these guys instead of playing catch-up."

Chapter Seven

Zane eyed the IV connected to the bag of fluids on the metal pole beside his bed. Clear tape covered the needle resting in the vein in his hand. He hated how the clear bag and piece of tape made him feel powerless. He was weak physically, which his doctor said was normal, but now that he was up and moving around on his own, the soreness in his abdomen was manageable. His visitors had lessened to a few sporadic pop-ins a day, which left him with too much time to contemplate an escape from the hospital. How much damage would he cause if he ripped out the IV and made a run for it? Would he have enough energy to change out of this damn hospital gown so he could haul ass?

Just as he was feeling ready to jump out of his skin, he heard a knock a second before a familiar redhead pushed through the door. Her brilliant smile was what he needed to

calm his anxiousness. Dressed in her typical casual top and jeans, her hair in its signature braid, she immediately pulled a chair closer to his bedside, which suited him fine. It gave him an up-close view of the freckles sprinkling over her cheeks and nose and the deep blue eyes which sparkled as he gazed at them.

“You’re up,” she said cheerily. “Good. I was hoping we’d have a chance to visit.”

“What are you doing here? I figured you’d be heading home from work.”

“Well, I am. Just not from KSI.”

When Sydney was hired at KSI, it was under the stipulation she could maintain a few clients in her private security business. Most of the time, she handled her business remotely from home in the evenings, but sometimes, she was needed to make an in-person visit.

“I figured once I finished with my customers, I’d stop in to see you on my way back to KSI. I have a few things to do there before I can call it a night,” she explained. “I’ve been worried about you.”

“No need to worry. I’m good.” He smiled and placed his hand over hers where it rested on his bed.

Her smile dropped. “Stop lying. Put up a good front with your mother, with your sisters, or anyone else if you want. But not with me.”

If she only knew how he’d been lying to her from the beginning. He was the brother she never had, but to him, she was never in the sister or friend zone, and she could never know how he felt about her. He hoped his undercover operation would give him the distance he needed to move past his feelings. Hell, he had agreed to give her away at her wedding to his teammate, but seeing her worried over him made him

realize his feelings were still there. They may have been pushed out of the way for him to focus on his job, but they were as strong as he remembered.

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you’re in pain. That you’re afraid because De la Peña could very well know who you are and where you are. That he could come for you and everyone we love. That you’re done taking risks which put you and the rest of us in danger. Hell, I’d settle for you promising to take a few days to recover while the rest of us figure out how this op got blown all to pieces.”

He squeezed her hand. “I can’t sit by and do nothing.”

Sydney withdrew her hand and sat back with a long-suffering sigh. “Of course not. Except you may not have a choice. You’re recovering from a knife wound and major surgery. Your body needs time to heal, whether you like it or not. A little bird also told me Tristin and Jay benched you.”

“I’ll promise you whatever you want if you’ll break me out of here. This place is driving me nuts.”

“No such luck, Mr. Wilder.” His nurse breezed into the room pushing her laptop cart, the same stern expression she always wore on her face. He’d been too caught up in Sydney’s presence to notice her come through the door. “You’re going to be with us at least another day or so.”

Bridget glanced up, and he could see she hadn’t realized Sydney was with him. The two women stared at each other, Syd with her eyes wide and Bridget with her mouth open. He looked from one to the other, unable to decipher the weird vibe which suddenly invaded his room.

“Bridget,” Sydney murmured. “Oh, my God. It is you.”

“Syd, what’s going on?” Zane struggled to sit up straighter, wincing as the ache in his gut protested.

Bridget rushed forward to raise the head of his bed slightly while helping him settle comfortably against a stack of pillows. Then she faced the redhead with a warm smile which had Zane blinking, stunned. He’d never received a genuine smile from her, but Sydney gets one on their first meeting. The idea bothered him for reasons he didn’t care to define.

“It’s good to see you, Sydney. Marlowe has been wondering if you were successful in getting your car fixed.”

Sydney grinned. “Tell her yes. It was exactly as she said it was. The mechanic was able to repair it quickly. Cole and I still want to have you all over for dinner. We’ve had a lot going on.” Her eyes flicked over to Zane, and Bridget followed her line of sight.

“I didn’t realize you knew each other. Small world.”

“Zane and I are friends, and we work together. He is going to give me away when Cole and I get married in a few months.”

He cocked a brow at Sydney. A few months? When he left on assignment, Sydney and Cole had not set a date. He shouldn’t be surprised the wedding was so close. He’d been undercover for a year, and a lot can happen during that time. But hearing it still made it all seem real. Without a date, he could carry the tiny hope that he still had a chance with her or something could happen to break up her and Cole and he could be there for her. The hope dissipated with the news.

When he stared back to Bridget, he could see something in the depths of her dark eyes. It took him a moment to realize what he saw — understanding and empathy. She knew. With one glance and a few minutes in his and Sydney's company, Bridget knew he was in love with his friend. Damn, this woman's talents were wasted working in a hospital. She had all the makings of a strong FBI profiler.

"Either my brain is still in a painkiller fog, or I'm missing something here. You two know each other?"

Sydney rolled her eyes at him. "My car broke down one night, and Bridget and her niece and nephew stopped to help me. Her niece actually got my car running and told me what to tell the mechanic to check for. Even Cole was impressed. Anyway, they're all new in town, so we wanted to have them over for dinner to thank them."

"I told you it's not necessary," Bridget said smoothly as she went back to her work. "We were happy to help. Marlowe loves working on this stuff, and she'll be pleased to know your car is working now."

"Marlowe is your niece?" It was the first piece of personal information he'd been able to get out of her, and he was curious to know more.

"Yes. Mathias is my nephew. Now, how are you feeling, Mr. Wilder?"

"I've told you to call me Zane. I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're obviously still in pain. On a scale of one to ten, what is your pain level?"

"Not enough to rate. What were you saying about me being here longer?"

Her expression told him she didn't believe his assessment of his pain, but she let it

slide. “Sydney, would you mind giving us a few minutes?”

“Whatever you need to tell me, you can say in front of Syd. We’re practically family.”

Sydney placed a hand on his arm. “No, it’s okay. I need to check in with Kat before she leaves work. I’ll step out for a few minutes, and you can fill me in when you’re done here. Bridget, it’s good seeing you again. I promise to be in touch very soon. Say hello to Marlowe and Mathias for me.”

“I will. Nice to see you.”

Zane watched Sydney leave then watched Bridget take his vitals, a knowing smile hovering over her lips.

“You gonna ask me? I can tell you’re dying to.”

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She moved to enter his information into the laptop. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I came in here to check how you’re doing. Are you experiencing any chills or a headache?”

His brow furrowed. “No. You’ve never asked me before.”

“You’ve never spiked a fever before. It’s low, so I don’t think it’s anything to be overly concerned right now. I’ll let your doctor know, but I’m sure she’ll have us monitor it and increase the dosage of your antibiotics. If it goes up too high, it could be a sign of infection. If that happens, she will likely put you back in the ICU until it can be brought down. She will be in to see you later this afternoon to make her rounds, so I’m sure she’ll want to talk to you more about it then.”

Zane scowled. “I thought the risk for infection had passed.”

“With an injury like yours, there’s always a risk. But you’re otherwise healthy and fit. I wouldn’t worry at this point.”

He couldn’t resist teasing her, especially since she usually gave as good as she got.

“You noticed I’m fit? You’ve been checking me out, Nurse Bridget?”

She gave him an unladylike snort which had him grinning like a fool. “You sure you want to be flirting with me when your girlfriend is right outside?”

That was enough to erase his grin. “Sydney is not my girlfriend. We’re friends, almost like family. She’s about to marry Cole. I work with both of them.”

“Are you trying to tell me something I already know, or are you reminding yourself? Because I don’t know if you’re aware of what your face looks like when you watch her. What’s the word people use...lovesick. That’s it.”

“You’re off your game today, Nurse Bridget. You’re all wrong about me and Syd. You can make it up to me though by convincing the doc to order my release instead of increasing my stay.”

She was back by his bedside, straightening his covers. “Don’t be a baby, Mr. Wilder. I know a lot of people who would welcome a few days rest, and you can’t be lonely, not with all of the visitors you’re getting.”

“I thought I told you to call me Zane.”

She met his gaze briefly and then turned back to her laptop. “You did.”

Zane watched her, wondering how she could pique his interest so much. She was practically a stranger to him, and he hadn’t spent a lot of time in her company. But she had a way about her which stirred his curiosity. She had a story, and he was spending more time than necessary trying to guess what it was.

“How is it your niece knows how to fix cars?”

She smiled, and he blinked at how it softened her face. There was almost a maternal air about her. “She’s a genius. She’s always taking things apart to see how they run and then putting them back together. Her father had her working on cars since she was seven.”

“So she and your nephew live with you?”

“You ask a lot of questions, do you know that?” she fired back at him.

“Just trying to pass the time. So, what happened to their parents?”

“They died in a car accident. I was awarded custody of Marlowe and Mathias. We moved here, so Marlowe could go to Johnson Rainier High School. She was accepted into their advanced STEM program, and she’s only thirteen. Mathias is sixteen and very smart and athletic. They love pizza, but neither of them has a sweet tooth like I do. Does that satisfy your curiosity, Mr. Wilder?”

“Not by a long shot.”

Her head whipped up, and he could read the shock in her eyes. He smirked, pleased he could catch her off guard. “You didn’t expect me to say that, did you?”

“Considering you’re in love with your friend, no, I didn’t. You might want to be careful about your flirting. People can take it the wrong way.”

“And what way did you take it?”

She met his gaze directly, impressing him with her spunk. “My observation about you and Sydney hit closer to home than you’re comfortable with. So you try to flirt with me to make me flustered so I’ll back off. It’s a good effort, I admit. But better men than you have tried it before. They always fail.”

He’d gotten used to her asking him if he needed anything prior to leaving his room, so he felt a bit disconcerted when she exited without another word. He started to wonder if he’d gone too far with his teasing.

He finally chalked her reaction up to the fact she wanted to maintain boundaries with him as her patient. If he could catch her outside of the hospital, her reaction would be different. He was certain of it.

By the time Sydney returned, an idea formed in his head. Before he questioned her about the progress of the De la Peña case, he asked for something else.

“When you invite Bridget over for dinner, I want to join.”

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“Really?” She was suddenly giddy with excitement. “I like her. She’s pretty and nice, and her niece and nephew were so polite and smart. I think dinner would be a great way for you to get to know her without the pressure of a first date. How romantic is this? You taking an interest in the woman nursing you back to health.”

“Stop with the dramatics, Syd. That’s not what this is.”

“Then what it is exactly?”

His gaze lingered on the door to his room as if he could still see Bridget standing there with her sable hair swinging against her face, one hand in the pocket of her scrubs while the other pushed her cart.

“I don’t know. I can’t shake the feeling there’s more to her than meets the eye. But it’s not important. Let’s talk work before I go stir crazy sitting in this place.”

“I didn’t come here to talk work. Jay and the others have it under control. You need to forget about De la Peña for now.”

“I can’t. My cover was solid for a year, and all of a sudden they accuse me of being a snitch. The only thing that makes sense is I was set up, and I have a hunch who did it. I don’t know how they figured it out. I gave nothing away. I was too careful.”

“The truth is the guys haven’t turned up much to go on. If you have a hunch on where they might be searching, you need to call Jay. Any lead is better than what they have now.”

Zane nodded. "Okay. I'll call Jay and tell him my theory. They gave my mom my cell phone when I was admitted, and she finally brought it to me last night. I was pretty out of it when I was in the ICU, but I'm starting to remember more since I'm off the painkillers. They were messing with my head."

"They were necessary. Regardless of what you Alpha Team guys think, you aren't superheroes. Take the meds. Better to sleep than to be in pain."

He shook his head. "I need a clear head if I'm going to be of any use to the team. Once I talk to Jay, if the pain is worse, I'll have Bridget give me something."

"I would try to convince you to wait until tomorrow to call Jay so you can rest now, but I already know you're not going to agree to it. So I'll go. You do what you need to. I'll see you tomorrow." She stood and leaned forward to drop a kiss to his cheek. The soft feel of her lips against his skin was sweet torture.

"Take care of yourself. Please. I'm not sure I can handle it if something happens to you."

"I'm fine, Syd. I'm not going anywhere, and nothing is going to happen to me. I promise."

They both knew he couldn't keep the promise in their line of work, but she accepted it for now.

Once he was alone, he reached into the drawer of the nightstand beside his hospital bed. He withdrew a notepad and pen the hospital provided, and he began jotting down all of the thoughts jumbling through his mind, crossing out the ones which had more to do with the women in his life than his case.

Chapter Eight

Bridget saved Zane's room for last as she checked on her patients before the end of her shift. The man had trouble written all over him, and yet he stayed on her mind all night. She reminded herself he all but admitted to being in love with Sydney, but after seeing her with Cole the night they stopped to help her, Bridget was sure Zane's feelings went unrequited. She could have kicked herself for allowing her mind to wonder if he'd let her help him forget all about his feelings for his friend.

The man had her twisted in knots.

She blamed it on being sex deprived. Since becoming a guardian, her love life had been put on hold. She'd tried juggling her responsibilities with dating in the first couple of months she had Marlowe and Mathias, and it had been a disaster. She could never relax and enjoy the date when her niece and nephew were grieving.

So now all of her attention went to Mathias and Marlowe, which she didn't regret one bit. But when faced with a fine-looking man, her libido went into overdrive, and she wasn't prepared for that.

One benefit to her wandering thoughts was she'd managed to figure out what to do. After one quick stop in Zane's room, she could head home, send the kids off to school and log in some quality time with her vibrator.

"Bridget! Wait up!"

Her hand had pushed open the door to Zane's room when she heard someone call her. Leaving it cracked, she turned to see Seth Masters hurrying toward her, a charming smile splitting his face. She quickly glanced around her to see if Charlotte or Amy hovered close by, but they were with their own patients. She was left to face the infamous Dr. Flirtatious on her own.

"Dr. Masters. I'm surprised to see you on this floor. Taking a short cut to the ED?"

He stopped in front of her, not even a little out of breath from his quick pace. For some crazy reason, knowing he was in better shape than she was annoyed her.

This had to be what annoyed her, right? It couldn't be that he stopped her from going into Zane's room and delayed the end of her shift. Could it?

"I was actually about to head out. I was hoping to catch you before you left. I'd love to treat you to breakfast, sort of as a welcome to Lenfield Medical. Nothing fancy. Just this diner on Main Street which stays open twenty-four hours. Their pastries are really good."

She stood dumbstruck. She thought the good doctor only wanted to flirt with her as the new nurse in town. She had no idea he would ask her out. With what Charlotte told her about his influence at the hospital, she almost put aside her rule about not dating co-workers so she wouldn't make any waves. She needed this job. Being in Grayson Cove was too important for Mathias and Marlowe for her to blow her one employment opportunity in the small town.

"I, uh, I'm sorry. I have to get home to my niece and nephew. I need to make sure they eat breakfast and head off to school on time."

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She bit back a triumphant smile and resisted the urge to pat herself on the back. Nice save, Kincaid. He was a father, so he could understand familial duties took precedence over anything else. He could hardly fault her for wanting to be there for the kids. Even if her kids were self-sufficient enough to not need her for their morning routine.

His smile disappeared, and he appeared almost embarrassed as he watched her. “Right. I get it. Raincheck then?”

“I appreciate the gesture. It’s not necessary, but it was nice of you to offer.”

“Enjoy your time with your niece and nephew. I guess I’ll see you around. Probably in the stairwell.”

She forced a chuckle at his weird attempt at humor. “Yes, we do seem to bump into each other in the stairwell a lot.”

“Well, goodnight then. Oh, um, actually, good morning.” He moved on past her, and she watched him disappear into the stairwell.

She couldn’t tell if he was mad or upset or disappointed. She hoped it was none of those and he was thinking of whom he could take out instead of her. Dr. Flirtatious was another complication she didn’t need.

She pushed her cart through the door to Zane’s room, her work smile set on her face. She stumbled over the leg of the cart when she realized he had his icy blue stare pinned to her as she stepped inside. Lowering her gaze, she hoped he couldn’t feel

her heart pick up its pace.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Wilder? Any pain?”

“A little.”

“You know the drill. On a scale of one to ten, how severe is your pain?” she continued.

“Two.” His answers were succinct, but his stare was intense. He hadn’t even insisted she use his first name.

She willed herself not to squirm, but she had the feeling of being in the principal’s office after being caught drinking under the bleachers at the football field. “I can bring you some acetaminophen to help with the pain. Any other symptoms I need to be aware of?”

“No need to bring the pain reliever. The pain’s tolerable. No other symptoms. Just ready to get out of here.”

He didn’t sound angry or annoyed. He didn’t sound cheerful or tired or in pain. He sounded...neutral. His tone held no emotion, his expression gave nothing away. Though she was the one asking questions, she couldn’t shake the impression that she was in an interrogation, and she couldn’t imagine what it was he would want to know.

“The doctor should make his rounds within the hour, and you can ask him about your discharge. Your fever is down and has been for a little while, but I wanted to check it again before I head out. I figured you might be sleeping as early as it is.”

“I’m an early riser. The military drilled it into me. You must be tired though.

Working all night has to be tough.”

Pulling on her gloves, she shrugged as she went over to swipe the thermometer across his forehead and record his temperature. “I’m getting used to it. Your temperature is normal. I need to check your stitches. Your dressing may need changing.”

Zane had changed out of the hospital gown into a T-shirt and sleep pants. He raised the hem of his shirt, and Bridget forced herself to focus on the bandage covering his wound instead of the six-pack abs he was sporting. The skin around his stitches was no longer red, thanks to the antibiotics doing their job, but more of a healthy pink. She removed his bandage completely, tossed it into the correct receptacle and found clean gauze and surgical tape.

“This will take a few minutes. If you’ll hold still.” She tore two pieces of tape and stuck the ends on the handle to his bed, so she could reach them easily to secure the bandage. Then she cut the gauze large enough to cover his wound and held it in place while she added the tape. “All done.”

“Thanks. So your shift is about over?”

“In about ten minutes.” She started entering her notes in Zane’s chart using the laptop.

“I’m surprised you turned him down.”

Her fingers paused over the keyboard, and she shot him a glance from under her lashes. “Beg your pardon?”

“Doctor what’s-his-name. He asked you out. I’m surprised you turned him down. If what the other nurses say is true, he’s a hot ticket around here.”

She snorted and went back to typing. “You’re gossiping with the nurses? You have been in here too long.”

“I don’t need a lot of sleep, so I hear things. Why did you turn him down?”

“You’re stepping into none-of-your-business territory, Mr. Wilder. Now, do you need anything?”

She still stood beside his bed, so he was able to reach out and lightly grasp her arm.

“Don’t trust him, Bridget. Steer clear of him.”

She glanced at her arm, her brow furrowing at the tingles radiating under her skin at his touch. Then she raised her eyes to meet his, stunned to see concern clouding their depths.

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“Do you know Dr. Masters?”

Zane abruptly released her. “No. But he’s a player. You deserve better.”

“Why would you say that? You don’t know him or me for that matter.”

“No need to get defensive. I was raised by a single mom. I’m just looking out for another single mom.”

She softened, his explanation chipping away at her defenses more effectively than a jackhammer. “Not that it’s any of your business, Mr. Wilder, but I don’t date people I work with. If you need anything, use your call button. See you tomorrow if you’re not discharged first.”

Bridget left before Zane had a chance to stop her again. She made quick work of her end-of-shift duties, hurriedly gathered her things and headed to the hospital lobby as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. She didn’t slow down until she was in her car with the door secured behind her. She rested her head against the headrest and released a long, shaky breath. Her heart continued to pound, and her stomach felt the flutter of butterflies.

Tomorrow, if Zane wasn’t discharged before her shift started, she would ask Charlotte to assign Amy to him. She needed a break from his intoxicating and unnerving presence. Her request would likely raise questions from her supervisor, but she had no other choice if she hoped to protect her peace of mind.

???

“You can’t bench me now. This is my case.”

Zane struggled to keep his voice from rising, but he could do little to maintain a normal blood pressure. Hopefully, none of the nurses would notice and come to check on him. He wasn’t ready for them to order Jay and Tristin out of his room until he had a chance to change their minds.

When the two walked into his room, Zane sat up straighter and barely exchanged hellos with them when he began sharing all of the case details he’d jotted down. He didn’t leave out even the smallest note because until they figured out how his cover was blown, they weren’t ready to rule any information as significant or not. He didn’t expect Jay to say his involvement with the case was on hold while he healed.

“You’re in no shape to work this case, and besides, your cover was blown. De la Peña thinks you died in the warehouse, but if you put yourself out there to investigate the case, he’ll come after you or send someone after you. Our intel at this point is shaky at best. Until we know more, you’re better off laying low.”

Zane wanted to shout his frustration, especially when he couldn’t logically disagree with his team leader. “You need me on this case. Thumper and Singer are the moles, and they ratted me out to throw suspicion off them. I’m sure of it. I got a vibe from them, but then all hell broke loose.”

“Any idea who they might be working for?” Jay didn’t question his teammate’s “vibe.” He trusted the instincts of each man on the Alpha Team, and since Zane was the only one present when the attack went down, he was the one who could speak to the subtle clues he observed.

“They mentioned Cal Russo, probably to see if they’d get a reaction from me, but I don’t think it’s him. Then they threw out the name Morrison. I don’t know who he is, but the look Singer and Thumper gave each other made me think they knew.”

“There was nothing in the ATF’s file about a Morrison.”

“Yeah, and in the year I’ve been under, I’ve never heard the name mentioned at all until the night I was stabbed.”

“So the key is this Morrison,” Jay surmised. “We need to find out more about him, and maybe we can use him to bring De la Peña down.”

“Or if he’s as bad as Armando and Elian, we can take them all down. That’s why you can’t bench me.”

“Until I know they aren’t coming for you, I don’t have a choice. Think about it, Zane. If they track you down, then they can find Payton and Davi. No way in hell can I let that happen.”

Just the mention of Jay’s family was enough to take the steam out of Zane’s argument. As the best friend of Jay’s sister, Addison, Payton had been in his life a long time, but it wasn’t until a year ago, when Payton inadvertently landed on De la Peña’s radar, that the two of them became reacquainted, eventually married and included Davi in their family.

Zane hadn’t been around Payton and Davi much since he went undercover shortly after Payton and Jay married, but they were already ingrained in the KSI family. After all they’d been through, Zane couldn’t be the reason they were back in De la Peña’s sights. Though he’d never heard any mention of retaliation, he knew how close to the vest the gun runner kept his plans, especially those seeking vengeance.

“Okay, I’ll back off the case,” Zane conceded. “But let me at least help Kat and Syd in the command center. I’ll lose my mind if I’m stuck at home while you guys are chasing leads on my case.”

Tristin exchanged a glance with Jay. “I figured you would say that, but I have a different assignment for you. Brick has a case, and since we’ve called all hands on deck to investigate your stabbing, he could use some help with the case.”

“Shit, Jay. It’s one thing to take me off my case. It’s another to put me on cheating-husband duty. Why are we even taking on a new case of any kind when everyone is working my case?”

“It’s not a cheating husband. It’s a family. The details are complicated, so you just worry with taking care of yourself. We can talk shop once you’ve been discharged. I’ll keep you posted on what we find out about De la Peña.”

“This is shit, Tryst. I’ve lost a year of my life because of these people with nothing to show for it. I need to be the one to see this through.”

“Get your head out of your ass,” Jay admonished. “This is not personal, and whether you admit it out loud or not, you know this is the right move. Stop acting like a brat.”

Zane barked out a laugh. “Love you too, man.”

Jay and Tristin stayed a few more minutes before heading back to work. For the first time in a long time, Zane was left feeling helpless, and it was a feeling he refused to let stick around. Somehow he would find a way to close his case and track down the ones who put him in the hospital.

He hoped he still had a job when he was done.

Chapter Nine

Bridget rolled over and tapped her phone screen three times until she successfully silencing her alarm. Then she rotated back on her side in protest of the early hour. Day two of her four-day break from work, and she was already chastising herself for agreeing to go on a run with Mathias.

The kid loved to run even before his parents died, but lately, he gained a new obsession for it. Though he wasn't playing high school sports anymore, he kept up with the exercise, which kept him lean despite his voracious appetite.

Not long after her niece and nephew came to live with her, she decided to join him on his runs. She thought it would give her a chance to connect with him. Though runningwithhim wasn't an accurate description. His long strides and stronger lung capacity meant he was faster and covered more ground than she.

She sighed as she pushed herself to a sitting position on the mattress. If she didn't get out of bed, Mathias would guess she'd changed her mind, and he would start his run without her. She forced herself up from the warmth of her covers.

Her feet padded lightly against the floor as she made her way into the bathroom, still shaking off the last remnants of sleep. She took care of her needs, washed her hands and face and secured her short tresses in a messy bun. She shed her sleep shirt as she moved to her dresser, pulling on a sports bra, loose T-shirt and spandex leggings. She added a breathable cotton headband to hold loose tendrils of her hair back from her

face.

When she opened her bedroom door, the rich aroma of coffee greeted her, filling her mouth with saliva. Before she moved to the kitchen, she peeked in on Marlowe with a soft smile. The teenager's covers were pulled from the mattress and wound around her like a cocoon. In addition to the pillow she rested her head on, two other pillows rested on the mattress on either side of her. At her feet was a large stuffed hippopotamus her mother had given her one year as a birthday present. Vivian the hippo was a muted gray with pink material on the inside of the ears and on its chest and belly. Gray stitches, a darker shade than the hippo, gave evidence to the holes which once leaked stuffing until Jennifer had sewn them together.

As Bridget was about to walk away, she noticed her niece's phone sitting on the nightstand, the screen faded to black. A charger cord stretched across the nightstand, the end hanging off the edge. With a sigh, she walked over to plug up the phone and waited for it to have enough charge for her to adjust the volume. Just in case they needed to call while they were on a run, Bridget wanted her niece to hear the phone.

She finally made it to the kitchen and sighed when she saw the steaming mug of coffee waiting for her on the top of the bar in the kitchen. She settled on a bistro chair, wrapped her hands around the warm mug and smiled to see her requisite cream was already added. She savored the first sip, closing her eyes as the liquid warmed its way down her throat to her stomach.

Then she opened her eyes and settled her gaze on her nephew. Mathias stood at the counter, resting his weight against the sink as he chugged a bottle of water. His hair, a gorgeous shade of golden brown, fell across his forehead, framing his hazel eyes. His T-shirt and nylon basketball shorts were mismatched in color, his running shoes scuffed from hours of use.

"You don't have to come."

She took another sip. "I may not be a morning person, but I do want to spend time with you. If we get back in time, I thought I'd head out for some doughnuts for breakfast while you and Marlowe got ready for school."

"Sounds good."

Downing half of her coffee, she pushed up to her feet. "I think that's enough for now. Ready?"

He crushed his empty water bottle between his hands and raised his arms to pitch it toward the recycling bin in a perfect arc. "Let's go."

Their house was small, the neighborhood quiet. The hour was too early for their neighbors to be up and about. Bridget set the security alarm and followed Mathias out of the house, securing the door behind them. Some might say her security system was overkill in a community which was too boring to warrant it, but she didn't take any chances with how often her kids were home alone. She even considered getting a guard dog to amp up the security for her own peace of mind, but she had not had time to scour the rescue shelter for a pet.

As was their habit, the two started running side by side, Mathias adjusting his strides so Bridget could easily keep up. Only the sound of their shoes pounding against the pavement punctuated their run. The sky shifted from a murky black to a gray which would give way to the brilliant yellows and oranges of the sunrise.

Once they were able to see their surroundings without the aid of streetlamps, Bridget motioned for her nephew to run on ahead. He needed no other encouragement for his long legs to carry him rapidly down the road and out of her sight. She knew the spot where he would stop to wait for her, so she set her own pace knowing there was no rush to catch up.

Before long, she passed the sprawling, two-story brick structure of Johnson Rainier High School with its pristine lawn and broad, white columns. The digital marquee scrolled a series of announcements, and Bridget noted the upcoming football game and pep rally and a Technology Fair being hosted by the STEM program. Marlowe mentioned something about the fair yesterday, and Bridget would have to ask her more about it over breakfast.

She slowed her pace as she neared Mathias standing by the fence surrounding the football field. He rested one hand on top of the chain link fence while the other sat on his hip. His eyes stared out over the field. He wasn't even out of breath. The sorry dog, she thought with a modicum of jealousy. She was going to need a minute before she could do more than say hello without huffing and puffing.

She walked the last few feet to stand beside him, working to slow her breathing. She thought she detected a hint of wistfulness in his profile. "Do you miss it?"

At one time, Mathias was a star athlete, his ability coming from his father who showed enough promise to attend college on an athletic scholarship. Mathias excelled as a quarterback for his high school football team. He was the first baseman for his baseball team, and he medaled in track on more than one occasion.

Bridget made it to several of his games, cheering alongside Jennifer and Dean. Even Marlowe would glance up from her book long enough to root for her big brother. As impressive as Mathias was as an athlete, his true accomplishment was his sportsmanship, something Dean drilled into him nonstop. He was respectful of his coach, teammates and competitors. He never missed a practice or a game unless he was too sick to get out of bed or too injured to play. He never missed a chance to lift up his other teammates for their successes, and his coach had often asked him to mentor newer players on how to work as a team.

Mathias' love for the game died with his parents in the car accident. He finished his

seasons — because he was raised to see his commitments through — but he decided when he transferred to Johnson Rainier that his athletic career was done. Dean and Jennifer would be heartbroken to know he gave up the sports he loved because of them, but Bridget understood. After that night, when the cops showed up on their doorstep and told her niece and nephew about the accident, nothing was the same for any of them.

Bridget hadn't pushed him or attempted to change his mind. She believed they all needed time to find their new normal and to figure out who they were and what they wanted. But seeing his wistful eyes staring out over the football field made her wonder if she'd made a mistake.

"You know you can talk to me, right?" She nudged his shoulder until he regarded her. "I know something is up with you. If you don't want to talk, I understand, but I'm here. For whatever you need."

Mathias nodded but kept quiet for several minutes. She waited. She didn't know if he would talk, or resume running or gaze out over the football field some more. Whatever he wanted to do, she would go with it.

"Do you think they would be mad?"

"No. Never." Her emphatic response didn't alleviate the worry lines between his eyebrows.

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“You swore you wouldn’t lie to us.”

She sighed. Of course, he would throw her words back at her — her promise to him and his sister the day of their parents’ funeral.

“I’m not lying. You finished out your seasons at your old school. It’s all they ever asked of you. I can’t say they wouldn’t be disappointed you aren’t playing anymore, but I can honestly say they wouldn’t be mad. They would want for you whatever makes you happy.”

“How do I know what that is?” He paused when he heard the quiver in his own voice. “Nothing feels right. Playing football doesn’t feel right. Not playing doesn’t feel right. I don’t know what feels right.”

“It’s okay not knowing. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m guessing my way through this. I don’t know what’s right either. Maybe moving here wasn’t right. This school, letting Lowe skip a grade to go straight to high school, letting you chip in so much when I should manage this on my own. None of it feels right.”

“How do we figure this out?”

Bridget turned to lean her back against the chain link fence. She buried her face in her hands, her nephew’s question feeling like a punch in the gut. Her hands slid down her face until she dropped them to her sides.

“Damn, Mat. I wish I knew the answer.”

He turned to mimic her stance but crossed his arms over his chest. “The move made sense. We needed a fresh start.”

She cut her eyes at him. “Really? Does your sister feel this way?”

He smirked. “Maybe. She likes the STEM program. She said her teachers are cool. She’s nervous about the Technology Fair though.”

“Why? That’s right up Marlowe’s alley.”

“She hasn’t made any friends yet, and she has to choose a partner. She doesn’t think anybody wants to be her partner.”

“She never said anything. I’m not sure I could help her even if she did.”

“You know what Mom would tell you?” She turned surprised eyes to meet his. “She’d say your job is not to rescue us.”

Bridget smiled at the reminder. “It’s to love you. And I do. I hope you know that.”

He returned her smile. “We do.”

She melted, tears pricking the back of her eyes. She hastily blinked them away. “Okay. Well, then, I’ll stop trying to fix everything for you. You’re a smart and talented guy. You’ll find your place here. If it’s on the football or track team or being in the drama club or band or just being a student, then you’ll have my support. Your mom and dad would be proud of you no matter what.”

“Don’t worry about Marlowe either. She’ll figure out this partner thing too.”

“Maybe she’ll make some friends as part of this. You never know.” She knew she

sounded uncharacteristically optimistic, but she couldn't stop hoping a glimmer of truth lived behind her words. "What about you? Made any friends?"

He shrugged. "I thought so. There's this girl. Bianca. She seemed nice, but her boyfriend's the quarterback. His name is Jones, and he's a douche. I'm not sure it's worth the hassle of trying to be friends with her when he's freaked out by it."

"Shit. This sounds like all the high school drama I lived through when I was your age. I thought it would be better now."

He snorted derisively. "Don't know why you thought that."

Bridget rolled her eyes. "I'd rather deal with sick people. I got marriage proposals and offers to cook us dinner. That's way better than your drama."

"If you got offers to cook dinner, then where's the food? I'm getting tired of your meals of scrambled eggs and hot dogs."

She shot him a mock scowl and punched him playfully in the arm. "Just for that, I'm going to race you back to the house. Loser cooks breakfast."

She suddenly broke out into a run, glancing over her shoulder to see him hesitate before sprinting after her. He overtook her quickly, as she knew he would.

When they made it back, Marlowe was up reading whatever book held her attention at the moment while the television was tuned into the Discovery channel for background noise. Mathias disappeared to shower and get ready for school.

Bridget decided to postpone a shower, planning to get one later when the kids had left. They all could use a special breakfast and some fun conversation before school, and she wanted to take advantage of the time they had for that.

With her focus on her niece and nephew, Bridget failed to notice the blue sedan which trailed behind her and Mathias as they ran and now parked at the curb across the street from their house. The driver kept his eyes trained on the house, waiting as if he had all the time in the world.

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A neighbor stepped from the house closest to the sedan. The neighbor's dog began to bark wildly, tugging on his leash but held back by his owner. The driver quickly started the engine and pulled the car away from the curb to head down the road and disappear from sight as it rounded a curve.

Chapter Ten

Zane walked through the doors of KSI moving slower than normal. He was ready to be back at work, but his injury made his movements stiff. The pain had subsided for the most part, but he was frustrated to not be back at one hundred percent.

“Hey, man, need me to carry you upstairs?” As the security guard stationed behind the security desk in the lobby, Jordan Raines made an imposing figure meant to ward off people who had no business at KSI. It wasn't just his six-foot-one frame - burly enough to stretch the seams of his uniform almost to their limit - which made him intimidating, but it was also his rigorous military training as a Marine which people dared not cross.

Though he appeared scary as hell, Jordan was easygoing in nature, as evidenced by the grin slitting his face, but the best thing about him was his wife Stella, one of the sweetest women and best cooks Zane had ever known — though if someone told his mother he felt that way, he would emphatically deny it.

Zane responded to Jordan's teasing with a middle finger salute, which made the man belly laugh.

“It's good to see you back, man, but seriously, there's no shame in taking some time

to get back to one hundred percent. You look better than you did in the ICU, but you still look like hell.”

Zane stared at him derisively. “Thanks, man. Appreciate the support.”

“I’m not trying to be a dick. I want to watch out for you. We almost lost you.”

Zane softened his expression. “Yeah. I know. Just feeling a little smothered, is all.”

“Hey, you know I have to look out for you. Stella would have my balls in a sling if I didn’t.”

Zane grinned. “Yeah. Tell her thanks for the lasagna she dropped off at my place. It was what I needed after all the hospital food.”

Jordan nodded. “It’s one of my favorites, but she wanted me to tell you if you wanted something else, let me know. In the meantime, Tryst said if you came in to send you straight to his office.”

Zane sighed. “He wants me to work some easy case Brick has. He doesn’t think I’m ready to be in the field or work the case I already had.”

“Nothing wrong with taking it easy, man. At some point, they’ll need you to close this one out, and you’ll be ready when the time comes. You’re no good to anyone if you rush it. But it’s damn good to see you back.”

Zane stepped into the elevator and released a long breath once the doors closed with a swoosh. Even easygoing Jordan was giving him grief about coming back to work. What happened to the guys he usually worked with who told each other to “shake it off” whenever they got injured in the field? The hovering and well-meaning words of concern were exhausting.

But the smothering continued as he gingerly made his way to Tristin's office. He forced himself to swap a few friendly words with their receptionist, Eleanor Frost, who was too much like a hard-ass grandmother to the whole staff for him to blow her off. Then came the questions about his condition from investigators Isobel Garcia and Gennessey Croft. He endured good-natured ribbing from his teammates, Brennan "BB" Beckett and Griffin "Wings" Tyler. He earned a stern lecture from Jay for coming back to work too soon before he was standing in front of Tristin's door, knocking briefly and pushing it open without waiting for permission to enter.

Brick was already in Tristin's office, and neither man seemed surprised to find Zane there. He suspected Jordan alerted them that he had arrived. He closed the door behind him, bracing himself for the lectures they would give him.

"You look like shit, but it's good to see you up at least."

Just how bad did he look? Though Tristin's grin took the bite out of his words, Zane was starting to feel self-conscious with all of the wise cracks. If one more person joked about his appearance, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from throat punching him.

"Can we not talk about me? Tell me about this case already, so I can close it and get back to my own case."

Tristin raised a quizzical brow. "What? You don't want an update on your case before we talk about the other?"

"I didn't figure you'd tell me if I asked."

"We found Morrison."

That got Zane's attention. The elusive Morrison whom De la Peña accused him of

working for had plagued his thoughts since he'd regained consciousness after his surgery. Not once had he heard the name mentioned while he was imbedded in the crime family, and he couldn't understand how the crime boss could be so troubled by someone but never talk about him prior to the night at the warehouse.

Zane lowered himself into a chair, his gaze shifting from Brick to Tristin and back. "Well? Don't leave me in suspense. Who the hell is he?"

Tristin picked up a file folder from his desk and passed it to Zane. "Max Morrison. He's not a gun runner. He's not the head of some crime syndicate. He's not into drugs or prostitution or any other criminal activity Armando might be interested in. At least not that Travis and Kat were able to find."

Zane opened the folder, but he was too keyed up to focus on what the papers said. "Then why is Armando suspicious of him?"

"He's a casino owner. He owns several all over the country. The FBI suspect his businesses are used to launder money, but he's too good to get caught."

"Why would De la Peña accuse me of being a spy for a casino owner? It doesn't make sense."

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Tristin nodded his agreement. “Sydney is helping Kat and Travis. They are still digging. We’ll keep you posted. Brick, why don’t you fill him in on your case?”

“Wait.” Zane placed the folder back on the desk. “Don’t put me on this case. I get I’m not ready to be in the field on my case, but put me in the command center. Let me help Kat and Syd run down leads. Travis can get back to his gym. You said this new case is easy, so Brick and the others can handle it with no problems. They’ll probably close it by the time we get to the bottom of my case.”

“Stop fighting me on this.” Tristin’s normally light tone now held an edge of steel telling Zane the time for second guessing his boss’ orders had passed.

Brick handed a second file folder to Zane, ignoring the tension in the room. “We were approached by a couple who seemed nice enough. Their son and his wife were killed in a car accident. They sued for custody of their grandchildren, but the parents awarded custody to an aunt — the wife’s only sister. The couple claimed the aunt was unfit, but the judge ruled in favor of the aunt. The couple approached us for two reasons. They wanted to hire us for simple surveillance to watch over their grandchildren. The aunt apparently leaves them alone quite a bit, and they wanted us to make sure they were safe when they were alone. Then they wanted us to document any evidence we saw to support their claim the aunt was unfit.”

Tristin leaned forward, resting his forearms on the surface of his desk. “Brick sensed something was off about their story. He called me and Jay in, and we got the same feeling. We turned the case down.”

“But...what? You want me to work a case you turned down?”

Brick balled his hands into fists and tapped them against the arm rests. “They’re from Georgia, so they wanted to hire a local firm to handle the case. We think when we turned it down, they hired Tarrant.”

“Which means this family will have mercenaries doing whatever it takes to take this couple’s money. I don’t believe there’s a case to prove the aunt unfit. The court would not have honored the custody agreement if that was the case. The children also asked to stay with their aunt instead of their grandparents. Something is not right about this situation. I don’t know about you, but I can’t sit here and watch this family suffer any more than they already have.”

“What grounds do they have to declare the aunt unfit?” Zane hadn’t glanced at the file, waiting to hear what Brick and Tristin had to say instead.

“They claim the aunt is a party girl, selfish, irresponsible...you know the old song and dance. Not really fit to be a guardian, but very much the cool aunt the kids go to when they run away from home or want to try their first beer. They claim it is the only reason the kids testified in favor of the aunt,” Tristin explained.

“Sounds like the grandparents are pouting because they lost,” Zane drawled.

“We think there’s more to the story. We can’t let this go. Not until we’re sure they are safe against whatever Tarrant has planned.”

Zane sank against the back of his chair, his eyes fixated on the unopen folder in his hands. Tarrant Security was the opposite of Knight Security and Investigation in every way, but the worst was how their actions put Sydney and her best friend Chloe Stephens in danger.

KSI was charged with protecting Sydney against her abusive ex, Emmett Carter, who had operated under the radar as a human trafficker. Carter used Tarrant Security to

turn one of the KSI investigators to breach their security and kidnap Sydney and Chloe. If for no other reason than to cause Tarrant trouble after what they put them all through, he had to accept this case.

Zane opened the file with the intention of skimming it now and reading it more in-depth later. He didn't get very far. A photo and name jumped out at him from the first page as if they were framed in glowing neon.

“What the hell?”

“What's wrong?”

He peered up at Tristin. “Bridget Kincaid is the unfit mother?”

Brick shifted in his seat so he could study Zane. “You know her?”

“She was one of my nurses at the hospital. You said the grandparents called her a party girl? That doesn't fit. I heard her turn down a date with a doctor to get home to her niece and nephew.”

“There are a lot of things the grandparents told us that don't fit. I've got Gennessey running down sources who can give us more details on the custody case and the accident which killed the kids' parents. I'm hoping she can find something to give us a place to start.”

Zane closed the folder and stared at Brick. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Review the intel in the file. Then I think it makes sense for us to do some surveillance to get an idea of the family's routine and see if anyone from Tarrant has harassed them.”

“I can take the first night of surveillance,” Zane volunteered almost absently, the folder feeling heavy in his hands, begging to be opened.

“I will. You just got out of the hospital.”

“It’s surveillance. I think I can handle it. Stop hovering, or I’ll have to kick your ass.”

Ignoring the grins Brick and Tristin exchanged, Zane stood and headed out of the office. He was too distracted to notice the pain in his side resulting from moving faster than he should have. He had no idea why he felt so shaken. This was a case like the hundreds of others he’d worked at KSI.

But there was a difference. He knew the target of this investigation. He didn’t know her well, but he had a talent for reading a person’s character. He observed her when she was doing her job. He heard her speaking with her colleagues. He heard her when she asked for a break to check in on her kids at home. None of his observations fit with the accusations against her.

He ducked into an empty meeting room so he could spread the file on Bridget Kincaid out on the table. He started studying the information from the top of the first page and working his way through to the last.

This case was more than hinky. Someone was out to get the sweet nurse, and he was determined to figure out why.

Chapter Eleven

Bridget fought off a cringe when the cashier repeated the total which was also displayed on the card reader in front of her. Her bright idea to cook something special for Mathias and Marlowe had her extending her grocery budget quite a bit, but she reminded herself the quality family time would make it worth it. She swiped her debit card and used the stylus attached to the card reader to add her signature. While the receipt printed, she finished adding the bags of groceries to her shopping cart. She smiled her thanks to the cashier and shoved the receipt in her purse, pushing the cart out into the parking lot.

The overcast sky had darkened while she was in the grocery store. As she hurried across the asphalt, she felt a fat droplet of water land on her head, the moisture running down her scalp. She picked up her pace, determined to unload and climb into her car before the predicted deluge fell from the sky. Other customers were also hurrying to and from their cars, never pausing to check their surroundings as they tried to escape the impending rain.

Bridget made quick work of piling her groceries into the truck and slamming the lid down. She checked for oncoming traffic and pushed the cart across the aisle to the rack. As the cart's wheels bounced over the edge of the rack, she glanced up and froze.

Mirrored sunglasses shielded his eyes, odd on a stormy day when the sun had barely peeked from behind the clouds, but not as odd as the fact he watched her. She guessed he never expected her to catch him staring, but with his sedan positioned right in front of her, he was hard to miss even with her passing glance. The car was

also one she recognized, one she thought belonged to a neighbor since it'd been parked on her street a few times.

She jumped when the car's engine turned over, headlights piercing her eyes. She turned and ran back to her car, the raindrops falling a bit harder, dampening her hair until it clung to the sides of her face. She depressed the unlock button on the key fob so she could jerk the car door open as soon as she reached it. She all but fell inside, yanking the door closed behind her and securing the lock. By the time she peered back across the aisle, she was breathing heavily from the exertion...and the sedan was gone. She twisted her head to try and find where the car had disappeared to, but it was nowhere to be seen. Still, she stared until the rain fell too heavy for her to see out of the car windows.

She struggled to put her key into the ignition, and then she noticed her hands shaking. Forcing deep breaths in through her nose and out her mouth, she willed herself to calm down. She was safe. Whoever the guy was, he didn't attempt to come after her. He didn't attempt to talk to her or grab her or anything else nefarious.

Icy fingers of fear tickled her spine, and she felt the color drain from her face. What if he was still close by, but out of sight? What if he followed her home? He knew she was alone, so what if he was waiting to get her away from the busy supermarket before he made his move?

Her thoughts churned down a crazy path until she finally searched her purse, cursing the cluttered space until she found her cell at the very bottom underneath all her stuff. She scrolled through her contacts for the number she never expected to use but for some reason saved in her phone anyway.

“Yeah.”

The unorthodox greeting had her voice catching in her throat. The deep voice

sounded gruff, almost annoyed at being disturbed with a phone call. Bridget almost hung up, but he spoke again, sounding angry this time. She forced the words out in a rush.

“Cole? It’s Bridget. Bridget Kincaid. From the side of the road. You know, your fiancé’s car broke down. We stopped to help. My niece fixed it. You said I could call you anytime for anything. You probably don’t remember—”

“Of course, I remember.” His voice softened, the warm tone calming her nerves. “Syd still wants all of you to come to dinner. What are you doing tomorrow night?”

“I have to work.” She spoke absently, her eyes still scanning the parking lot for signs of the sedan. “Listen, I hate to bother you, but I’m at the grocery store. There was this car and this guy. He wore sunglasses, and it’s raining. He stared. He was watching me. I know he was. He’s gone now, but...well, I feel silly saying it out loud, but I’m creeped out. I just...what if...you know, he could be waiting somewhere...I can’t see...”

She couldn’t complete a sentence as her thoughts tumbled together. She had to sound crazy to him, but she felt safer being on the phone with Cole.

“Are you in a safe place now?”

“Yes. At least I think so. I’m sorry. He’s gone, but I worked myself up and got paranoid. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Listen to me, Bridget. Text me a location pin, and I’ll come to you. If he comes back, call me. Don’t confront him or put yourself in a position for him to approach you. Understood?”

And the panic returned. “Yes.” The one word came out more as a whisper.

“I’m coming to you. Sit tight and send me your location.”

The phone beeped as the call ended. She opened her messaging app to send him her location as he asked. With one last glance around the parking lot, satisfied the sedan wasn’t lurking nearby, she rested her head against the back of her seat and closed her eyes. She went from cursing herself for overreacting to believing someone was stalking her until she thought she was losing her mind.

She jumped off her seat, her hands slamming against the steering wheel, when a knock sounded on her window. Her heart stopped until she registered Cole’s face through the rain-streaked window. He wore a rain jacket with a hood pulled up over his head. He motioned for her to unlock the car door, which she did without hesitation. He slid into the backseat behind her. She jumped again when the passenger door opened, and another man climbed inside. Her mouth gaped open when Zane shoved the hood to his own rain jacket down.

“What are you doing here?”

“Not now. Tell us about this man.”

She shook her head. “It seems crazy to say it out loud, but he was driving this car. I swear I’ve seen it on our street the last few days. I thought it was my neighbor’s car, but he’s not my neighbor. I don’t think he is. Anyway, I went to put my cart in the rack right over there, and he was parked there. He was staring at me. Well, he had to be. He had these sunglasses on. They had mirrored lenses, so I couldn’t see his eyes. But it’s raining. Who wears sunglasses on a rainy day? But he left, and I haven’t seen him. But what if he’s waiting to follow me home? I mean, that happens, right? You hear about this kind of stuff all the time.”

Zane reached out to cover her hand with his. “It’s okay, Bridget. Take a deep breath. Nothing’s going to happen to you while Panther and I are here.”

She breathed in through her nose and out her mouth, drawing strength from his hand against hers. Feeling calmer, she met his eyes, her lips curving into a slight smile.

“Thank you. What the hell is Panther?”

This earned a chuckle from both of them, and the sound had her relaxing a bit more.

“That would be me,” Cole spoke up from the back. “Can you describe the car and whatever you can remember about the man?”

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She tried to provide all the details she could, but she couldn't recall much. The whole incident caught her off guard, and she'd been concerned with her own safety and less with remembering details.

"I'll drive around and see what I can find. You get her home?"

Zane nodded. "Copy that."

Cole headed back out in the rain. Bridget watched him out the window, barely making out his form getting behind the wheel of a truck parked behind her. She'd never noticed them pull up, and the realization chilled her when she thought of how the man with the sunglasses could have ambushed her while she thought he was gone.

"Bridget, do you think you can slide over the console to this side? I'll come around and drive us to your house."

She released a long breath. "You don't know where I live. Why are you even here?"

"I was at work talking to Sydney and Cole when you called him. Did you know we all work together?"

She nodded. "Cole told me to call him if we ever needed anything since we don't know anyone in town. I never thought I'd have to call him. I thought he was just being nice when he offered because my niece fixed Sydney's car."

"He meant it. When I found out you needed help, I offered to come with him. I had to help my favorite nurse, right?"

She turned away and felt her cheeks flush. “I feel stupid for calling. It was probably nothing. I’m overreacting, right? I mean why would someone follow me and watch my house. It sounds like a bad made-for-TV movie.”

“Let me take you home. We can talk more there.”

She stared out the windshield at the sheets of rain obscuring her view. Thunder sounded in the distance, and a streak of lightning lit up the sky.

“Maybe we should wait out the storm for a little while.”

“I’ve driven in worst weather. Trust me. Slide over here, and I’ll come around. You can give me directions to your house.”

He got out of the car and slammed the door behind him before she could say another word. He was rounding the front of the car, his rain jacket little protection against the storm, so she had no choice but to struggle across the console to drop into the passenger seat. Water dripped on everything when he slid behind the steering wheel, but she didn’t care. She would never say it out loud, but she was relieved to have him there.

She told him how to find her house, and she settled back against the seat as he navigated his way through the storm. The rain started to slack by the time he pulled into her driveway. He helped her get the groceries inside with one trip. They piled the bags on the kitchen counter and shook the rain from their clothes and hair.

“Go change into something dryer. I’ll start putting away your groceries.”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “You don’t have to do that. It’s not necessary. You know, you should have Cole or Panther or whatever his name is to come and pick you up. I’m fine. I’m not sure why I got so spooked. It’s silly. I’m sorry for wasting your

time.”

She stood with her back to the kitchen sink, the counter separating her from Zane, but he moved to stand in front of her. His hands lightly gripped her shoulders, the heat from his touch searing through her clothes and causing her to shiver.

“You haven’t wasted our time, and you are not silly. We need to talk, but you need to change into some dry clothes first. Don’t worry. We’ll make sure you’re safe.”

“Why is it when someone tells you not to worry, that’s exactly what you do? What is going on? Is the guy really following me? It makes no sense.”

“I know. Trust me for a little longer.”

“I barely know you. You shouldn’t even be here. You should be at home, recuperating. Are you in pain?”

He grinned. “So the nurse in you never shuts off, does it? I’m fine. No pain. I’m just soggy.”

A chuckle burst forth from her throat. “Sorry. I don’t have any clothes to fit you.”

He dropped his hands but didn’t step away from her. “It’s fine. Cole keeps clothes in his truck, so I can change when he gets back. Go. Let me take care of these groceries.”

She started to ask him more questions, but the desire to be warm and dry won out. As she moved out of the kitchen, she gave him one last glance over her shoulder to find him watching her. She returned his smile and disappeared into her room. She longed for a shower but settled on changing her clothes and brushing out her hair.

Low voices carried from the kitchen as she emerged. She wasn't surprised to see Cole sitting with Zane at her kitchen table. The groceries were put away, and the coffee maker percolated. She breathed in the rich aroma, preparing herself for the conversation she was about to have. Both men stopped talking and regarded her with smiles as she moved to the table to join them.

"Okay." She sat at the head of the table opposite Cole, and Zane sat at his left side. "What do you guys know that I don't? Neither of you seem surprised this guy was watching me, and I think I deserve to know why."

"Sydney told you we work for a security and PI firm, didn't she?" At Bridget's nod, Cole continued. "We were approached to take on a case recently, but we turned it down. We think the clients then hired a rival company to take their case. We can't be sure, but we think the guy watching you today works for them."

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“What? How am I involved in a PI case?”

“The clients wanted to hire us to investigate you and to watch over Mathias and Marlowe. They wanted evidence to prove the kids weren’t being cared for like they should.”

Bridget gaped at them, speechless and perplexed. She’d only been in town a short time. Who could possibly suspect her of failing to take care of her teenagers?

The answer suddenly dawned on her. She braced her arms on the tabletop, her mouth closing with a snap. They seemed to be waiting for her to comment or question them further, but she couldn’t find the words to say.

“You know what we’re talking about, don’t you?” Zane narrowed his eyes as he watched her.

“My sister’s in-laws. Mathias and Marlowe’s grandparents. Am I right?”

The men exchanged a glance, and Zane nodded. “Yes. I’m guessing they’ve done this before.”

“Not exactly. I shouldn’t be surprised they’ve gone this far, but I thought they’d let this go once the custody hearing was over. They’re part of the reason why I moved the kids here for a fresh start. They made such a mess of things after my sister and her husband died.”

“Do you mind telling us some of the details? We don’t want to pry, but if they’ve

hired Tarrant Security to take this case, things could get much worse. We don't want that to happen."

Cole's tone was kind, something she'd not heard a lot of when it came to the custody situation. She preferred to keep her private life private, but the offer of help and the sympathetic ear had her softening. The words started pouring out of her before she had a chance to overanalyze the wisdom of sharing with these two strangers.

"Oran and Ivy never approved of Jennifer. They had their eye on someone else for Dean to marry, a girl he'd known his whole life. She was nice enough, but she and Dean never saw a future together. Especially after he met Jennifer. I don't know if Dean's parents had anything specific against my sister other than she wasn't the one they chose. Dean was an only child and perfect at everything. Everyone loved him, and he got excellent grades in school. He was the perfect athlete. He never got into any trouble. Hell, he even volunteered to mentor at-risk students in the elementary school."

Bridget smiled as she became lost in her memories. "That's how they met. Jennifer volunteered for the same program. They were friends at first, but eventually they started dating. Then he proposed. Oran offered to pay Jennifer if she would break off the engagement. There was a huge blow-up, and Dean never invited his parents to the wedding. But they showed up anyway and proceeded to criticize everything about it until my father told them to shut up and go home."

"They sound like real pieces of work," Zane said.

Bridget rolled her eyes. "You have no idea. They never accepted Jennifer, but when she had Mathias, things changed. They doted on him and helped Dean and Jennifer out with anything they needed. They came to all of his pee-wee and little league games, his birthday parties, school programs, you name it. Then Marlowe came along. At first, they doted on her too. She was in elementary school when they started

noticing how awkward she was with other people, but she excelled at everything in school. Her brain works on a level most of us would never understand. Jennifer and Dean loved it, and they did everything to help her learn new things and discover what she was good at. Oran and Ivy, on the other hand, stopped asking for Marlowe to accompany them to places. They would make excuses to only include Mathias, and Dean was quick to put a stop to it.”

Cole rested his arms on the table in front of him. “What happened with the custody hearing?”

“Oran and Ivy felt I was the most unlikely choice to be Mathias and Marlowe’s guardian. At the time, I didn’t disagree with them, but I knew Jennifer would never want the Williamses raising them. I tried to get my parents to agree to raise them, but my dad’s health is not the best. He didn’t think a judge would overturn Jennifer and Dean’s will to grant them custody. So I stepped up.

“Oran and Ivy took me to court. They brought out every single thing I’d done in my life to prove I didn’t measure up. All the times I went partying with my friends. The time I flunked the math class which meant I had to wait a semester before I could enroll in nursing school. When I took Marlowe to get her ears pierced when she was five even though Jennifer and Dean didn’t want her to have them pierced. The time I picked Mathias up from a party where he gotten drunk, and I didn’t bring him home. Instead, I took him to my apartment to let him sleep it off.”

Bridget shook her head, trying to shake out the bad memories. She took a deep breath to redirect her thoughts and answer Cole’s question more directly. “Anyway, Oran and Ivy said the only reason Dean and Jennifer named me as guardian was because they didn’t expect to die before either of their parents.”

“The judge obviously didn’t agree,” Zane prodded her gently.

“I think he did until he decided to allow Mathias and Marlowe to testify. You have to understand, Marlowe takes everything at face value. She doesn’t understand the purpose of lying, and she misses a lot of social cues most of us grow up recognizing. So when Oran and Ivy specifically told her not to tell anyone about their plans to send her to a gifted boarding school when they won the court case, she didn’t until she was told in court she had to tell the truth no matter what. So she did. She told the judge how she didn’t want to be sent away. She wanted to stay with me and Mathias because we understood her. Then Mat testified he didn’t want to be separated from his sister, and he knew I would take care of them because I knew about all of the tricks teenagers try to get away with stuff behind their parents’ backs.”

She chuckled at the memory. “He told them I would call them on their shit and wouldn’t let them get away with anything. He’s not wrong.”

“If they only want custody of Mathias, then why not sue for custody of him?” Cole asked.

“They knew the judge would never allow the kids to be separated so soon after their parents died. They tried to convince me to split custody – Mathias would live with them while Marlowe stayed with me. They said the kids could hang out on the weekends, and it would make things more ‘manageable’-” She used air quotes to emphasize her point. “-for everyone. I sent them packing with a big hell, no.”

Cole leaned back against his chair, and Bridget wondered if it would hold his weight. “Why aren’t they letting this go? The judge has already ruled against them. Seems pointless to keep pursuing it.”

Bridget sighed. “They’re grieving. Dean was their whole world, even if their relationship was strained. I think they see Mathias as their second chance, to get it right where they messed up with Dean. It seems crazy, but I’ve seen grief really mess with people. I want to be understanding, but not at the expense of my family. I wish

they would leave us alone.”

Zane squeezed her hand. “That’s why we’re here. We’re going to make sure they stop trying to break up your family.”

Bridget smiled into his gorgeous blue eyes, their depths warm and sincere. Something passed between them, something she couldn’t identify. She knew she believed this man she barely knew, and she trusted he would make good on his promise to her.

Chapter Twelve

Bridget pulled her car up to the gate but stopped short of reaching the call box. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat as she gazed beyond the wrought iron fence to the fortress looming ahead of her, an intimidating vision of formidable brick, windows tinted to hide what was inside and a manicured lawn which was both inviting and out of place.

“Whose place is this exactly?” Mathias sounded as unsure as she felt, and oddly enough, that comforted her.

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“Sydney said it was her boss’ house. She said he likes to have employees over for cookouts and games, and she thought this would be a chance for us to meet some new people. She said they are all very cool, and she thought we’d like them. I’m still wondering why I said yes, though.”

“How many people are supposed to be here?” Marlowe asked cautiously from the backseat.

“I didn’t ask,” Bridget admitted. She peered through the rearview mirror to catch her niece’s eye, sensing the young girl’s unease. “Okay, listen up. Here’s the plan.” Bridget waited for the kids to give her their attention. “If at any point, any of us is not having fun or are uncomfortable or ready to go home, we say the word, and we leave without any question or protest. Agreed?”

They all nodded, and Marlowe asked, “What’s the word?”

Bridget blinked. “What?”

“You said to say the word, so she wants to know what that is exactly. What do we say to cue each other we’re ready to leave without everyone suspecting we’re not having a good time,” Mathias explained, and Bridget nodded as understanding dawned.

“Headache,” Bridget replied with the first idea which popped into her head. “Whoever wants to leave complains of having a headache. Since we all came together, we can use it as a reason why we all leave. Everybody ready?”

They nodded, so she released the brake and allowed the car to coast up to the call

box. But the gate suddenly swung open without her depressing the intercom button. She glanced at Mathias before driving through and following the driveway to the front of the house. Vehicles were staggered along the drive and even in the grass. Bridget parked her car in a spot along the drive she hoped wouldn't be an inconvenience but would allow her an easy out if they left early.

They stepped from the car as a group. Mathias carried a glass container of homemade lemonade which he'd held securely in the floorboard between his legs while they traveled. She didn't want to show up without bringing something, even though Sydney told her they had everything they needed.

Bridget moved like she was walking through molasses as she led their small group to the front door. She had no idea where her nervousness was coming from. Most of her life, she was the life of any party with no qualms about mingling with strangers until they felt like her long-lost best friends. But this felt different. During her party days, she was never concerned with making a good first impression. With Sydney and her crew, Bridget yearned for acceptance and for a new circle of friends in this strange town.

The door swung open, leaving Bridget with her fist hanging in the air in a failed attempt to knock. They were greeted by the tall redhead with the bright smile. Bridget noted Sydney's willowy figure under her loose clothes and the freckles which dotted the light skin of her face. Her eyes were a dazzling blue, reflecting her smile and making Bridget's nerves ease a little.

"I am so glad you're here!" Sydney's squeal had Bridget and the kids grinning in return. "Come in! You're right on time. Food is on the grill, and the guys are getting some kind of game together. I made them wait until you got here in case you wanted to play."

Another woman walked up to greet them, and Bridget was struck by how pretty she

was. Shiny sable hair in a ponytail, dark eyes regarding them from behind a pair of round glasses, tall with a figure most women wished they had. She dried her hands on a dish towel as she approached them, her smile warm.

“Hi, guys. I’m Kat. Welcome to our house. Everybody else is outside. We’ll introduce them, but I have to warn you. There are a lot of us. Don’t worry about trying to remember everyone. They won’t be offended if you have to ask their names over and over. And don’t feel intimidated. They’re all easygoing and fun.”

At the mention of how many were outside, Marlowe shrank behind her brother, a move Bridget didn’t miss, though she decided not to call attention to it. “Thanks for having us. You’ve probably already figured out I’m Bridget. This is my niece and nephew, Marlowe and Mathias. I know you said we didn’t have to bring anything, but we brought some fresh lemonade anyway.”

“Perfect. Come on back and you can meet the rest of our crazy group.”

They followed Sydney and Kat through the kitchen, where Mathias set the lemonade on the counter, and stepped through glass doors into another world. A gorgeous patio with spots of colorful flowers, an outdoor pool, lush green lawn, and an atmosphere of relaxation made Bridget want to sit and stay for hours, doing nothing but taking in the peace. At the moment, there wasn’t quiet to go along with the peace, since people milled around on the lawn, gathered around the grill or sat with a beer, laughing and talking.

“Hey, everybody!” Kat called over the din, drawing everyone’s attention with the authority of someone used to corralling a large group. “Our guests are here, so you guys better behave. This is Bridget, Mathias, and Marlowe.”

A chorus of hellos and welcomes assailed them, and the small group presented tentative smiles and small waves. Sydney urged them further into the yard to mingle,

and Bridget gave herself a pep talk to be bold and show her niece and nephew how easy it could be to make new friends.

The drop-dead gorgeous man who called to them flashed a friendly smile that made the task seem simpler. “Hi, guys. I’m Tristin, Kat’s husband. Hope you guys like hamburgers and hot dogs because we have plenty. But if you don’t, tell me what you like, and I’ll add it to the grill.”

“Burgers are fine. It’s nice to meet you,” Bridget said as she led the kids over to a nearby patio table to sit down. She settled beside a beautiful blonde and a young girl who seemed close to Mathias’ age. She smiled as she introduced herself and was met with an equally friendly welcome.

“Hi, Bridget. I’m Payton, and this is my daughter Davi. Welcome to our group. I’ve heard so much about you from Syd. She said you guys saved her from being stranded on the side of the road.”

“Well, it was more Marlowe and Mathias. Marlowe has a knack for mechanical stuff, and Mathias is her tall assistant who can reach into places she can’t.”

“Wait! Did you sayshefixed the car?” Davi leaned in closer, her lovely face animated as she glanced repeatedly from Bridget to Marlowe. “That is amazing. And your name is Marlowe? That’s a cool name, too. Do you think you could show me how to fix cars?”

Marlowe flushed, looking at Bridget like a drowning victim in need of a flotation device. She lowered her gaze to her hands shyly, as she often did when someone complimented what came naturally to her.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “I’m not sure I can show someone how to do it. But I have books that tell you how to fix almost anything.”

“When it comes to anything with an engine or battery, Marlowe is better than most. She’s in the STEM program at Johnson Rainier,” Bridget added.

Payton blinked. “Oh. I didn’t realize you were both old enough to be in high school.” Her eyes encompassed both Marlowe and Mathias.

“Marlowe is younger, but she skipped a grade to start high school early. Mathias is a junior.”

“That explains why I haven’t seen either of you at school,” Davi said. “All of the accelerated kids take all the same classes together, and the juniors and seniors are in a different part of the school from where the sophomores and freshmen are. I’m a sophomore.”

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“I’ve seen you before, I think. Maybe after school or during lunch or something. I can’t remember,” Mathias said.

Davi shrugged. “I haven’t made a lot of friends yet, so I kind of keep to myself at lunch. I only started J Rain this year.”

Payton leaned closer to Bridget as if sharing a secret. “J Rain is what the kids call Johnson Rainier. Davi went to school in the next town over before transferring to Johnson Rainier.”

“I haven’t made a lot of friends yet either,” Mathias said.

“He’s made enemies though. We both have,” Marlowe blurted, and her blush deepened when she realized she shared too much.

Bridget’s smile faded. She knew both kids were having some problems with classmates at school. They assured her they had it handled, but she worried anyway. She’d built an image in her head of what their experience would be like, and she had a difficult time hiding her disappointment that it was less than she hoped.

“The STEM kids are pretty competitive. A lot of them think they’re smarter than the rest of us, and they’re better than anybody else. Including each other. But don’t worry. If anybody is mean to you, you can tell me, and I’ll take care of them,” Davi promised Marlowe, turning her eyes toward Mathias. “And let me guess, you had a run-in with Bianca Green and her bitchy friends.”

“Davi,” Payton admonished. “Watch your language and stop threatening to beat

people up. You're in high school, not some prison block."

Bridget bit back a grin when Davi rolled her eyes. Even if she and Payton had the mother-daughter banter going between them, Bridget could feel the closeness bonding the two. She instantly felt a kinship with them, and she hoped Marlowe would come out of her shell the more she hung around the outspoken Davi.

"It feels more like prison," Davi mumbled.

"I've met Bianca, but she's been nice to me," Mathias explained.

"It's because you're hot. She likes to make her boyfriend jealous by flirting with all the cute guys. She's a tease, so watch your back with her."

Bridget was fascinated to see her nephew blush at Davi's off-hand compliment. The young girl didn't seem to be flirting as much as stating a fact, and Mathias continued as if she hadn't called him hot.

"I figured that out already when her boyfriend got in my face for talking with her."

This news brought another eye roll from Davi. "Jones Leahy is a prick. He's all talk, so you don't have anything to worry about with him, but his buddies aren't above jumping you from behind when nobody's around. Watch out for them."

"What the hell kind of school are you going to?"

Bridget's eyes widened as one of the largest men she'd ever seen approached, and she felt Marlowe shrink beside her. Dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt that was all but screaming for mercy as it stretched to its limit across his broad chest and well-muscled arms, he wore his hair was a tad too long for Bridget's liking, but it fit the man's devil-may-care appearance even if his easygoing smile and dancing eyes

didn't.

"It's nothing I can't handle," Davi responded smoothly. "And now that I know Marlowe and Mathias, I can help them too."

The man towered over their table, the fingers of one hand lightly resting against the top as he peered down at them. "Well, before you have to kick somebody's ass for bullying you, you'd better call me and let me have a talk with them. I guarantee they'll leave you alone."

Payton laughed. "Way to make a good impression on Sydney's friends," she teased. "Brick Coffey, meet Bridget, her niece Marlowe, and her nephew Mathias."

Brick held up his hand and backed a couple of steps away from the table as he teased Payton right back. "Hey, I'm just watching out for our girl here. You can't fault me for that." He pierced Mathias and Marlowe with his gaze. "That goes for you two as well. If you're friends with Syd, you're one of us, and we look out for each other. If somebody is giving you a hard time at your school, you let me know. I'll take care of it."

Marlowe peered around her aunt up at the big man watching her, his gaze softening. The teenager didn't say anything. She allowed her eyes to study his hulking frame, and she reached for her cell phone and took a picture.

"Lowe," Bridget hissed. "What are you doing?"

Marlowe glanced at them all with innocent eyes, an expression Bridget had seen many times when the young girl thought if her actions made enough sense to her, they should make sense to everyone.

"I took his picture. I figured I could show it to the kids at school and tell them he's

my friend, and they wouldn't be mean to me. He offered to help, so I thought it was okay."

Brick's surprise broke way to amusement. "Damn straight. If it makes those brats show you some respect, then you show my picture all over the damn school. And it's nice to meet you, Lil Bit. And you too, Mathias."

Bridget felt her tension leave her as a deep affection for this man settled in her chest. Anyone who doted on her kids and made them feel special were automatically friends for life in her book. When she saw Marlowe beam up at the man, she realized her niece might be suffering from some hero worship.

"So any of you interested in some touch football?" Brick scanned the group as if expecting them all to take him up on his offer.

"I'll play."

Bridget gaped at her nephew a full thirty seconds before regaining her composure enough to snap her mouth closed. This had to be the first time he played football of any kind since his parents died, and she hadn't expected him to readily agree to play now.

Davi stood. "I'll play too."

"I'll pass," Payton added, and Bridget echoed her response.

"What about you, Lil Bit?"

Marlowe's eyes widened. "Me? You want me to play football?"

"Don't worry. It's touch football, so I promise you won't get hurt. Besides, you'll be on my team. Something tells me you could give me an advantage over the others."

She flushed again but nodded and fell into step beside Brick as they walked to where the others gathered. Bridget smiled after her, her anxiousness about being around Sydney's friends easing.

"You don't have to worry. Brick will make sure she has a good time."

Bridget shifted her gaze back to Payton. "Oh, I'm not worried. Lowe loves football. When Mat played, she used to go with her dad to practices and games, and she soaked up everything about it. In fact, if Brick listens to her, he'll likely win the game."

"What do you mean?"

"She's not someone people typically pick for anything. She's lived in Mathias' shadow and sometimes gets overlooked. The thing is, she may not be athletic, but she's better at strategy than her brother. She's followed the sport since Mathias

played his first youth league game, and their dad coached him. She would listen to the two of them discuss plays, and she'd go with Dean, her dad, to Mathias' practices. When Dean realized her gift for strategy, he would let her stand with him on the sidelines during practices and offer suggestions. Dean always said he thought she'd make a great coach, and it would make her so happy. They were all football fanatics. Even their mom Jennifer...my sister."

"I think that's amazing. I know there's an age difference between them, but I hope she and Davi can become good friends. Davi could use someone like her in her life. She's had it rough lately."

Bridget hated to think of how the kids might bond over their respective tough times. She thought of how nice it was to see the kids having a good time without the cloud of their parents' death hanging over them, but she felt a familiar melancholy fall over her as she wished Jennifer and Dean could see their kids making friends among this group of strangers. Then she felt a touch on her arm and lowered her eyes to Payton's hand.

"How long ago did they die?" Payton asked gently.

Bridget drew in a shaky breath, not prepared to answer questions about them so soon. She focused on her hands and twisted her fingers together. "Over a year. They were killed by a drunk driver."

"I'm sorry. I'm glad you, Mathias and Marlowe have each other."

Bridget managed a weak smile. "Thank you. I never pictured myself raising kids, and I'll admit I'm faking it until I make it."

She uttered the cliché in jest, hoping to lighten the mood, but there was a lot of truth in the idiom that she hoped Payton wouldn't notice.

“I know what you mean. Going from no kids to raising a teenager is like shooting yourself in the foot. But having Davi in our lives has been like finding the one piece needed to complete the puzzle. Neither Jay nor I were ready for parenthood, but we wouldn’t trade it for the world. I hope we’re able to adopt her very soon. I want to make it official. But I can tell you have nothing to worry about. In my line of work, I’ve learned to spot a fake a mile away. You are no fake. Something tells me you are a better guardian for those two than you think.”

Bridget started at Payton curiously. “What do you do?”

“I’m a social worker for a medical clinic downtown. We have patients going through all kinds of trouble, and sometimes it helps them to have someone to talk to. I don’t mind being that to them because I have that in Jay and Davi.”

“So Jay is...” She let her sentence hang in the air between them incomplete, expecting Payton to fill in the blank.

Payton pointed out a man in the distance, his shorts and T-shirt covering a well-muscled body, his beard trim and dark, his manner speaking of authority. “Jay’s my husband. He and Brick are supervisors at KSI — Knight Security and Investigations where they all work. His sister and I were best friends and college roommates. She died, too, several years ago. Davi lost her birth mother over a year ago. So we’ve all lost someone close to us. You have friends here, Bridget, if you ever want to talk or forget for a little while.”

Bridget wasn’t sure what to say. Overcome with emotion, she just nodded. Payton rested a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“I think I’ll check to see if Sydney and Kat need any help in the kitchen. If you need anything, hit up Tristin at the grill. He’s Kat’s husband, and he owns the company the guys work for. I know it feels confusing, but eventually you’ll figure everyone out.”

Bridget didn't reply, but she realized Payton didn't need one. Her new friend walked toward the house, and she stared at the group starting the touch football game. She retreated into her thoughts, so she didn't hear the movement coming up behind her. She jumped when someone sat down beside her, and she swung her eyes up to meet a pair of bright blue eyes crinkled at the corners. Their impact sucked the breath from her lungs.

How could she not have considered the possibility Zane Wilder would be here?

"Hi." There it was. The deep vibrato and the sexy smile she remembered. Even wounded and in the hospital, he had an appeal which drew her. When he showed up at the grocery store like a superhero coming to her rescue, he seemed to be well on the mend, and he oozed sexiness which was both intense and charming. Since then, she'd done little but think of him.

"Hi." She suddenly felt shy and wracked her brain for something else to say.

He beat her to it. "How are you doing? Have you noticed anything strange lately?"

She shook her head. "No, not since you've had someone watching over us. Since you've told me what to look for, I always notice them. I appreciate them making sure the kids get home from school without someone bothering them, but I think they scared away whoever has been watching the house."

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Zane didn't reply. He stared off into the distance. He seemed to be watching the touch football game, but she wasn't so sure. She sensed there was something else on his mind.

"So are you still feeling pain? From your surgery?"

"I hardly notice it. I was well taken care of." His remark brought a hint of a smile to her lips. "Do you miss having me as a patient?"

"Does anyone really miss a pain in their ass?" Her sass was second nature, so it was what she resorted to when she was unsure of herself.

Zane barked a laugh, glancing over at her profile. "Well, not everybody can be as charming as...what was the guy's name? The patient who proposed to you?"

"Mr. Stutler? How do you know about him?"

"Are you kidding? The employees think nothing of talking about each other in front of the patients. Or in the hallway where the patients can overhear. They said you were Mr. Stutler's favorite nurse."

She flushed. "I don't know about that. I think he liked that I would slow down and talk to him. He doesn't have anyone in his life. He never has any visitors. Besides, when I told him about my kids, the proposals stopped. Most men aren't interested in women with a ready-made family, even men who propose to every woman they meet."

“Not every guy has a hang-up about kids. Look at Jay. He knew when he proposed to Payton that Davi was part of the deal, and it didn’t matter to him. Now it’s like they’ve always been a family.”

“Well, take it from me, a guy like that is rare. I mean, would you be willing to date a woman with children?”

Bridget meant her question as a challenge, but when his eyes swung around to capture hers, she realized how the question must have sounded to him.

“Are you asking me on a date, Nurse Bridget?”

“I don’t date patients, Mr. Wilder.”

His eyes danced. “I’m not your patient anymore.”

“No, that’s true. But I don’t date men who are interested in someone else.”

Like she flipped a switch with her words, the light dimmed in his eyes, his irises darkening and almost churning like the sky during a storm. Their gazes stayed locked, and the longer the silence stretched between them, the more she wondered if she overstepped. Finally, he averted his eyes back to the touch football game.

“Your kids seem to be having a good time.”

“Nice segue, but yes, the kids are having a good time. Mathias loves anything sports related, and I think Marlowe has a crush on the big guy. The one who looks like a Mack truck with hair. I can’t remember his name.”

Zane threw his head back with a laugh, and she tried not to notice how her body tingled at the sound.

“That would be Brick, I’m guessing.”

“Oh, sure. You name a kid Brick, and he has no choice but to grow up to be the Incredible Hulk, minus the green skin.”

When he chuckled again, she had to wonder if he was laughing at her attempt at humor or if he was laughing at her.

“His name is Mason. He was nicknamed Brick when he served in the Army,” Zane explained.

“How original,” she returned sarcastically. “Do you all have nicknames?”

“Some of us.”

She couldn’t stop herself. The old Bridget – the flirtatious, club-hopping Bridget –tilted her head enough to have her hair drape to frame her face. Her responding smile was coy, but not obvious. Her tone was playful enough to keep him intrigued. It was a practice she’d perfected, so it was ingrained in her despite the fact she hadn’t been in this position in a while.

“So what is your nickname, Mr. Wilder?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Don’t believe a word he says.” Sydney appeared beside them with Kat and another woman, blonde and elegant even dressed in shorts and a casual top. “He has a nickname. Come on. Why don’t you tell her?”

“Sydney gave it to him,” the blonde told her with a smile. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Bridget. I’m Chloe, Syd’s best friend. She’s told me a lot about you.”

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“Hi. Nice to meet you.”

“If you don’t tell her, I will,” Sydney said in a sing-song voice.

“Mind your business, Syd,” Zane growled.

Bridget knew he meant it as a warning to his friend, but the sexy growl made her stomach flip and her wonder what it would be like for him to growl into her ear while they were naked in her bed.

“It’s Houdini,” Payton responded as she walked up carrying two glasses of lemonade, one of which she placed in front of Bridget. “Syd gave it to him because he suddenly appears out of nowhere, and you never notice him until he speaks.”

“He did that to me a few minutes ago!” Bridget turned dancing eyes to Zane, her lips curled in a mocking smile. “Houdini, huh? Yeah, it fits.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he grumbled.

“I beg to differ.”

A shout from the makeshift football field drew their attention, and they got caught up in the game until Tristin called them to eat. Everyone filled plates full of food while continuing the light camaraderie that flowed naturally among the group. They all seemed to be friends from way back, but they included Bridget, Mathias and Marlowe as if the three had been a part of their group for years.

As they laughed over some joke made by the guy everyone called Wings, Bridget caught the eye of her niece and nephew. One glance at their full smiles and satisfied expressions, she knew no one would be using their code word any time soon.

Chapter Thirteen

Zane's anger never materialized unless he was provoked. Growing up with a single mom and three older sisters taught him restraint and patience — as much as a man can have in an estrogen-filled household. Today he had to summon every ounce of his self-discipline to stop from exploding in rage. As Brick gave him the basics of the investigation, he felt his blood start to boil.

“You sure this is the guy who replaced Einstein?”

Einstein. Just saying the name left a bitter taste in his mouth. James Albert was rarely called anything but Einstein while he worked at KSI. He and Brick were partners, working many security and PI jobs together. They made a good team, so no one suspected Einstein of being someone who would betray them for the all-mighty dollar. The fact he was the reason Sydney and Chloe were left vulnerable to Sydney's abusive ex-fiance made Zane hate the man more. Even dead, his affiliation with Tarrant Security was coming back to bite them in the ass. Einstein worked for KSI but reported to Tarrant, who'd been hired by Syd's ex to track her. Einstein's betrayal was so deep, he ended up stabbing Brick and leaving him for dead in an alley just to get to Sydney and Chloe.

And now a new name associated with Einstein popped up on their radar as an operative for Tarrant. They were able to capture a grainy photo off a traffic cam of the guy and the sedan following Bridget. Zane wasn't sure how, but Sydney managed to get an ID off her facial recognition software. Joe Albert.

“From what I figured out, he's Einstein's cousin. He was doing time for drug

possession when Einstein died, so when he was released, he followed his cousin to Tarrant. They hired him without hesitation.”

Zane couldn't turn away from the pages in his hands that detailed the criminal background information Sydney pulled on Joe. Multiple arrests for drug possession. Multiple arrests for soliciting a prostitute. A couple of arrests for assault. All minor enough offenses which may have earned him prison time but allowed him early paroles due to prison overcrowding.

“He knows Bridget's comings and goings. And he knows her vulnerability.”

Brick nodded. “The kids. I think we should have Sam take the kids to school himself and pick them up in the afternoon. Monica doesn't want him working on the De la Peña case, so this will free up the rest of us to back up the Alpha Team when the time comes. I figured you'd want to be the one to watch after Bridget when she's not at home. Her security system at the house is pretty tight, so I think we could rotate surveillance around the perimeter when anyone's there. I don't think we're at the point where they need to be relocated to a safe house.”

Zane stared at his friend in disbelief. He shuffled through papers in the file folder open on the table where he sat. Brick stood on the other side, looming over him as he watched Zane point to a photo in the file. Zane couldn't see it without wanting to punch his fist through the wall.

Taken at night, their investigator, Isobel Garcia, had used a digital camera and lens designed for night photography to snap the photo during her turn at watch. Taken one night after she'd seen Joe Albert watching Bridget's place, Isobel was able to capture Joe Albert lurking in the shadows beside Bridget's home. The scum peered through a window which Zane realized peeked into Mathias' bedroom. Because the man never touched the house or pane, the alarm didn't alert the family to his presence.

That would change as soon as Zane could make a phone call to the company KSI used for all surveillance and security equipment. He wanted Bridget's house wired with motion sensors which linked directly back to KSI.

“This guy should never have gotten so close to them. If his job is surveillance, why approach the house at all or allow his cover to be blown with Bridget at the supermarket? Either he's gone rogue, or there's more going on here.”

“Tristin thinks we need to make it known to Tarrant we're protecting Bridget. He thinks they'll back off on the surveillance.”

Zane shook his head vehemently. “No way in hell will that deter them. They'll get more covert with their stalking. I like them being careless, so we can keep tabs on what they're up to.”

“That's just it. Tryst and I don't think they're being careless. We think they're making their presence known for a purpose. Maybe to trip Bridget up, maybe for another agenda. Whatever it is, we think their motivation is no longer about getting money from the Williamses.”

“So what is their end game? You know what? Maybe we should pay a visit to Tarrant. I want them to know they will not get away with messing with Bridget and the kids.”

Brick held up his hands. “Calm down, man. We're not letting this go, but we have to be smart about this. Let me and Tryst figure out how to handle Tarrant. For now, this photo and the incident at the grocery store should be enough to get a restraining order against Joe Albert.”

Zane opened his mouth to give Brick an earful of what he believed they should do when the conference room door opened enough for Jay to step inside. “Sorry to

interrupt. Zane, you gotta minute?”

Zane stared at Brick, who nodded. “We can talk more later. Don’t worry. Tryst and I are on it.”

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As much as he loathed leaving things with Bridget's case up in the air, Zane followed Jay down the hall to the command center, the home base for their computer analysts. Sydney sat at her computer with Kat standing behind her, staring over her shoulder at the monitor. They glanced up when the men came into the room, and Zane noted the triumphant gleam in Sydney's already brilliant blue eyes.

"What's up?"

Sydney's smile lit up her face. "I found a break in the case. Well, maybe not a break exactly, but it's big regardless."

"Syd found a connection we weren't expecting," Jay explained. He nodded to the redhead for her to continue.

"So we knew De la Peña suspected the casino owner Max Morrison of sending in spies to try and take down his organization. He's not wrong, but I don't think he's guessed the whole story. There's a bigger conspiracy brewing."

Zane couldn't resist raising a skeptical brow at Sydney's dramatics. "Conspiracy? Really?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but she's right. There's a lot more going on here than anybody thought," Kat reiterated.

Jay crossed his arms over his chest. "Start at the beginning and talk us through it."

Sydney swiveled her chair, so she was fully facing the men. Zane noted how

animated she was, how excited she became to figure out a problem. Her love for her job radiated in every part of her. Her innocence and the excitement she showed over the small things tugged at him.

“I went back to what we knew from the night Zane was stabbed. It was obviously an ambush. Armando and Elian suspected him of working for Cal Russo or Max Morrison. Cal is a known criminal who’s ruthless and careful. He’s a prime suspect in several murders, but there has never been enough evidence to convict him. Morrison is more of an unknown. He’s a casino owner who’s worth billions. He has no obvious ties to organized crime or any criminal enterprises.

“I also considered Zane’s suspicions about Thumper and Singer. Armando believes they are loyal to him, but after how shady they were acting at the stabbing, it’s plausible they pointed the finger at Zane to take the heat off them.”

“So what are you saying?” Zane prodded.

“She’s saying she found the thread connecting them all,” Kat supplied, motioning for Sydney to continue.

“Cal Russo cornered the market on gun-running in this area. He had the run of the show until Armando expanded his operation from New Jersey into several small communities like Grayson Cove. I found out all of this through ATF intel Tristin got from his contacts. They have an amazing amount of background information. Once I paired that with Zane’s suspicions, pieces started fitting together.”

“Syd, can you get to the point?” Zane shifted his weight anxiously on his feet.

“Stay with me. It’ll be worth it, I promise. Anyway, when Armando first moved his business to this area, he flew under the radar. He built up a few loyal clients before Russo even realized he had competition. There was a note in the files by a retired

ATF agent who speculated both thrived being competitors. He said you couldn't take one down because the other would step up to take his place, but as long as they both had equal stakes in their criminal clientele, they would keep each other from becoming too powerful."

"An agent who doesn't want to dismantle two crime lords running guns through small town America? That is some messed up shit," Jay said.

"No kidding, but this is where the story gets interesting," Kat inserted.

"I found an old article about a car accident involving Cal Russo's son Tad and his girlfriend, Rebecca. The article said the couple were run off the road and sent off into a ravine, where the car flipped multiple times. Tad was killed. Rebecca suffered irreparable brain damage, and to make it worse, Rebecca was pregnant. The family decided to leave her on life support until the doctor felt the baby could be delivered safely. The baby was delivered prematurely via C-section, and then Rebecca died a few days later."

"It's tragic, but what does it have to do with De la Peña or...any of this?" Zane asked.

"Rebecca's last name was Morrison. Her son Thaddeus is being raised by both sets of his grandparents, Max and Rose Morrison and Cal and Tiffany Russo. Armando De la Peña is suspected to be behind the car accident."

Jay whistled under his breath. "Damn."

"There's more." Sydney whirled around and clicked her mouse a couple of times. The giant screen on the wall lit up and within seconds displayed two older photos.

"That's Thumper and Singer."

“Singer is actually Reggie Singer, and Thumper’s real name is Jubel Reisling. Thumper’s sister is Tiffany Reisling Russo. Thumper is Cal’s brother-in-law. I haven’t found any evidence tying Singer with the Morrisons and Russos yet, but with Thumper’s connection, I’d say your hunch about them being the snitches is spot on. It’s one big web of crime, deceit and revenge.”

Zane fought off the urge to roll his eyes at Sydney’s dramatics. “But how did the De la Peñas not know who Thumper really is? I mean if we figured it out, why didn’t they? They’ve been careful to vet anyone coming into their organization.”

“I don’t know, except Tiffany dropped Riesling when their mother divorced their father and married their stepfather. The stepfather legally adopted Tiffany, but Thumper stayed with their father. It could be they didn’t dig deep enough to make the connection.”

Zane studied the photos for several minutes, letting the information sink in. “Did you find any connection between Thumper and Singer outside of their involvement with the De la Peñas?”

“No, nothing. But I’m still digging. There has to be a connection somewhere.”

“Those two are as close to the inner circle of the crime family as anyone outside of Armando’s sons, so they have to have been part of the De la Peña organization for a while. If they were working with Russo and Morrison to take down Armando and Elian, then why are they taking so long? If Thumper and Singer are the moles, they should be armed with enough intel for Morrison and Russo to destroy Armando and send him packing back to the Dominican.” Zane theorized aloud more for his own benefit than for the others in the room. It was his way of piecing together the intel on a case until he resolved the unknown.

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Jay moved closer to the screen, as if closing the distance would help him figure out this puzzle of a case. “I’m guessing that’s taking down the crime family may not be their only motivation.”

“So what is?” The words burst from Zane’s mouth with more force than he intended.

“I don’t know. I’m going to have Tryst to get in touch with his ATF contacts, and I know a guy who works in the FBI’s organized crime division. Maybe if we loop them in on what we’ve found out, they can provide some direction on where we need to go with this case,” Jay said.

“No. If you involve the FBI, they’ll take over the case. I need to see this through. These guys tried to kill me.”

Jay faced his teammate. “I know. But you’re in no position to do anything right now, and we’re no closer to knowing our next move than we were when you were stabbed. We need to do this right, and that means involving the right people. Tryst will make sure we’re not pushed out of the case. But until we have a plan of action, you are benched. I need you one-hundred percent for when we take down these guys.”

Silence settled around them as Zane struggled with his rising frustration and his respect for his team leader. Jay finally broke the silence.

“I have to brief Tryst. Good work, ladies. Keep me posted on what else you find. Kat, call in the rest of the team. I need to fill them in and start strategizing on how we’re going to get these guys. Maybe with some brainstorming, the link to all of this will come to us.”

“On it.”

While Jay left to head down the hall, Kat moved to her computer to send notifications to the Alpha Team’s phones — all the phones but Zane’s.

“Zane.” Sydney’s gentle voice drew his attention, and he hated the pity he saw in her eyes. “Jay’s right. This case is personal for all of us. We have to be smart in how we deal with it.”

He ran a hand through his hair and pierced Sydney with his stare. He had no idea what to say without taking his frustration out on her or making her feel even more sorry for him. And he couldn’t handle getting pity from anybody, especially her.

“I need some air. If they need me, call my cell. But I doubt they’ll need me.”

“Zane,” she called to stop his retreat. “Stay and help me track down leads. Don’t go away angry.”

He paused, his hand on the door, and spoke with his back to her. “I’m not, but I’m not needed here. At least not now. I’m just going to clear my head.”

He walked out and spoke to no one as he headed to his truck. There was one place he knew to go when he felt like this and one person who could help him gain perspective.

He was going home.

Chapter Fourteen

The front porch of the Wilder home carried memories of quiet summer afternoons, long talks on the porch swing and hours spent staring at the stars while the sounds of

crickets and katydids filled the air. Today with an iced glass of tea in his hand, listening to the gentle creak of the swing as it moved, Zane started talking to Maggie Wilder.

Her son was a man of few words, saying what was necessary when the occasion called. Maggie accepted this part of him which was so much like his father. Sometimes she found Zane's silence soothing in a noisy and chaotic world.

But past experience taught her that when her son decided to speak, it was best to sit back and listen until he ran out of words.

Zane never shared with his family the nature of his work, so he spoke of the De la Peña case in generalities. It was difficult for him to vent his frustration when he couldn't explain why he wanted to see this case through to an arrest and conviction, but it felt good to blow off steam all the same. He got on a roll, moving from talking about De la Peña to sharing about Bridget without realizing he shifted topics until his mother spoke.

"I remembered her from the hospital. She seemed very sweet. Does she know what the grandparents are trying to do?"

He nodded. "She does, and she's scared. I keep comparing her to you. She's raising her niece and nephew on her own, and I feel she's doing the best she can. The kids seem happy, and they're good kids. They don't deserve someone trying to mess that up. But when we refused to take the grandparents' case, they went with another firm that's not above doing whatever it takes to get paid. Brick has me working the case with him."

"Will you be able to split your time between the two cases?" Maggie watched him intently with shrewd brown eyes that never missed a thing.

“For now, yeah, but I want to see the other case through. I’m not getting a choice though. Tristin has benched me because of my injury.”

“Which he should, for your own health. But why can you work on Bridget’s case with your injury but not the other?”

Zane hesitated. He hated causing her worry, but he also hated lying to her. “There’s not a threat of danger to me with Bridget’s case.”

Other than a sharp intake of breath which she slowly released, Maggie showed no reaction to his revelation. “You believe your place is with this other case, the one that’s more dangerous? They won’t be able to close the case without you?”

Maggie’s question hit close to the heart of the matter. He stood and paced the porch, his fists shoved in his jean pockets. He didn’t answer his mother, but since she was the person who knew him better than anybody else, he didn’t have to.

“You’re not needed. You provided information that got them closer to closing the case without you.”

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“Dammit all to hell!” He exploded, more at the situation than at his mother. He would never use harsh language with or around her, but he thought under the circumstances, she’d let it slide. “This is my case. I’ve worked on it for a year. How can I watch them work this case without being in the middle of the investigation?”

“Has Tristin said the words, you can’t be involved in the investigation?”

“He told me I can’t work the case. I have to lay low because he needs me back at one hundred percent.”

“Even though they’ve put you on a different, less dangerous case, they’re still sharing information with you. It seems to me they need you on both cases. Your role on the first case has changed, but that’s alright since Bridget needs you more on her case.”

“Momma, there are other people who can work her case too. I’m expendable.”

“You’re wrong. You’re feeling sorry for yourself and refuse to see the big picture. The fact that the other case is moving forward is because of your work, so if they no longer need you to be in the center in order to close it, you’ve already shown you are not expendable. But while others can step in Bridget’s case, they can’t bring to it what you can.”

“What do you mean? If they’re in any kind of danger, I couldn’t do much with my injury still healing. And Brick knows as much about the case as I do.”

“You know what it’s like to lose a parent. You know what it’s like to be raised by a single mother, and you know what it’s like to be the only boy in a house full of

women. You know what it's like to watch after a sibling. I know you are the youngest, but once you hit your growth spurt when you were twelve, you were the protector of me and your sisters. No one messed with us for fear of having to deal with you."

He chuckled and felt his cheeks heat up under his mother's praise.

"Zane, you know what Bridget's family is going through. You are equipped to help her and her children better than anyone at that PI firm of yours. From what you told me about the grandparents, this isn't going to end well. They're trying to hold on to the memory of the son they lost by using their grandson as a stand-in. This is going to devastate this family, and it's never going to give them what they're looking for. It breaks my heart."

"Mom, I'm a PI, not a damn savior. If the grandparents decide to sue for custody and paint Bridget as an unfit guardian, there's really nothing I can do."

Maggie stood, her expression as fierce as when she scolded him for coming home from his junior prom falling-down drunk. She pointed a finger at his chest. "Daniel Zane Wilder, stop feeling sorry for yourself and get your head out of your ass. You're a grown man who's been dealt a bad hand. You're acting more like a child who's had his favorite toy taken away."

"A child? Mom, I'm blowing off some steam."

"Yes, well, remember it wasn't too long ago we weren't sure you were going to live long enough to blow off steam. I'm telling you it's about priorities, and you better get yours straight."

He placed a hand on top of the one she pointed at him and pushed her arm down to her side. Then he wrapped her in a bear hug. She rested her cheek against his chest

and returned the hug fiercely. She pulled away and placed her palm on his cheek.

“You’ll do the right thing. I know you will. Besides, you won’t be able to stay away from Bridget and her family.”

“Oh, yeah? Why is that?”

She flashed him a secretive smile and turned to pick up their empty glasses. “Because you like her.”

Zane watched her disappear into the house, hesitating a moment before following her. “What are you talking about? I don’t know them. Not really. I mean, yeah, I like her. I think we could be friends.”

Maggie placed the glasses in the kitchen sink and turned to face her son. “Friends? Interesting.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I know that look. Forget it. If you think you’re going to play matchmaker or something, you would be wrong.”

Maggie’s smile was indulgent, almost secretive. Was there something she knew that he didn’t?

“It’s okay. It’s been a long time since you’ve been interested in someone like this. It’s nice to see.”

“I’m not interested in her.”

She held up her hands as if admitting defeat. “All right. Whatever you say. But tell me one thing. How often have you thought about Bridget since you met her in the hospital?”

“She’s a case. Of course, I think about her. Your point is not valid.”

“Zane. Sweetheart. Think about how often Bridget crosses your mind. Then think about all of the other cases you’ve worked for your job. Can you honestly say you haven’t spent more time being preoccupied with her than the others?”

He opened his mouth to deny his mother’s assumption, but the words caught in his throat. He did think about Bridget often. His thoughts didn’t run along a romantic tangent as his mother implied. He thought more about how good she was at her job, how good she was with her niece and nephew, how fun it was to banter with her, how cute she was when she laughed, the sound throaty and sexy, her nose crinkling as she succumbed to her mirth.

Maggie moved away from the counter to stand in front of him, craning her neck to peer into his face. “You know what I think you should do? Take the afternoon off and spend it with me. We’ll watch game shows and cook something delicious for supper. We’ll have your sisters come over, and we’ll enjoy some quality family time. Sound good?”

Zane nodded. “Yeah, but Zoe will want to bring Michael along, won’t she?”

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His mother reached for her cell phone, her expression odd as she texted his sisters. “They aren’t together anymore.”

“Since when?”

“Since the night you were stabbed. Please let her be the one to bring this up to you, but she and Michael had a fight. He stormed out, but when she heard about you, she called to tell him. Instead of coming to the hospital to be there for her, he moved out while she was gone.”

“Is she alright? Damn, do I need to find him and beat the shit out of him?”

“As much as Zoe would appreciate the gesture, I don’t think it’s necessary. I think it’s been coming for a while, and he just used your stabbing to take the coward’s way out. She’s handling it as well as can be expected.”

While his mother continued to message his sisters, he stayed rooted to the same spot, realizing his mother was right. The De la Peña case consumed him enough that he missed two key points in his life. One was the end of his sister’s serious relationship with the man the family believed she would eventually marry. The other was how much more of an asset he could be to Bridget’s case than he originally thought.

While he admitted his mother was correct about his contribution to the case, he refused to consider her observation that Bridget crossed his mind more often than even Sydney had.

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Eyes the color of a summer sky reflected the flickering flames of a roomful of candles, their orange glow the only illumination in an otherwise dim room. Rain pattered against the windows, obscuring the view of the cityscape outside the floor-to-ceiling window panes. Music, soft and sensual, enhanced the romantic setting, and butterflies danced in her stomach as she anxiously anticipated what was to come.

He didn't speak as he approached. The sleek suit stretched over his well-muscled physique, hinting at the perfection underneath the expensive material. He raised an arm and held out his hand, stopping short of touching her. He waited. His lips curved into an enigmatic smile.

She wanted to know the secret behind his smile. She wanted to feel his muscles under her fingertips and to know what it was like to be encircled in his arms. She wanted to tell him she would follow him anywhere, do anything he wanted.

But all she did was place her hand in his, her palm and fingers dainty in comparison to his strong and capable grasp. With one gentle pull, she was where she desired — in his arms. And they danced a slow, sexy rhythm. The world faded away, and only the two of them existed. Her dress swished about her knees. He leaned forward, his lips pressed lightly against the shell of her ear.

“Bridget,” he uttered on the deepest, most erotic breath she'd ever felt against her skin. “Bridget.”

“Bridget. Bridget. Are you okay?”

Her body shook as she suddenly woke from a sound sleep, her head bumping against the staircase railing. She winced, rubbing the aching spot under her hair, and peered into the face of Dr. Seth Masters. He stood two steps down from where she sat, eyeing her curiously as he flashed her an indulgent grin. Why the hell was she dreaming about the doctor who, she was sure, was stalking her during her shift breaks

in the stairwell? He was always bumping into her, and today she decided to take her break a little later in hopes of avoiding him.

No, she hadn't been dreaming about the doctor. She was dreaming about the man who wasn't a part of her life but permanently lived in her fantasies. Normally she allowed herself to indulge because it hurt no one for her to daydream about her gorgeous former patient. But this time, Zane was clouding her thoughts, disrupting her slumber enough to make her fall asleep at work.

Her eyes widened, and she jumped to her feet, smoothing her scrubs as if the wrinkles would magically disappear after the hours she'd spent on shift. "Oh, shit! I can't believe I feel asleep. How long have I been out here? I have to go back to work. Charlotte's going to kill me."

Her mouth essentially vomited the words aimed more at the universe at large than at her Doctor Stalker. She jogged up the few steps to the door and swung it open to step on her floor.

"Um, Bridget? Are you forgetting something?"

She whirled back around to see Seth holding out her cell phone. She must have had it in her hand and dropped it on the step below when she fell asleep. She practically ran back down the stairs to get it, the door clanging shut with a deafening echo. She grabbed her phone, her hand brushing against his, and he tightened his grip. When he didn't readily release her phone, she shot him an irritated glare, which made his smile widen.

"Have breakfast with me."

"Not now. I have to get back to work."

“Then say yes, and we both can get back to work.” He held her gaze, and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Come on. We’ve been flirting for weeks now. Don’t you think it’s time we got to know each other and see if we might want to spend more time together?”

She opened her mouth to shoot him down but stopped the words from leaving her throat. She’d been unable to wipe Zane Wilder from her mind, and now her obsession with him was affecting her work. Maybe what she needed was a different distraction, one which was safe and wasn’t a threat to her control.

“Name the place, and I’ll meet you there at the end of my shift.”

She almost changed her mind when she saw the triumphant gleam in his eye. Even though she planned on using him, she hated she played right into his hands.

“I’ll text you the address.” He released her phone and turned to continue down the stairs. When he reached the next landing, he glanced back, gave her a cocky wink and continued on his way.

He never asked for her number, but even as the random thought crossed her mind, her phone buzzed in her hand. A text notification popped up on the screen. Though it was from an unknown sender, the text held the address to the diner where she and the kids ate on their first night in town. How the hell did he get her number?

She blew out a frustrated breath. Damn Zane Wilder! In a different life, she would have shot Dr. Masters down without hesitation. In a different life, she would have indulged her attraction to Zane and got him out of her system. But she wasn’t that woman anymore. Instead, she was making decisions proving she was anyone but that woman. She not only had her responsibility to Marlowe and Mathias, but she couldn’t risk their grandparents finding out about any behavior they could use to paint her as an unfit guardian.

Going on a date with a doctor could improve her reputation, and with it being a Saturday morning, the kids wouldn't need her to help them with their morning routine before school. She might regret encouraging the good doctor when nothing would ever come of it, but if it meant keeping her image intact for her kids' sake, she could endure it.

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Would it be enough to make her stop fantasizing about Zane Wilder? Somehow she didn't think so because she'd liked spending time with him. She hadn't seen or spoken to him since the barbecue, but she hadn't forgotten him either. They had laughed and flirted, they had played games, real and metaphorical, and they had fit within his circle of friends like they were a couple. The whole evening had felt natural, and it wasn't until she and the kids got home that she realized how much she missed letting loose and enjoying the company of friends...and a handsome man.

He was actually a beautiful man. So perfect it almost pained her to gaze at him. He probably had a slew of women falling at his feet for a chance to warm his bed. She couldn't bring herself to ask Sydney during the few phone conversations they'd had since the barbecue, though she was dying to know that and so much more about him.

Then there was his infatuation with Sydney. She didn't think it was more serious than a crush, or he wouldn't be so willing to step aside and let Cole have her. He didn't strike her as the type to graciously bow out instead of fighting for what he wanted. But if Sydney was the type of woman he was attracted to, Bridget shouldn't have caught his attention. She and Sydney seemed polar opposites, and not just in appearance.

Maybe it wasn't so much the appearance of a woman as her circumstances which attracted him. She'd considered, more than once, that all she was and could ever be to Zane was a damsel in distress. The guy had a protective streak a mile wide, and Bridget had no desire to play the helpless victim. It was one more reason why she needed to break his hold on her.

Her radical move to shake Zane's hold on her was necessary. Her rule against dating

co-workers be damned.

Chapter Fifteen

Bridget exploded in laughter and would have doubled over if the seatbelt wasn't holding her securely in place. The smooth leather of the passenger seat supported her body in all the right places, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd been in a car as nice as Dr. Seth Masters' Lexus. She felt like they were barely moving as Seth maneuvered the luxury car toward the address she'd given him. Music from the classic rock satellite radio station filtered through the speakers, low enough to be no more than ambient noise.

So much about Seth had pleasantly surprised her, from the music he enjoyed to how easy he was to talk to. She'd had her doubts about him when they met up at the diner, the only place in Grayson Cove open so early in the morning. He guided their conversation as they each enjoyed their breakfast deluxe platters.

Their conversation had been light, jumping from a variety of topics, and time passed quickly for her. After their meal, he'd paid the check and escorted her to her car. He placed a chaste kiss on her cheek before she slid behind the wheel. Once he made her promise they would share a meal again, he closed the door.

What would have been the perfect end to a first date was tainted when her car failed to start. Seth made a show of peering under the hood for her, but she had a feeling he knew as much as about cars as she did. Finally, he offered to drive her home. She never accepted a ride from people she barely knew, but circumstances worked against her hard-and-fast rule. He was a trusted doctor and a co-worker, and calling for a ride would mean dragging someone out of bed at seven o'clock on a Saturday morning. She couldn't see the harm of accepting Seth's offer this once.

The ride to her house passed quickly as Seth regaled her with stories from some of

the more unorthodox patients he'd treated. She laughed hard enough to get a stitch in her side, but she didn't care. She was enjoying herself too much to get caught up in her self-imposed rules.

When Seth parked in her driveway, Bridget was stunned to realize she hated to see their date end. She shifted in her seat to stare at him, unconsciously comparing him to Zane. Seth was good-looking, though not as devastating as Zane. He was good company with a good sense of humor. Seth's job gave her more in common with him than with Zane. The doctor was easy, not the complication she believed Zane to be. This was what she needed in her life — easy and comfortable. Spending time with someone with no expectations and no heartstrings attached left her free to focus on more important things, like her job and her kids. Why had she been so quick to dismiss the doctor?

“So are you going to tell me?”

She tilted her head to the side, her lips pursed as she tried to guess his meaning. “What exactly are you wanting to know?”

“Why you changed your mind about me? I never expected you to agree to have breakfast with me. You don't date co-workers, remember?”

She nodded. “Right,” she drawled. “I don't, as a rule. But I've been making a lot of changes in my life. Most of them are because they were the best things for my niece and nephew. I guess I wanted to make a change that was...for me.”

“And a date with me was your first choice for a change?”

She wasn't sure what kind of explanation he was fishing for, but she wasn't ready to have a deep conversation with him. She had to keep this light. It was all she could handle.

“Don’t analyze my motives too closely, Doc. I can always change my mind.”

She slipped from the car before he had a chance to respond. If she thought he would be able to see through her loose-fitting scrubs, she would have put a little extra sway in her hips to tease him as she walked to her door. When she heard his car door open and close, she allowed a slight smile to curl her lips. She knew his ego and curiosity wouldn’t let her have the last word. She didn’t turn around until she reached her front door.

“You left before we could plan our second date.”

She waited until he stood in front of her. “And how do you know I want a second date?”

His expression was arrogant, his smirk cocky. Yeah, we’ll have to work on that if we continue to date, she thought. She had never liked guys who were too self-assured, one reason why she never dated doctors. Arrogance seemed to be part of their job description.

“When is your next day off?”

“We can’t go out then,” she answered, partly to be arbitrary and partly because she wanted to spend the day with Marlowe and Mathias. “Ask me out for Sunday, and I’ll consider it.”

He took one step, paused, then another, and paused. One more put him toe-to-toe with her. Seth was tall, but not as tall as Zane, so she didn’t have to tilt her head as far back to see him. She waited for his snarky, yet charming comeback, but instead Seth lowered his head and captured her lips with his.

The kiss was firm and demanding. His hand raised to brace against the back of her

head, barring her from pulling away. She gave into the moment, returning the fervor of his kiss. The kiss was pleasurable, and when he pulled away, she realized she enjoyed it. She lightly pushed against his chest, adding space between them.

“Thank you for breakfast, Doctor. If you decide you want a repeat on Sunday, call me.”

Feeling flirtatious and sexy, she unlocked the door and stepped inside. She took a moment to disarm the alarm and turned back to him, flashing him her signature coy smile which had always worked in charming the opposite sex.

When he stepped closer, she thought he was going to kiss her again, and she lifted her chin in anticipation. Instead, he pushed against her, knocking her off balance. She stumbled back a couple of steps before she regained her balance, but it was enough to give him room to come inside. He locked the door behind him, not giving her a chance to protest.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m about to do you, sweetheart.”

His hands gripped her arms tightly as he threw her against the wall separating the living room and kitchen. The force of his body pushing her backwards gave her little leverage to fend him off. She struggled against him though he pinned her with his body. She felt his cock harden against her stomach.

“Let me go! I’m not having sex with you.”

“After all the trouble I’ve gone through? I showed you a good time. Now it’s your turn. Don’t try to pretend you don’t want this. You’ve been giving me signals all night.” He lowered his head to kiss her, but she twisted her head to the side.

“Stop it, Seth. My niece and nephew are in the back bedrooms. They could walk in here at any minute. You need to leave.”

His hand came up to grip her chin, his fingers digging into the skin at her jawline. He pulled her face back until she stared straight into his eyes. His arrogant gleam was replaced with a leer which chilled her to the bone.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be quick. I heard you liked it rough, and I plan to give you exactly what you want. But you’re going to have to be quiet, sweetheart. We can’t have the kiddos walking in while I’m fucking their aunt hard and fast.”

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An evening spent at his mom's had been what he needed. Neither of them spoke about their earlier conversation. They prepared baked ziti with Italian sausage and heaps of mozzarella cheese — just the way he and his sisters enjoyed it. Maggie added a salad and fresh garlic bread to go with it. She had pulled the bread out of the oven as his sisters started arriving.

After a boisterous meal, which was the norm when the five of them ate together, they settled in the living room to watch a movie as they often did growing up. It was Zaida's turn to choose, so they watched a superhero action flick instead of the typical rom com or tear-jerker drama his other sisters typically chose.

The movie failed to hold his interest, so he caught himself watching his mother and sisters, noting the happiness on their faces. He thought — and not for the first time — that his mother was the reason he and his sisters found peace with their lives. Maggie told them often how their father valued family and how the two of them planned to have a lot of children. They dreamed of attending little league games and PTA meetings and recitals. When his father died, Maggie spent most of her time working to support their family, but she never sacrificed time spent with her children.

Maybe he should introduce Bridget to his mother. Then she'd know someone else who raised a family on her own, and she could turn to Maggie for advice when she needed it. God knows, he and his sisters created enough chaos for their mother to have experience in every type of situation.

After the evening was done, he decided to stay the night in his old room, and he talked Zaida into doing the same. Though they talked well into the night, he still rose early, a habit he gained in the military that he had never been able to break. He left the coffee brewing and his mother and sister sleeping when he hit the road. He intended on going to work, but his truck seemed to have a mind of its own as it ended up driving slowly past Bridget's dark and quiet house.

He fought the urge to stop. Because of Bridget's case, he knew her work schedule had her at the hospital last night. Since the kids didn't have school, it was obvious they all were catching up on sleep.

The silver Lexus which turned on the street stood out in the middle-class neighborhood. Instinct had Zane slowing his truck as he peered through the car's windshield. When he saw Bridget in the passenger seat and the good doctor behind the wheel, he felt disbelief radiating through him. He thought she was at home resting after a long shift at the hospital, and she was with the doctor she claimed to have no interest in.

His shock gave way to irritation as he turned onto the street heading away from Bridget's house. He'd traveled a few feet, but then he executed a U-turn and headed back. If his teammates knew he was spying on Bridget and her date, they would give him an ungodly amount of grief, but he didn't care at this point. His gut was churning, and he couldn't leave yet.

As the Lexus parked in the driveway, he waited for her to get out, wondering why she was lingering in the doctor's company. He released a breath he didn't realize he was holding when she finally emerged. She was still in her pale blue scrubs, the ones which dipped just enough at the neckline to hint at her cleavage and gave her skin a rosy tint. She was coming from work.

He stiffened when the doctor stepped from the driver's side and followed her. He shouted after her, but Zane couldn't hear their words from where he'd parked along the curb, far enough back to not be noticed. After hearing all of the gossip about the doctor hitting on any female who crossed his path at the hospital, he didn't like Bridget spending even five minutes with the guy. Her shift had ended over an hour ago, so what had they been doing during that time? And where the hell was her car?

When they kissed at her door, Zane hesitated a second. Then he was out of the truck

in a flash and jogged up to the edge of her yard, ducking low behind a tree. He watched Bridget step inside, and his gut churned to see the smile she flashed at him. She liked him, despite what she told Zane at the hospital. He scowled as he watched the doctor move forward.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. The doctor pushed against Bridget, and she stumbled backwards. The door slammed behind them before Zane registered what happened. Something wasn't right. Even if Bridget had been on a date with the doctor, she hadn't invited him inside. He pushed his way in, and Zane was ready to rip out the guy's heart through his throat.

He didn't know what he'd say to explain his presence, but he rushed forward until he stood on her porch. He'd have to rely on his experience of working undercover to help him think of an excuse on the fly.

He paused before pounding on the door. Was that a kitten crying? He didn't hear the sound again, and he started to wonder if he'd imagined the whimper. And then there it was. He pounded on the door, reaching for his gun only to realize he'd forgotten to grab it from his glove box.

"Bridget," he called through the door. "It's Zane. I need to talk to you. It's important."

This time there was no mistaking what he heard. A bloodcurdling scream penetrated the thickness of the door. He raised a boot and slammed it in the right spot to bust the lock. He stormed through once the door swung open. He zeroed in on the doctor pinning Bridget against the wall, one hand up her scrubs top and one pulling at her pants. Struggling against him, she peered over the doctor's shoulder, panic in her eyes and blood on her split lip.

Rage as red as a matador's cape slipped over his vision. He pinched a nerve at the

man's shoulder, eliciting enough pain for the doctor to loosen his grip on Bridget. Then Zane grabbed his shirt collar and yanked the doctor back with enough force to toss him to the floor. Bridget sank to the floor, tears streaming down her face and her body shaking. Zane caught movement in his peripheral vision and, after making sure the doctor was still writhing on the floor, he turned to see Mathias standing in the hallway. He had pushed Marlowe behind him, but she watched everything unfolding with wide eyes peering around her brother.

“Mat, get your aunt and your sister, go to the bedroom with the sturdiest lock, and stay there until I come for you. Do it now.”

To his credit, the sixteen-year-old moved without hesitation to do as Zane ordered. With the family secure, he grabbed a fistful of the doctor's perfectly cut hair and jerked the man to his feet, ignoring his yelp of pain. He shoved his face close enough to the doctor's that spit from his words landed on the man's face.

“You lousy piece of shit, you're lucky I don't yank your cock from your body, so you don't have the equipment to rape another woman ever again. Because I'm betting Bridget is not the first, but she damn well will be the last.”

“She asked for it,” the doctor sneered. “She likes it rough. She even pretended to have car trouble, so I'd bring her home. She asked me to pretend to attack her to make it more exciting. You didn't know she was a whore, did you?”

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Zane plowed his fist into the man's face, finding satisfaction in the sickening crack of the doctor's nose. He landed a second punch to the man's gut and then a third to his jaw which sent the doctor hitting the floor again. Seth's head bounced off the hardwood floor, and after uttering a groan, the son of a bitch passed out.

Zane pulled his cell from his pocket and made two calls — the first to the Sheriff's Department dispatch.

"This is Zane Wilder with Knight Security and Investigations. Who am I talking to?"

"Wilder! It's Miller. What's going on?" The dispatcher was someone Zane had contacted on other cases, and one of the goals of the KSI teams and investigators was to maintain strong relationships with local authorities and dispatchers.

"I need to report an attempted rape. I need a shop and a bus dispatched to my location. I'm on scene. The perpetrator is subdued. The victim and her children are secured. It occurred in her home."

Zane had slipped out of his rage into his military persona, where he assessed the situation and took charge to take care of business. He used cop lingo to order a patrol car to take the doctor into custody and an ambulance to care for Bridget.

"On it. Smith and Rhodes are in your area. They should be there in five. Bus is ten minutes out."

"Thanks." He cut the call without waiting for a response and selected a name from his contacts for his second call.

“Dammit to hell, Zane! Do you know what time it is?”

“Panther, wake Sydney and get over here to Bridget’s. She was attacked.”

“Shit! Is she all right?”

“I don’t know. The guy is here. I had Mat take her and Marlowe back to one of the bedrooms and lock the door until the cops get here to arrest the asshole. He’s a doctor at the hospital where she works. Man, he’s messed up. I want to kill the bastard. Her kids were in the next room. If I hadn’t stopped when I was driving by...”

Zane started pacing, his free hand running through his hair over and over as his mind played the “what if” game. He could hear voices in the background, and he guessed Cole filled Sydney in on what was happening.

“What did you do?” Cole asked him, and Zane could hear shuffling in the background which Zane assumed was his teammate dressing to leave the house.

“I hit the guy and broke his nose. He fell to the floor and knocked himself out. Then I called dispatch and then you.”

“You got a zip tie? Secure his hands while he can’t resist. Syd and I are on our way. She’s calling Chloe too, so she may beat us there.”

“Thanks, man.”

Pocketing his cell phone, he searched the living room for something to bind the doctor’s hands. He always carried zip ties when he worked a case, but he hadn’t expected to stop at Bridget’s house, much less subdue a rapist. He finally pulled the ties holding back the curtain panels and used those to bind the man’s hands and feet for good measure.

He heard heavy footsteps on the porch a minute before he heard someone call out, “Police!”

“In here, guys,” Zane said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender so the officers would know he wasn’t a threat.

“Wilder, is he the perp?” Adam Smith was the only one of the two cops he recognized, and he was glad to have a familiar face responding.

“Yeah, he hit his head on the floor and passed out, but I secured his hands and feet in case he roused.”

“What the hell happened?” The other officer — Zane remembered the dispatcher referring to him as Rhodes — moved to replace the tie at the doctor’s hands with a set of handcuffs.

“The victim is Bridget Kincaid. She’s a nurse at the same hospital where he’s a doctor. He brought her home. She has her own car, but he said something about her having car trouble. I was driving by to stop in and talk to Bridget. I saw him push her inside, and as I came to the door, I heard Bridget whimper then scream. I busted the door and found him attempting to remove her clothes while she struggled. I pulled him off, we fought, and he hit his head on the floor. She lives here with her niece and nephew, and her scream must have woken them. They came into the room. I had them take Bridget back to one of the bedrooms and secure the door while I took care of him and called you guys.”

“You just happened to be driving by this early on a Saturday?” Rhodes asked him.

“He’s a friend. I’m thankful he was driving by, no matter what his reason.”

Zane wasn’t expecting the feminine voice speaking up behind him. He turned around

to see Bridget standing inside the door frame connecting the hallway to the living room. Still dressed in her scrubs, she had her arms wrapped around her middle. Her face appeared freshly washed, but her eyes were bloodshot from her tears and her lip was swollen with an ugly scar where the blood had scabbed over.

He expected her to be hesitant to step into a room full of men after what happened. Instead, she walked into the room with angry strides and glared at the doctor's still form on the floor.

"I work with him. His name is Seth Masters. I went to breakfast with him after our shift at the hospital. I was having care trouble when we were leaving, so he gave me a ride. He kept saying he heard I liked it rough."

"Do you know why he would say that?" Rhodes asked.

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She shook her head, her eyes fixated on the doctor. “I told him my kids were here, but he didn’t care. He seemed so nice. I can’t believe I fell for his act.”

“I know this may be difficult, Miss, but we need you to come to the station to make a statement. An ambulance is on the way, so you can wait until you’ve been checked out.”

“I’m fine, and I’ll tell you whatever you need to know about what he did.”

Bridget was shaking, a normal response after what she went through, Zane felt his respect for her soar after seeing her tap into her inner strength, refusing to let what happen stop her from seeking justice.

Chapter Sixteen

Bridget can’t remember when she’d been so exhausted. Every ounce of strength she had left was being used to keep her sitting upright with her eyes open. After working a twelve-hour shift, then fighting off Seth, giving her statement to the police and dealing with the revolving door of people coming into her house, she had little left to give her niece and nephew...but after what they witnessed, they needed her.

“I’m not arguing with you about this. I would feel better if you go hang out with Sydney and Cole today.”

Marlowe cozied up beside her on the sofa, refusing to let her aunt out of her sight since Bridget’s scream woke her from a sound sleep. Bridget’s heart squeezed painfully at knowing Marlowe and Mathias witnessed her attack. She felt foolish for

relaxing her carefully constructed guard for even a few hours. She'd forgotten she had rules for a reason, so she shouldn't be surprised something like this happened the moment she went against her instincts. She'll never forgive herself for traumatizing them, adding to all the hardships they'd experienced in their young lives.

Mathias stood like a mountain in front of her, stoic and unmoving. He wasn't happy with being sent away when all he wanted to do was watch over her. She had no idea how she knew, because he gave nothing away with his unreadable expression, but he was upset he couldn't protect her against Seth. Even though protecting her wasn't his job, no amount of reassurance would absolve him of his self-imposed guilt.

She wanted to hold them close, to draw comfort from their concern and their love. She also needed to be alone. Alone, she could succumb to her fear. She could give in to the tears which burned her eyes every time she thought of what could have happened if Zane Wilder hadn't magically shown up at her door.

So when their new friends offered to spend the day with her kids, she saw the gesture for what it was — a reprieve from Mathias and Marlowe hovering over her.

"I'm not leaving you. Marlowe can go, but I'm staying."

Bridget recognized Mathias' stubborn set to his jaw and the scowl creasing the skin between his brows. The expression was so reminiscent of his father Dean that Bridget felt her control on her emotions slip a little more.

"I'm not leaving," Marlowe said quietly but firmly.

"Please. I need to know someone is watching out for you two."

Cole, who had been sitting quietly with Sydney and her friend, tried to appear he wasn't eavesdropping, but she wasn't surprised when he interjected. "Bridget, do you

mind if I say something?”

She shrugged and nodded for him to continue. She braced her elbow on the arm of the sofa and propped her head on her hand. She allowed her eyes to close as Cole talked.

“I know you want to be here for your aunt, but I have to agree with her. You guys have a lot going through your minds right now, and she does too. You don’t have to come with us, but I think the distraction would be good for both of you. Sydney and I would like to take you to breakfast. If you need to talk, we’re here to listen. If you want to be quiet, we’re here for that too. Then if you want to come back, we’ll come back.”

Bridget’s eyes flew open, and she stared at the man she considered a friend after a short time. She almost lost the slim hold on her emotions at his gesture, and she glanced from him to Sydney, who smiled warmly and regarded Bridget with friendship and not the pity she expected. She expected them all to judge her for putting herself in a position to be attacked. The fact they didn’t left her shaken.

“You should go.” Zane stood across the room, his gaze trained on the view out the window, but he’d turned to face Mathias as he spoke. “Let yourself forget for a little while. I’ll be here. I won’t let anything happen while you’re gone.”

Bridget wasn’t about to let Zane see her lose her composure, but if his reassurance would get her kids out of the house, she would play along.

Mathias turned away, and Bridget’s heart squeezed painfully. She hated she caused him stress with her mistake.

Her nephew finally turned back around, and she smiled at the acceptance in his eyes. “All right. We’ll go to breakfast. I’m not very hungry, but we probably need to try to

eat.”

“No!” Marlowe clung to Bridget’s arm as her head shook furiously.

“Lowe, it’s okay. Aunt Bridge is not going anywhere. She’ll be able to rest better and worry less if she knows we’re safe with Cole and Sydney. We’re doing this for her.”

Bridget loosened her niece’s grip on her arm so she could drape it over Marlowe’s shoulders. “I’m so glad I have you and Mathias here to watch out for me. I love you guys so much. But all I want to do is sleep, so when you do come home, you can tell me what a good time you had with our new friends.”

Marlowe still regarded her aunt with uncertainty, and Bridget managed a weak smile. “It’s okay. Really.”

Cole smiled at Marlowe. “Go ahead and do what you need to. When you’re ready, we’ll go somewhere for breakfast. I don’t know about you, but I could go for a stack of pancakes right now.”

Marlowe appeared forlorn as she went back to her room. Bridget exchanged a glance with Mathias before he followed his sister to his own room. She smiled at Cole, mouthing an exhausted thank you.

Then her gaze landed on Zane, standing at the edge of the room, trying to blend into the background. She was too tired to laugh at his attempt. No way could he not stand out with his imposing form, his chiseled features, great hair and arresting eyes. He met her gaze, and she failed to notice Cole lead Sydney and her friend into the kitchen. Zane shifted his position, and Bridget panicked as he seemed like he was going to approach her. She held up a hand to stop him.

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“I don’t know why you were at my house, and I want to know why. I think you want to explain. I’ll give you a chance to do that. But right now, I want to sleep. I don’t want to think or cry or yell or...do anything but close my eyes and sleep until my shift starts.”

He pushed his hands into his jean pockets. “Maybe you should have someone else cover your shift.”

“Do you think Seth’ll be there? He’s been arrested, right? I can’t miss work. I just started. I don’t...I don’t want them talking about me...and him because I’m not there to set the record straight.”

“I suggested it because I thought you could use the time to deal with what happen. And be here for the kids. They’re afraid for you.”

She exhaled slowly, realizing her tears were closer to the surface than she thought. “And if I stay home, they’ll know I’m not okay. Their world has been turned upside down enough. They need me to be okay, and I can’t take that away from them.”

He nodded, and for a moment, she saw understanding in his eyes. She wondered if she imagined it or if she was tired and saw what she wanted to see. But when her kids came back, kissed her goodbye and stepped outside with Cole and Sydney, Zane pulled her up from the sofa and propelled her ahead of him into her bedroom. She had no idea how he knew it was hers, but she didn’t care. He pushed her to sit on the bed, ordered her to stay put and stepped from the room. Then the beautiful blonde who had come with Cole and Sydney stepped inside.

“Hi, Bridget. I’m Chloe. Sydney’s friend.”

As if her brain decided to stop working, she stared at the woman smiling kindly at her. She told herself she should return the greeting, but she couldn’t do more than there and watch her. Fortunately, Chloe didn’t seem to expect a reply.

“I know you’re exhausted, and I’m guessing your body is going into shock. It’s perfectly normal. I’d like to help you change out of your clothes and stay with you until you fall asleep.”

“Why?”

Chloe closed the bedroom door and moved closer to the bed. “Mind if I sit?”

Bridget didn’t answer, but Chloe sat down on the mattress beside her as if taking her silence as a yes.

“I can understand some of what you’re going through. It’s been a few years, but I was attacked and raped. It’s a long story, and I’ve been working hard to try and deal with it. I’m not going to try and get you to talk to me. I’m not going to tell you not to feel what you’re feeling. I’m going to help you change out of your scrubs. If you’d like to shower, I can warm up the water for you. If you want to sleep, I’ll talk to you until you fall asleep. I want to help. Whatever you need.”

“Sleep sounds...amazing, but the shower. I think...” She couldn’t finish the thought.

“The shower it is. Give me a minute.”

Bridget zoned out. She couldn’t remember how she ended up naked under the shower spray, but when the warm water hit her sensitive skin, the tears started to fall, mingling with the water as it swirled down the drain. The tears gave way to sobs, and

she slid down the shower wall until she huddled in the corner and gave in to her raging emotions. She wailed at how stupid she was for trusting Seth, how crazy she was for letting down her guard, and for how dangerous it was to put herself and her kids in a position to be hurt.

She had no idea how long she sat there, but when the water turned cold, she gingerly pushed herself to her feet and turned the shower off. When she pushed back the curtain, Chloe was there to wrap her in a big, fluffy towel. The woman instructed her to dry off and helped her slip into clean underwear and an oversized T-shirt. Chloe led her back to the bed, and Bridget curled under the covers, allowing the warmth to seep through to her bones.

She closed her eyes, believing sleep would come instantly. Instead, her mind's eye recalled Seth's face so close to hers that she imagined feeling his hot breath on her face. Suddenly the covers felt too confining, like she couldn't escape the feel of his body pressing against hers, holding her captive as he touched.

She shot up in the bed and flung the covers away from her, her breaths coming in quick, panicked pants.

Chloe reached over to prop the pillows up behind Bridget. Then she straightened the covers at the nurse's feet, making sure they were smooth underneath her.

"Just lean back. Leave your eyes open if you want, but rest. It's what you need."

With a gentle hand, she pushed Bridget against the pillows and crossed around the foot of the bed. Then she surprised Bridget by climbing onto the bed next to her.

"The first time I met Sydney was at this party — I forget where. I was there to network. Part of my job is event planning, and I had already started to build a reputation for myself. I was approached by Emmett Carter to help his fiancé plan

their wedding. She was clueless when it came to such things. His fiancé was Sydney. She was quiet, standoffish. I thought she was a bit of a snob, thinking she was too good to be associating with a mere party planner when she was engaged to a successful investment broker. First impressions are not always what they seem. They fool even the best of us.”

Bridget swallowed the lump in her throat. “Why are you telling me this?”

Chloe watched her, her eyes clouding with an emotion Bridget’s tired mind didn’t readily recognize. “I’m just talking. You can lie back and listen. Or you can tune me out. I want you to know you’re not alone right now.”

Bridget nodded, adjusted her pillows and settled more comfortably on the bed. She shifted to her side and curled her hands under her pillow as Chloe continued.

“Most of the time Emmett was at the apartment when I came to work with Sydney. She seemed incapable of making a decision, and instead of empowering her, he took over. I’ll admit I couldn’t wait for the wedding to be over because I didn’t like working with them.

“But then one day, Emmett got busy at work, and I was alone with Sydney. She was completely different, shy but sweet and funny. We had the best time. I hugged her when we finished, and she flinched. Before I pulled away, I saw a bruise on her neck. It looked like a handprint.”

“I’m sorry,” Bridget whispered, realizing what Chloe didn’t say out loud.

“She felt stuck. Emmett had alienated her friends and family, so she only had him. That’s when we started planning, this time for a life away from him instead of her wedding. We found her a place to stay and set her up a business. She’s a computer genius, so it didn’t take long to find customers to help her support herself. Anyway,

she finally felt free to leave Emmett.

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“But he came back. A few years ago, around the time Syd met Cole. Emmett was involved in some shady shit, and he wanted to use Sydney’s hacking skills to hide his crimes from the FBI. Cole and Zane and the rest protected us, but Emmett found a way to get to her. He kidnapped her...and me.”

Chloe paused. Several seconds passed, but Bridget didn’t want to interrupt the moment. Whatever Chloe wrestled with, Bridget believed it was important for her to say it out loud in her own time. Caught up in the woman’s story, Bridget was able to slip away from her memories and focus on the present.

“Emmett grew up in the foster system. He was placed in a group home where he met Danny Dawson. They formed an attachment to each other, like brothers. Danny involved Emmett in setting up a drug business then a human trafficking business. They were...evil. I’ve never met anyone who was so dark, with a soul so black, but that was Danny Dawson. It’s taken me a long time to even be able to say his name out loud.”

“How long were you held captive?”

Chloe exhaled loudly, her hands grasping the fitted sheet in her fists. “Long enough to be raped by Danny Dawson. I thought Cole and the others would rescue us before it went too far. I fought him off with everything I had, but he...he only...well, he liked that. He, um, he had just finished when the guys busted in to save me. Danny was shot and killed by Cole and the others, so there’s that. Emmett’s in prison.

“I wanted to tell you this to say we all have monsters. Danny is mine. Emmett is Sydney’s. The doctor guy is yours. I won’t pretend I know what you’re dealing with.

I didn't personally know my monster. Yours is someone you trusted. Someone you thought could be a friend. You let him in your life, and he betrayed you. Everything you're feeling is what you should be feeling. It doesn't mean the monster wins."

"I feel broken." Bridget had no idea where the words came from, but once she gave them voice, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

"You're not. Cracked, maybe. But definitely not broken. You are like me and Sydney. We're powerful women. We take the shit life gives us and let it shape us into badass women. That's what you are, Bridget. You're a badass. You'll have moments where you'll feel afraid and sad and frustrated and broken. But those are only moments. They'll pass and leave behind a strength you didn't even know you possessed."

Bridget reached out to touch Chloe's hand. "Thank you. You didn't have to share this with me, but I appreciate it. I appreciate you being here."

"You're welcome. You're part of a badass club of women, and I have to say, I think you're going to fit in with us just fine."

Bridget's eyes felt weighted, her lids fluttering as she struggled to hold on to the comforting friendship Chloe offered. But as they sat in companionable silence, Bridget eventually slipped into blissful darkness.

???

Zane stared into the bottom of his fifth cup of coffee of the day. If he poured any more caffeine into his system, he'd jump out of his skin. Cole and Sydney were keeping Mathias and Marlowe occupied doing God knows what, and Chloe had left shortly after Bridget fell asleep. He sat alone in the kitchen, fighting his dueling emotions of wanting to be here to make sure Bridget was safe and of wanting to go

down to the jail and beat the shit out of the doctor some more.

His cell phone vibrated against the kitchen table. He'd turned off the ringer because he hadn't wanted to wake Bridget. She needed sleep, and he hoped since she'd been shut away in her bedroom all day, that's exactly what she was getting.

Before he could check his phone, a noise caught his attention. He stood and listened more intently. There was the scream, the one that was achingly familiar and chilled him to the bone. He bolted down the hall and crashed through the door to Bridget's bedroom door. She thrashed on the bed, fighting an invisible foe. One quick scan reassured him no one had broken into her room. He hesitated, wondering if she'd welcome his presence, but then reacted. He slid behind her, gripped her shoulders and gave her a gentle but firm shake.

"Bridget, you're safe. Wake up. It's Zane. You're safe. Wake up, Bridget. Come on. Wake up for me."

She gradually stopped struggling, and when he saw her blink her eyes as she returned to reality, he dropped his hands and settled in front of her on the bed. He pushed her hair back from her face before he thought twice about touching her with such familiarity. She finally raised troubled eyes, and he saw the storm brewing behind the deep brown irises.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I was dreaming. I couldn't get away, and he..."

"I know. Chloe warned me you'd probably have nightmares. I'm glad you were able to get some rest before you had one."

"Is Chloe still here?" She reached for the covers to pull them up over her bare legs, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink.

“No, she had to go to work, but she said to give you her number. You can call or text her whenever you want to talk. About anything.”

She nodded. “You have nice friends.”

He wasn’t sure what to say, so he opted for a subject change. “The kids will be home soon. They’re still with Cole and Sydney. They said something about getting some ice cream before they come home.”

Her head flew up, her eyes wide. “What? What time is it?” She whipped her head around searching for something. “Where’s my phone?”

“I think your phone is in the living room. It’s three o’clock or a little after.”

“Shit! I have to be at work soon.” Bridget moved to rise, but Zane pushed her gently back down on the bed.

“No, you’re not working tonight. Payton took care of it. She has a social worker friend at the hospital. She called to explain a little of what happened. Don’t worry. She didn’t divulge too many details, but she asked her friend to explain your absence without broadcasting what happened to protect your privacy.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. I need to work. I’ve just started this job.”

“Chloe suggested it. She said you may not admit it, but you could use a night with the kids. Unfortunately, you can’t stay here.”

“What? Why? This is my home. I’m not letting what happened run me out of my home. No way.”

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“Relax, Bridget. I know. But I had to bust your door down to get inside, and we haven’t replaced it yet because we didn’t want to disturb you with the noise of installing a new one. So I’ll take you somewhere to stay for tonight, and Tristin has someone coming in later to replace the door.”

“My car,” she said as a sudden thought occurred to her. “I left it at the diner. It wouldn’t start.”

“The police found it and called me. Brick arranged for it to be taken to a repair shop.”

“I can’t afford that, Zane. You should have brought it here. Marlowe can fix it better than any repair shop.”

He gave her what he hoped was a comforting smile. “I know, but we wanted to check to make sure the doctor didn’t tamper with it to give himself an excuse to drive you home.”

She paled. “And did he?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t called to check in. There’s no need to worry though. Brick’ll take care of it and get your car back to you tomorrow. I promise.”

She took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. “Okay. I guess we can stay in a hotel. Does Grayson Cove even have one?”

He smirked. “Yes, but you’re not staying there. I have somewhere else you can stay and someone who wants all three of you to be her guests.”

She shook her head. "I'm not up to meeting new people."

"Then I guess it's good you've already met. It's my mother. She has plenty of room in her house, and she's looking forward to having you stay. She said it's her way of thanking you for taking such good care of me in the hospital."

"I can't impose on her like that. I think it's better if the kids and I spent the evening alone. I wanted them to see I'm alright."

"It's okay, Bridget. My mother would be the first to tell you there's nothing wrong with letting the kids see you're human. You can be strong and still accept help from people. There's nothing wrong with that."

She leaned back against the headboard, almost in defeat. "I know. The kids have been through so much though. I don't want to add to that."

"You haven't. None of this is your fault. I promise, you won't regret hanging out with my mom. I speak from experience when I say an evening of her home cooking and TLC is the perfect remedy for just about anything."

"Zane, um, thank you. For...you know. I don't know how you happened to be here, but I don't care. I hate to think of him hurting the kids after...he..." Tears welled up in her eyes, and she couldn't finish her sentence. But she didn't have to. Zane understood.

"You're welcome. There's no rush. Whenever you're ready, I'll take you and the kids to my mom's."

He stood and walked to the door. He glanced back, catching her gaze as she stared at him in wonder. He nodded at her and stepped out, both curious and uneasy about what she was thinking.

Chapter Seventeen

The Wilder home smelled of cookies. Each room Bridget peered in, the sweet aroma of flour and vanilla assailed her nostrils, and she was oddly comforted. Everything about the house spoke of love, from the carefully decorated rooms to the neat but lived-in feel, to the framed photos on the walls, depicting their family at various times in their lives — graduations, ball games, dance recitals, holidays, or even a random Tuesday. Family was important here, and Bridget felt a longing to linger.

Even knowing she should search out her kids to check on them, she tarried in the hallway outside the guest room she'd been given. Her eyes focused on the photo encased in a simple eight-by-ten frame. It was a family photo, but not one she expected to see. No one was looking into the camera. No one wore the forced cheesy smiles that presented a false sense of happiness and perfection. Their clothes weren't smooth and clean and in place, and their hair wasn't perfectly combed and styled.

She smiled as she read the frustration on the parents' faces. They twisted in their seats on the front steps of the house, trying to reach their children. The mom's hair was rumpled, the father's thinning strands stood on end. The baby in the mother's lap cried, his face bright red with his displeasure, and he had spit up on his clothes. The three young girls who stood behind their parents were like doorsteps with their size, but the resemblance in their angelic faces and dark hair was strong. The tallest extended her bottom lip in a perfect pout, her little arms crossed defiantly over her chest. The one next to her had pulled the bow from her hair, the dark locks falling onto her face, and she had her dress lifted to yank at the white tights she wore with obvious displeasure. The little girl on the other end made a silly face at the camera, and Bridget could almost hear her taunting the photographer until he snapped the photo of the chaotic moment.

Bridget turned when she heard a soft laugh behind her. Maggie Wilder stepped up, her eyes trained on the photo.

“So much went wrong that day. The photographer was a friend of my husband’s, and he offered to take a portrait of our family as a gift. I was so excited. I planned every detail, how we’d pose, what we would wear. I had a vision of us taking the kind of family portrait you would see in a magazine. But Zane spit up on his clothes more than once, so there was no hope of him wearing the outfit I’d chosen. David wasn’t feeling well. He was running a fever when we took the photo. I wanted to cancel it, but he’d insisted we go through with it.

“And then my girls. Zoe was mad because she couldn’t wear the dress she wanted to wear. Zaylee was upset because she wanted to sit in my lap, but I insisted she stand with her sisters while I held her brother. And Zaida. She wanted to play down by the creek instead of getting dressed up for some dumb picture as she called it. We managed to get a few perfect poses out of everyone, but overall, I was so disappointed the day hadn’t gone the way I pictured.”

Bridget glanced at her, bewildered. “If you had other poses to choose from, why did you frame this one?”

A wistful smile graced her lips, giving Maggie a youthful glow. “Later that night, David’s fever was gone, and he was feeling better. Zane took his evening bottle and didn’t spit it up. The girls were happy again and wanting to catch lightning bugs. So we went back out to the porch. David wrapped his arms around me as we sat on those same steps. Zane was asleep in my lap. The air was warm but not humid. The night was lit up by the prettiest moon I’d ever seen and by what felt like millions of lightning bugs. The girls chased them around the yard, helping each other catch them in jars. And for the first time all day, I felt like everything was perfect. That’s when David reminded me that forcing our family to be who they aren’t will never work the way we want. But the moment we let go of our expectations and let everyone be their true selves, that’s when we found peace. I chose this picture because it was the real depiction of that day. It reminds me of how unique our family is and of how chaos can lead to some amazing memories.”

“That’s beautiful.” Bridget’s voice was low as she felt her emotions rise to the surface. She had been on the verge of tears every waking moment since that morning, and feeling like she gave her niece and nephew painful memories made her more emotional.

Maggie seemed to snap herself out of her reminiscing, and she turned to Bridget with a wide smile. “How is your room? Is there anything you need?”

Bridget shook her head. “No, everything’s great. Thank you. I’m sorry we’ve invaded your home without any notice.”

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“It’s no intrusion. I’m happy to have you. Mathias and Marlowe are in the kitchen with a snack. Just some fruit and cheese, nothing that will spoil their dinner. They are so sweet, very polite and friendly. And their names! I love Mathias and Marlowe. So unique, and they suit their personalities.”

Maggie’s enthusiasm washed over Bridget like a healing balm. “My sister chose them. She saw them in a book she read in high school and knew then those were the names she would have for her children. You two would have definitely bonded over your love for unusual names.”

Maggie laughed. “Oh, I didn’t choose their names. David did. He liked the idea of having all of their first names start with the same letter. When I was pregnant with Zoe, I shared with him every name I loved, and he rejected every single one. I went to the hospital in labor without a name for my baby. On a whim, David put the baby name book in my overnight bag when we brought it to the hospital.

“The moment he laid eyes on Zoe, he was in love. While I slept, he sat in my room and held her for hours. The nurses told him he was going to spoil her, but he didn’t care. He told me he stayed up the entire night and read every name in the book to her, and he swears when he said the name Zoe, she opened her eyes wide and stared at him with such love, he knew that was the name she liked. I believe he was sleep deprived, but it makes for a nice story.”

“Do they all have stories like that?”

“No. As you can imagine, outside of Zoe, there aren’t many names which begin with Z that are common. David was determined, though, and researched for as many

names as he could find. I can't say I minded the ones he chose."

"He sounds like a wonderful man."

"He was very special." Maggie's eyes softened, and she seemed lost somewhere in her memories. Bridget felt like an intruder, stumbling into a private moment she was unaware of.

"I, uh, I should go and check on Mat and Lowe."

"Of course, but I promise you they're doing fine. If you want to take a minute to yourself, I can keep them occupied. They can help me finish with dinner."

"I should be with them. They're probably worried about me, and I want them to know I'm okay."

Maggie's gaze intensified as she watched Bridget closely. "Are you? Okay? I don't know that I would be."

"I have to be." Bridget surprised herself with the admission. Something about Maggie had her letting her guard down.

"Not here you don't. Here, you feel what you need to feel. If you want to go into the bedroom and sob or throw things or punch the wall or scream into pillows, then you do that. Do all of it if it's what you need."

The tears reappeared, pricking the back of her eyes, and Bridget blinked them away. "I don't have the luxury of falling apart or being a mess."

"It's not a luxury, sweetheart. Sometimes it's a necessity for us to pick ourselves up and carry on."

“How much has your son shared with you about my situation?”

Maggie’s demeanor never wavered. Bridget saw her acceptance and compassion in the gentle set of her face, the softening of her eyes and the motherly way she stood, as if ready to embrace Bridget at a moment’s notice.

“Not much. He shared with me a bit about what happened this morning, so I’d know why you needed a place to stay, but that’s all. We’ve learned not to ask questions when it comes to his job, but I don’t need details to offer to help a friend. I hope we can be friends and that you can find friendship with my girls. You don’t have to share a single thing with any of us for the offer to stand.”

The tears fell then. Maggie lightly gripped Bridget’s arm and shepherded her into the guest room. She gently pushed Bridget to sit on an accent chair. Bridget swiped the moisture from her face as Maggie disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. Once she returned with tissue which she passed off to Bridget, she settled on the edge of the bed. The two sat without talking, the sound of Bridget’s sniffles the only noise breaking the silence. Bridget was thankful Maggie didn’t feel the need to fill the quiet with platitudes like “it’s all going to be okay” because they both recognized them for the empty promises they would be.

Bridget felt compelled to share more with Maggie, as if her kindness deserved an explanation. “I’m under a microscope. Mathias and Marlowe’s grandparents have hired some shady people to prove I’m an unfit guardian, so they can fight for custody. I feel so stupid. I agreed to go on the breakfast date with Seth because I thought he would be above reproach. My dating a doctor would prove I’d changed from the woman who liked to go to nightclubs and dance with strange men until the sun came up. Instead I gave them ammunition to use against me. They can use it to prove my judgment can’t be trusted.”

“That’s ridiculous. He assaulted you in your own home. Nothing about that is your

fault, and it doesn't prove you make poor decisions."

Bridget sighed. "He should never have been at my house. My kids were there. If Zane hadn't shown up, I hate to think..."

"Don't do that. You can play the 'what if' game. What would have happened is irrelevant. What did happen is not your fault. I can't understand why their grandparents would go to so much trouble to prove that it was. They should be helping you, not working against you."

"They're grieving for their son. They never approved of my sister and our family. They acted like we were beneath them. They love Mathias and how much he's like his father. But Marlowe makes them uncomfortable. It's why Dean and Jennifer didn't appoint them as the kids' guardians. They wanted someone who would love the children for who they are and support them."

Maggie's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "She makes them uncomfortable? I have never heard anything so...so...so crazy!"

Bridget smiled through her tears. "I think so too. Marlowe lives inside her brain. She reads all the time and is always wanting to learn new things. She studies things by taking them apart to see how they run and then puts them back together. She tested at a genius level, but she doesn't judge the people in her life if they aren't as smart as she is. She views everyone and everything as something new to learn. Of course, with her big brain comes a lack of social skills, so I think it created a disconnect between her and the Williams'. They've never understood how to act around her."

"Her parents embraced her intelligence and curiosity, didn't they? And you have, too. I think that's wonderful. I could tell she was special, but I had no idea how much. She is a lovely girl. I can't imagine anyone not loving her and her big brain."

Bridget was surprised when the laugh escaped her throat, but Maggie's acceptance of her niece chased away her melancholy. "I think they love her. They aren't sure how to be around her. Their plan was to send her to a boarding school to mold her into a well-rounded young lady. Their words, not mine. Then Mathias would stay here and become a stand-in for the son they loved and lost. I don't even know if they realize what they're doing. Mathias is a lot like Dean, but he's his own person. And Marlowe is so fun and gives a whole new perspective on life. She views life in a way that's so different from the rest of us. It's refreshing."

Maggie moved to kneel in front of Bridget. She grasped Bridget's hands between her own and stared into her face with a smile as comforting as an embrace from her mother. "As one single mother to another, I can tell you that you'll make mistakes. You'll never make the right decisions every time. It's okay because you love Mathias and Marlowe for who they are. You support them and encourage them and give them wings to be the people they are meant to be. It makes all the difference in the world."

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Bridget lifted her eyes, struggling to regain her composure. The moment was suddenly overwhelming with Maggie saying the exact words she needed to hear.

“Damn. Your son said hanging out with you would be what I needed, and I hate to admit he’s right,” Bridget said.

Maggie laughed. “I won’t tell him if you don’t.”

Maggie squeezed Bridget’s hands and released them as she stood. “Take some more time to yourself. I’ll send the kids for you when dinner is ready.”

Bridget didn’t protest or insist she check on the kids herself. She allowed herself a moment alone in the stillness of the guest room. Her tears flowed unchecked, her hands shaking from the intensity of her thoughts and memories. That morning replayed in her head on a loop, and though she knew she wasn’t to blame, she allowed herself to wallow in her own regret and shame, letting the negative emotions well up within her and escape through her tears.

???

Zane’s eyes scanned the neighborhood, resting on every lawn, house and vehicle on the quiet street. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. People arrived home from work or took their dogs for an evening walk or watered their lawn — all ritual tasks which defined their everyday lives. Everything so routine that if something was out of place, he would be able to spot it. Other than the car parked on the opposite side of the street, with KSI Investigator Sam Montgomery sitting behind the driver’s seat, all was calm.

So why did creepy fingers of unease tickle up and down his neck? Why did his stomach churn with the notion they were missing something? And was that something having to do with Bridget and her case, Bridget and her attack, or the De la Peña case? He didn't think his gut would be sending him signals about anything other than those three.

His phone buzzed. With one last glance around him and a wave to Sam to let him know all was alright, he answered the call. He didn't have to glance at the screen to know it was Jay checking in.

"They okay?"

Zane released a long breath. "Yeah. My mom has Bridget settled in the guest room. Mom said she needed a few minutes to herself, but she was fine. Mom put the kids to work in the kitchen. Sam's at his post, but I'll probably stay here tonight as back-up."

"You feel it too."

He started pacing, relieved his team leader shared his unease. "Something's off. I'm not sure what, but there's something brewing. I can't figure out if it has to do with Bridget or something else."

"It's the doctor. I had Gennessey and Isobel go to the hospital today to check him out. He's a dick, but his reputation is solid. One of the best surgeons in the state. A big donor to a lot of local charities. A bit of a player who dips his toe in the BDSM scene on occasion. But nothing in his background points to him being a rapist."

"I heard her scream. I saw him pin her against the wall. She told him no, and still he touched her. I don't care if no one has come forward about it before. He's a rapist."

"I believe you. If he's done this before, he was careful enough to choose victims who

wouldn't come forward. So why Bridget? What was it about her which made him take such a risk? I mean, he had ample opportunity to take advantage of her before he got her home. Why wait until he had her in her house with her niece and nephew in the next room?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm spit balling. But admit it. I haven't said anything you hadn't already been thinking."

Zane ran his free hand through his hair. "So you think this warrants an independent investigation? Is the Sheriff's Office going to be open to that?"

"I'm saying right now we keep a protective detail on Bridget and the kids. The doctor has the means to make bail, and with no priors and a solid reputation, bail will be set, I'm sure."

"You think the SOB will try again?"

"Don't know. But if there was something about Bridget which made this guy act out of character enough to commit a crime, then I think it's a safe bet to assume he won't stop until he gets to her. I talked to Brick, and he's upgrading security at their house. He's installing video cameras outside and in common areas in the house. The feed will be piped to the command center, and Kat has it rigged to alert the investigator on duty of any breach at their house. Tristin has authorized overtime for the investigators, so someone is with them all the time. Since Alpha is still working the De la Peña case, Tristin has Delta on standby to provide back-up to the investigators and to Alpha. Whatever's needed."

"Thanks, man. I—"

The door creaked open, and Zane turned to see Bridget stepping out of the house.

“Zane, I just remembered...” She paused mid-step when she saw he was on the phone.

She seemed almost disappointed to find him occupied, and then he noted the urgency in her eyes.

“Hey, Jay. Let me call you back.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly as he watched Bridget shift her weight nervously from one foot to the other. “Stand down for now. I’ll brief you when I figure it out.”

“Copy.” Jay hung up without another word, and Zane replaced his phone in his jeans pocket.

“Bridget, what’s—”

“I just remembered,” she blurted. “I should have told the police, but with everything that happened, I didn’t think. It didn’t make sense at the time, and I don’t know if it will help now.”

He placed his hands on her upper arms, halting her rush of words. He waited for her wide eyes to meet his.

“Slow down and tell me what you’re talking about.”

“When...when Seth had me pinned...you know, against the wall...” Her throat flexed as she swallowed.

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

She nodded. “He told me...you know, what he was going to do. I told him I...didn’t want to. He said for me to stop pretending. He said he heard I liked it rough. He said he heard it. Like someone told him. Who would tell him something like that?”

“You’re sure those are the words he used?”

“Yes. He acted like I wanted him to...to...hurt me. And that I wanted it...with...the kids there.”

She watched him, forlorn to have to recall what happened but desperate for him to understand why she thought the information was important. He smiled gently,

running his hands up and down her arms in what he hoped was a calming gesture.

“I get it. I understand, and I agree. It’s important. You did good, Bridge. You’re amazing.”

Then he acted without thought, giving in to his urge before he thought better of it. He gently pulled her toward him and wrapped his arms around her. He held her close, her head resting against his chest, but he left room for her to pull away if she wanted to. His heart pounded when she wrapped her arms around his waist and held on.

“You did good, baby. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure this SOB doesn’t come near you or the kids ever again. I promise you. I never break a promise.”

Chapter Eighteen

Zane expected to be sore after his tangle with the doctor so soon after his release from the hospital. Instead, he strode across the lobby of Knight Security and Investigations without a stitch in his side or a hitch in his gait. The hour was late, requiring him to use his keycard for entry into the building. Jordan had already gone home, leaving the security desk unoccupied.

He took the elevator up to the second floor, impatiently waiting for the doors to open with a soft swoosh. His quick stride took him down the hallway toward the war room – a conference room equipped with everything needed for them to strategize an operation. The door was open, but there was no concern of someone uninvited walking in or of someone hearing conversations they weren’t privy to. KSI was closed, so only Tristin, Kat and the Alpha Team assembled in the room.

Zane settled in the first empty chair he came to, his eyes sweeping the room to note the person they waited for was Brennan Bennett, or BB as he was usually called. The youngest of their five-member team, BB was also known as the communications

expert and their tech guru in the field. Zane wasn't sure what was holding the other man up, but he decided they could start without him.

“What’s going on?”

“Kat, while we’re waiting for BB, fill Zane and the guys in on the lead you and Sydney found in Bridget’s case.” Tristin nodded for his wife to continue.

“I think Bridget was set up by someone to be attacked by Seth Masters, and I think Seth Masters was set up by someone to make the attack.”

Zane sat very still, his arms propped on the top of the conference table. Then he sat back in his chair far enough to make the mechanism creak under his weight. His anger started small as he registered what Kat was telling him, but then it grew into a ball of white-hot fire bouncing around inside him, setting his blood aflame.

“What. The. Hell.” His voice exploded in the room, echoing down the empty hallway.

“Stand down.” Jay was brusque in his command, but Zane responded as his military training dictated. He swallowed his anger and waited for Kat to continue.

“When Brick was installing the security cameras at Bridget’s house, he found a camera in the living room which wasn’t connected to her security system. It was pointed to the front door and was recording everything that happened in the front entryway. The footage was being sent using Bridget’s home WiFi connection to an off-site recorder. Usually this type of system can be accessed remotely from any device with the right system login.”

“Someone’s been watching her?” Zane slammed his fists against the table, unable to get a handle on his reactions.

“Brick did a thorough search of the house, inside and out. It’s clean except for the one living room and one on a nearby tree which provided a perfect view of the front porch.”

“So somewhere there’s footage incriminating Masters.”

“The thing is the recording is video, no sound. Depending on the angle, it could very well seem like Bridget came home from a date and was engaging in consensual rough sex. It could give the impression you were a jealous boyfriend who busted in to break it up,” Jay explained.

“No way in hell!” Zane exploded. “If the camera got a good shot of Bridget’s face, no way would anyone see her expression as anything but fear. I was there! I saw it.”

“The point is, without the footage, we just don’t know,” Kat continued gently. “I tried to trace the location of the receiver, but I couldn’t get closer than a fifty-mile radius. The signal bounced off a couple of towers to make it harder to track. So then I moved on to Seth Masters.”

“What do you mean?” Zane asked.

“I did a deep dive into his life. I searched for anything which would establish a pattern of behavior to help strengthen Bridget’s case against him. I checked to see if he might be the one who planted the camera in her home. Both were dead ends, but the deep dive into his financials wasn’t. As you can guess, he does pretty well for himself, but he received a sizeable deposit to his account from a law firm located in the Atlanta, Georgia, area. We’re talking fifty thousand dollars. The kicker is his account received the same amount in a transfer made this morning. Basically this law firm has paid the good doctor one hundred thousand dollars within the span of a few weeks. The first one came two days after Oran and Ivy Williams issued a payment to put Tarrant Security on retainer.”

Zane’s jaw dropped. “You connected Seth Masters to Tarrant Security? You think he forced himself on Bridget so they could get video evidence to support the Williams’ case against Bridget? Holy. Shit.”

“Not me. I didn’t think Tarrant would go so far to make a case. Jay’s the one who had me check for a possible connection.”

“I even called the arresting deputy and had him ask Masters a couple of questions,” Jay spoke up. “He’s hiding behind his lawyer. I thought if he knew we were in on the set-up, he would throw Tarrant under the bus, but he’s not talking. I’ve never known Tarrant to go to such extremes for a case. It has me worried about what else they have planned.”

“But this could be what we need to shut them down for good.”

Jay shrugged. “Not without more evidence. Everything we have is circumstantial.”

Zane opened his mouth to protest when BB breezed into the room with his laptop in hand.

“Sorry, I’m late, but I’ve got everything cued up whenever you want to get started.”

With his mind still reeling with the information on Bridget’s case, Zane stared at BB.

“Good,” Jay said, addressing everyone in the room as he continued. “We have Bridget and the kids covered for now. The reason I called everyone here though is because of the De la Peñas.”

Zane started to rise. “Guess that’s my cue to get lost, right?”

Tristin shot him a withering glare. “Not this time. Sit.”

“You’re looping me in? Why now when you’ve had me benched this whole time?”

“Because Cane Black received a phone call and voicemail on his burner cell.”

Zane fell back into his chair. “From who?”

Jay nodded at BB. He pulled up his laptop, used his finger to move the cursor on the touch pad, and hit the return key. Zane stared at a random spot on the table as he listened to the voice coming over the laptop’s speakers.

“Black. Look, man, I know I’m the last one you expect to call, but we need to meet. Believe me, you want to hear what I have to say. Call me, man.”

“Thumper.” Zane knew his voice anywhere. The rotund enforcer had a hesitant

quality to his voice which disappeared when he was conducting business for the boss. Some might mistake it for fear or insecurity. Zane knew it to be a front, causing Thumper's targets to let their guard down and give him an advantage.

"I've got a trace on the phone. You should call him back and see what he wants."

BB passed the phone to him. He stared at it for several seconds, and then he pressed the redial button. The persistent ringing grated on his nerves, and he started drumming his fingers against the table. He was ready to end the call when Thumper finally answered, sounding out of breath and panicked.

"Black. Where are you? You just disappeared."

"You left me for dead."

"That was Singer, not me. He figured you probably died, but I knew you were still out there somewhere. You're a tough son of a bitch."

Black's persona slipped over him, and he scowled. "What do you want?"

"Not on the phone, man. It's not safe."

"There's a scar on my abs that says it's not safe to meet you face-to-face either."

"I told you, man. That was Singer, not me."

Zane stayed silent, aware his teammates' eyes were trained on him. Black was a man of few words, and Zane knew the longer he waited, the more Thumper would babble, giving BB time to run the trace.

"Meet me. Tomorrow night. The usual place."

“Tonight,” Zane countered.

“It’s not safe, man. I’m not with Singer or the rest of them anymore. It’s not safe. For me or for you either. Once you hear what’s going on, you’ll want to work together. But we have to be careful. If they find out what we’re doing, we’re all dead.”

Zane had no idea what Thumper talked about, and his expression communicated as much to his team. “Why should I trust you?”

“Believe it or not, I’m the only one you can trust. Tomorrow night. Midnight. Usual place. Say you’ll be there.”

Zane hesitated, drawing out the suspense so Thumper was effectively on edge. “Tomorrow night. Midnight. But I’ll send you the meet location.”

“But—”

“It’s my terms, or nothing.”

BB nodded, and Zane ended the call without another word.

“He’s calling from the warehouse.” BB appeared as confused as Zane felt.

“The same warehouse where they confronted Zane?” Tristin moved to stand behind BB and study the laptop screen.

“Yeah. Or somewhere close by.”

Wings swiveled his chair to face Zane. “Where’s the usual place?”

“A loading dock down at the edge of the industrial park. Cell reception is spotty at best. It’s easy to escape by boat, and there aren’t many hiding places for snipers or cops to ambush. It was Elian’s favorite place to schedule meets. Armando preferred more public settings where it would be too obvious if someone tried anything funny.”

“I smell a set-up.” Wings’ voice boomed even when the big man wasn’t trying to be heard.

“Smart move insisting on a new location,” Cole praised. “So what’s the plan?”

“I have to go through with the meet. At least see what he wants. He could be trying to recruit me to help with his revenge plan. I’m curious to know why he’s meeting with me without Singer.”

“So we set up a meet at the abandoned sock mill, right at the edge of town.” Jay started to pace, something he did when he strategized. “Plenty of hiding places, but easy for us to wire. We can monitor the place, lay out traps to catch them if they try something.”

Tristin nodded. “Of course. It’s perfect. You meet with Thumper. If it’s a set-up, we take him down. If it’s not, we listen to what he has to say. Either way, we use him to regain an advantage against De la Peña.”

Jay caught Zane’s attention. “You up for this?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I can do this.”

“Take back-up.” Cole’s suggestion took everyone by surprise, and all eyes whipped over to stare at him. “The last time you met with them, they stabbed you. They can’t

be surprised if you don't come alone. Take Wings. One look at him, and no one's asking any questions."

"I think I'm supposed to be offended by that, but he's right. He won't suspect we have others stationed around the perimeter."

"Yeah, fine." Zane could see from his teammates' expressions that it was useless to protest. "I'll text him the location later tomorrow after we've had a chance to scope out the location and get our strategy in place."

"We'll regroup in the morning. Everybody rest up. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Zane didn't linger after Jay's dismissal. He felt too keyed up to hang around, so he climbed into his truck and drove with no destination in mind. He was always hyper alert before an operation, but this was different. He thought he might jump out of his skin, and his mind ran through scenario after scenario, considering every possibility for failure. He had to prepare for every contingency.

This was his chance to close this case. Failure couldn't happen.

Chapter Nineteen

Bridget jerked, her feet slipping out from underneath her and landing on the patio's tile floor. Her eyes flew open, and her heart pounded against her ribs. Whipping her head around, she felt another jolt to her system to discover a shadowy figure standing between her and the glass doors leading inside the Wilder home.

"What are you doing out here by yourself?"

Hearing Zane's voice had her sighing in relief. "You scared me, sneaking up like

that.”

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He chuckled as he moved to sit in the patio chair beside her. “I wasn’t sneaking. You were asleep. How long have you been out here?”

“What time is it now?”

“Almost midnight. Are you alright?”

She settled back in her chair, crossing her arms over her middle. She stared into the darkness, picturing the pretty lawn, sprawling shade trees and rose bushes which released a delightful scent on the night air.

“I’m fine. I was too keyed up to sleep. I came out here so I wouldn’t bother anyone. It’s so peaceful out here. I guess it lulled me to sleep.”

Zane leaned forward, propping his arms on his thighs. “It’s not safe for you to be out here like this. Especially when Sam thinks you’re inside fast asleep.”

She sat up straighter. “Is Seth out of jail? How does he even know I’m here?”

He reached out to cover her hand with his. “Relax. I didn’t say that to scare you. I want you to be careful.”

She stared down at their joined hands, the warmth from his palm radiating up her arm. “Is he out of jail?”

He withdrew his hand, and she bit back a protest. She enjoyed his touch too much to want him to stop, even though it probably wasn’t a good idea. She was a client of his.

They were alone on his mother's patio. Her niece and nephew were just inside. Nothing about this was a good idea, but a part of her wanted to indulge in the comfort he offered.

"He made bail."

"Well, we knew it would probably happen. Do you think he'll show back up at my place?"

"He would be stupid to do that, but we've upgraded your security. If you're afraid to go home, you're welcome to stay here as long as you need."

She stood and moved to the edge of the patio. She was amazed at how tempting his offer was. She'd fallen in love with his childhood home and his mother. Maggie even put Mathias and Marlowe at ease, keeping them laughing and smiling while they helped her with dinner preparations. Their little family felt whole for the first time since Jennifer and Dean's death.

"I can't stay. That house is our home, and I can't allow him to run us out. I just hate to leave Marlowe and Mathias there alone while I'm back at work tomorrow."

She sensed rather than heard him move. When she felt the heat from his body, she realized all she had to do was turn in place and be close enough to fall into his arms. What she couldn't figure out was why she suddenly wanted to.

"I don't know if I like the idea of you going back to work."

She did turn around at this, and though her breath caught at the impact of his proximity, she forced herself to focus more on the conversation than on how good he smelled, all woodsy and masculine.

“I have to go to work. I need this job.”

“And if he’s there?”

“Then I hope he doesn’t try to seek me out. He works on a different floor than I do, so there shouldn’t be any reason for our paths to cross. I’ll be careful.”

He ran the back of his index finger down her cheek, reaching to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I’ll have an investigator there with you. If he makes a move, someone will be there to intervene.”

“I’d rather the investigator watch my kids.”

His hand trailed down her arm, causing goose bumps to pop up on her skin. “We have more than one. I’ll make sure you and the kids both are protected.”

“You can’t watch out for us forever. Eventually, we have to go back to our life with just me and the kids.”

He dipped his head, his breath caressing her skin. “Nah. It’s not just you and the kids. You have friends now, Bridget. You can call on us. You don’t have to do it all on your own.”

“Why?” she whispered. “Why would you do any of this for us? For me?”

“It’s what friends do. Besides it’s what we do.”

“I don’t want to be some damsel in distress for you to rescue. If that’s all I am, then I’d rather do this alone. I couldn’t pay you, and I won’t be a charity case. But if what you said is true, then I can definitely use a friend.”

He held her hand loosely, and she could almost see a teasing smile curving his lips.
“Do I treat you like a damsel in distress?”

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She stepped back, gently pulling her hand from his. “You can’t seem to help yourself. You’re a protector, Zane. It’s what drew you to Sydney, isn’t it?”

“What are you asking?”

Even though they were cloaked in shadows, she couldn’t face him anymore. She brushed passed him to put distance between them.

“I guess I’m wanting to know if I’m a substitute for the one you can’t have.”

“Why do you think Sydney is the one I want? She’s with Cole. They’re going to be married soon, and I’m giving her away.”

Bridget rolled her eyes enough to cause a twinge of a headache. Men! They could be so clueless at times. She whirled around, her hand swiping at the hair slapping her face.

“I’ve seen how you look at her. She is who you want, but she doesn’t need to be rescued anymore. So you’ve moved on to me. I’m not a replacement. I don’t need to be some sort of ego boost or distraction. I don’t need things to be more complicated than they already are.”

“What do you want me to say?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. The truth, I guess. Why are you so willing to help me?”

She held her breath as he moved toward her, his strides purposeful and slow like a

jungle cat stalking its prey. He stood in front of her, and she swore the heat from his gaze seared through her clothes to brand her skin. Silence stretched between them so thick she felt her lungs struggle to draw in a breath. She wished she could see his expression or his eyes to guess what he was thinking. Was he aware of the zing of electricity coursing through her veins when he was close? Did he know the effect his intense eyes had on her body, making her aware of every masculine part of him?

What would he do if she gave into the urge to touch him? Her fingers could sneak under the hem of his T-shirt and stroke the hard plane of his abs, and if he didn't push her away, she could allow her lips to follow the trail. She swallowed the wave of saliva suddenly filling her mouth.

"I like you." Zane's voice carried softly on the night air, tickling her ears with the gentle vibrato. "I like how you care for other people. I like how you would fight to the death to protect your kids. You are full of sass and spunk, and all in a petite package. You...intrigue me. More than anyone I have ever met."

He stepped even closer, though their bodies didn't touch. "You claim I am using you to forget the one I can't have. You think I consider you a distraction. Well, you are a distraction, but you are not a replacement. You distract me from the bad things I have to deal with as part of my job. You keep me from being so wrapped up in my own stuff that I miss out on things like laughter or good conversation or being with someone because I want to and not because I'm paid to."

"Y-you want to be with me?"

"Yes, and that's why you're a complication for me, too."

"So what do we do?"

"We could ignore it. Just be friends and pretend there's not something else going on."

“We could.” She drew the words out slowly, silently praying this was not what he wanted. Remaining friends was the easiest and probably the smartest choice, but everything within her screamed against being placed in the friend zone.

“Or we could do what I’ve been wanting to do since the barbecue.”

Bridget could almost hear her nerve endings humming. Fear threatened to choke her, preventing her from asking what she desperately wanted to ask. What if the answer wasn’t what she hoped? She could be humiliated for taking a risk, but Bridget had never been one to back down in the face of fear.

“What is it?”

She spoke too low, so she wasn’t sure he heard her. She swallowed and opened her mouth to try again. He immediately placed a rough palm over her mouth, his touch light but enough for her to understand. She was quiet as she waited. Once he saw he had her attention, he moved his hands to cradle her face between his palms. His thumbs lightly caressed her cheeks. She closed her eyes as waves of pleasure swept through her. Damn, it’d been too long since she’d been with a man if such a simple touch turned her to mush.

“To kiss you. Not one of those short, sweet kisses that men and women have after a first date, when they barely know each other. It’s the kind of kiss we should have, but it’s not the kind I want.”

“What do you want?” Her words came out stronger, bolder, and her head tilted toward his touch.

“To kiss you the way you deserved to be kissed. With all the heat and desire we’ve been fighting since I was in the hospital.”

The sass he had talked about chose this moment to appear, from where she had no idea because her mind had short-circuited the minute he said he wanted to kiss her. She pulled his hands from her face but didn't release them.

"Don't flatter yourself, Mr. Wilder. The only thing I was fighting when you were my patient was the urge to slap you when you got too nosy."

He chuckled. "Okay. Maybe the desire was all mine, but it doesn't change a thing. I want to kiss you until we both forget our names and all of the stress and problems in our lives. I want to forget everything but how it feels to hold you. And how it feels to taste you. And how it feels to touch every inch of you."

"So what's stopping you?"

He lowered his head, and she released his hands so her arms could snake around his neck. How could his lips be soft and strong at the same time? She'd had a feeling this man would know how to kiss, but she had underestimated him. He didn't just know how to kiss. He knew how to possess. She was his the minute his tongue slid between her lips and tangled with hers. One hand moved to the back of her head. His fingers buried into the short strands of her hair and angled her head to give him better access to her mouth.

Bridget was lost.

His kiss gave her life and robbed her of breath, making her dizzy. She felt her knees start to buckle, but then his arms encircled her waist, pulling her up until she stood on her toes. Their bodies were flush together. He felt right, all hard planes and rippling muscles and soft lips and talented tongue which made her feel like she was burning from the inside out.

He released her mouth, but his lips trailed a path along her jawline to her neck, where he nipped and nuzzled at the sensitive spot where her pulse raced.

“We can’t,” she whispered despite the fact she hoped he wouldn’t stop.

But the kisses did stop though he didn’t release her. He lowered his head until their foreheads touched, and she closed her eyes to imprint the memory on her brain for the future nights she would spend alone.

“I know,” he agreed, and disappointment coursed through her. “I feel like I’m back in high school trying to sneak a girl into the house without my mother finding out.”

She giggled, the sound coming out husky as she fought to catch her breath. “It could be worse. You could have two teenagers you need to set a good example for asleep inside while you’re making out with someone outside.”

He kissed her lips gently, lingering a moment longer than necessary. She felt a thrill in her stomach as need pooled between her legs. Then he pulled away, stepping back a couple of paces.

“I’m, uh, I’m sorry if it seemed like I was taking advantage. I mean, after all that’s happened.”

“Please, don’t. I wanted this as much as you. I wanted to forget everything and do something for myself. I haven’t allowed myself to do that in a while. Well, with the exception of...you know.”

“I’m sorry. That you had to go through it. I hope you know we’ll keep you and the kids safe from him. You won’t have to worry.”

She smiled. “I know. Thank you.”

The moment grew awkward, and Bridget finally put them out of their misery. “I should go on to bed.”

“Goodnight, Bridget.”

“Goodnight.” She turned to head to the glass doors, the sight of the dark, quiet house beckoning her inside. Feeling a bit like she was emerging from a fantasy world she didn’t want to leave, her steps faltered to a halt. She warred with herself. She left her impulsive nature behind when she became a guardian, but she missed that part of herself, the one who made spontaneous choices with little concern for the consequences.

Her mind made up, she turned and marched straight to Zane, grateful his face was hidden in shadows. Her hands landed on her hips, her neck bending back enough for her to stare at him.

“It’s just for tonight, just one time. I’m guessing that’s all either of us can handle right now, but I get the feeling we both need it. God knows it’s been way too long for me.”

She grabbed his hand and turned to march into the house, dragging him behind her. Since he allowed himself to be easily led, she knew she was right that he wanted this as much as she did. She released his hand long enough for him to secure the door behind them. Then she snagged his hand again and led him quietly to the guest room. She breathed a quiet sigh of relief when they didn't encounter anyone along the way. She crossed the room while he closed and locked the door behind them. When he flicked on the light, she whirled around.

“Strip. Slowly because I want to take my time and enjoy the show. And remember to be quiet about it.”

His responding grin was probably the sexiest thing she'd seen in a long time. His hand reached up and behind his head, snagging the collar of his T-shirt and dragging it up and off in one smooth motion. Bridget's teeth snagged her bottom lip as her eyes drank in his broad shoulders, firm pecs and impressive abs. His jeans hung low on his hips, hinting at the erotic V disappearing below the waistband. His skin was smooth and tanned, and her fingers twitched with the urge to touch him. All in due time, she thought as a delicious thrill tickled her spine.

“Like what you see?” His smugness should have turned her off, but instead his body was doing fantastic things to her libido.

“I need to see more. Keep going, Houdini, before I lose interest.”

His movements were excruciatingly slow, but her skin was aflame as she took in every nuance. The tilt of his head, the curl of his lips, the flick of his fingers as he undid the button of his jeans, the rasp of the zipper as he dragged it down. Her mouth went dry, and her tongue snaked out to lick her lips. He used the toe of one foot to kick off his boot, repeating the gesture with the other boot. He toed off his socks next. Then he shoved his jeans over lean hips, stepped out of them and kicked them to the side.

The person who invented boxer briefs was both a genius and masochist. The way the stretchy fabric molded to his muscular legs and showcased his package drove her mad. Her nostrils flared and her breath quickened. He turned his back to her, and she enjoyed a whole new view of his broad shoulders and firm ass. When he shoved his briefs down and kicked them to the side, Bridget's blood roared in her ears, and she felt dizzy.

His body was gorgeous, perfectly proportioned and well-muscled from hours spent pushing it to its limits. He was built for strength and endurance. She was ready to make the most of it.

Zane turned around, and Bridget looked her fill. Everything about him stirred naughty thoughts, but when he approached her, his strides long and languid, every one of those thoughts evaporated. He invaded her space, snaking a hand to cradle the back of her head. He planted a quick kiss on her lips which devastated her with its heat and intensity. His finger then lightly traced the outer shell of her ear, down her throat to stop at the neckline of her shirt right above her cleavage.

“It's your turn.”

Her hands landed on his pecs, caressing the smooth skin. Her thumbs and forefingers latched onto his nipples and rolled them into tight nubs. She watched his eyes darken to a midnight blue, loving the way she could affect him. Her mouth closed over one nipple, her tongue laving the sensitive nub before her teeth nipped at it. A groan escaped his lips, and she felt it all the way to her lady bits. His hands landed on her waist, and when she felt them start to lift her shirt, she pulled away.

“So here's the thing. There was a point in my life when I spent a lot of time on my appearance. I took care of things so when I invited a man into my bed, I was waxed, buffed and toned to impress. Now, thanks to all the runs I join my nephew on, I'm not exactly a pile of mush, but I don't exactly put a lot of emphasis on my appearance

these days, if you get what I'm saying. So if you're someone who gets hung up on that, then maybe we skip the striptease, cut the lights and concentrate on the sex."

A devilish gleam sparked in his eyes. His hands returned to her waist and continued their ascent up her sides, taking her shirt with them. She raised her arms to allow him to lift her shirt up and off, tossing it to the floor to land on top of his jeans. He reached behind her back, releasing the clasp of her simple bra. With a light touch, he pushed the straps from her shoulders and down her arm until the bra fell to her feet. Then he stared as her breasts bounced against her chest, free from their confinement.

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“Perfect,” he muttered, his voice husky and rough and sexy as hell.

Her nipples tightened as the cool air of the room touched them. He weighed her breasts in his hands and dipped his head. His lips pulled a nipple into his mouth, lightly nipping and sucking at the sensitive nub until she moaned in response. His hand kneaded her other breast, his rough palms tantalizing the other nipple, causing her to squirm. He swapped breasts, and the sensations were swirling within her body, making her forget to be self-conscious.

“Zane,” she moaned, her hands burying in his hair and holding his head in place.

But he wasn’t to be limited to her upper body. His lips started at the valley between her breasts and moved down to her stomach. His tongue dipped into her belly button, and she squeezed her thighs together at the tingling of pleasure pooling at her core. He shoved her leggings and underwear down her legs in one swift motion, and he dropped to his knees, his mouth hovering at the juncture between her legs. Her breath was coming in short rasps, her skin on fire from his touch. But when he reached a finger to lightly circle her clit, she thought she would burst into flames.

“Zane!”

He tilted his gaze up at her, the infuriating smile returning to his face. “We have to be quiet, baby. Remember?”

She narrowed her eyes, not liking how much he enjoyed being in control. It was time to turn the tables.

Dropping to her knees in front of him, she captured his lips and tasted him with her tongue. The fiery kiss stirred the desire for more, so she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She pulled him closer until his chest pressed against her breasts, the light sprinkling of hair causing a tantalizing friction which drove her out of her mind. Suddenly she needed to be closer to him. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and he cradled her against his lap, rocking her so his shaft could tease her clit with slow strokes. She devoured his mouth, and he met her fervor with an intensity all his own.

She broke away, her lungs sucking in oxygen. “Please tell me you have a condom because I need you inside of me now. I can’t wait anymore. It’s been too long for me to take this slow.”

“In my jeans pocket. Do you want to move this to the bed?”

She shook her head. “It’ll take too long.”

He set her from his lap so he could reach over to grab a condom from his wallet. She took it from him and ripped open the package. She rolled the latex over his erection and pulled him on top of her. They shared another heated kiss, and he lined his cock up with her entrance. When they pulled away, she caught his gaze.

“I want you now. And I want it hard and fast. Understand?”

“Hell, yeah.” With a thrust of his hips, his cock entered her to the hilt, and he paused to give them both time to enjoy the sensation. But then she wrapped her legs around his waist and urged him to move. So he did, slow and smooth at first, and then faster, pounding into her until the ecstasy sent them soaring. Her orgasm slammed through her first, robbing her of all coherent thought. When she started to scream his name, he kissed her to swallow her cry. Then he reached his own release, and they rode out the climax together.

Floating down from their high, Zane dropped down to lie beside her on the floor. They stared up at the ceiling, the only sound was their harried breaths as they fought for control. Bridget's heart pounded, but her limbs felt like spaghetti. She was aware of how uncomfortable the bedroom floor was to lie on, but she didn't think she could move even if the house was on fire.

"I think you killed me."

She barked a laugh then clamped her hand over her mouth and listened to see if the noise was enough to wake the house. Everything was quiet, thank goodness. She wasn't sure how she was going to be able to face Maggie knowing she'd screwed her son's brains out under the woman's roof while her kids slept in rooms across the hall. But she couldn't feel guilty about it. Not when sex with Zane felt so good.

"So, um," she began, turning her head to stare at his profile. "So I lied when I said we would do this once. We are definitely doing this again."

His cocky grin returned, but this time she returned the smile.

"Hell, yeah," Zane drawled. "We are doing it again. And again. And again."

Chapter Twenty

Bridget sighed as the water fell in rivulets down her body. The steam and heat soothed the kinks out of her muscles and restored her alertness. She stood under the shower's spray for several minutes, indulging in the decadent feel of the water. Her head rested against the shower wall, her eyes closed. She allowed her mind to wander, and a smile turned her lips up.

Her sleep had been sporadic, but she didn't care. A night of hot, steamy sex was what she needed. Zane definitely knew what he was doing. He made her body sing, but she

gave as good as she received. They would nap after each time, and then one or the other would initiate another round. He was insatiable, and she had to admit she didn't mind. She almost regretted holding him to one night.

She forced him to leave her room around five in the morning before anyone else in the house stirred. She managed a few more hours of sleep, but then the smell of pancakes and coffee lured her from the warmth of her bed. She'd been surprised to find Zane gone, leaving her to eat with Maggie and the kids alone. Though she kept up appearances, never acting as if anything was different about her, she felt like Maggie sensed a change. Or maybe she felt the change was strong enough there was no way Maggie wouldn't notice.

Bridget felt lighter, powerful. She felt ready to tackle anything thrown her way. She hated to attribute her freedom to a night of sex with Zane because she didn't want to be a woman who needed a man to be fulfilled.

But she had needed Zane. She needed his fire, his attentiveness, his combination of gentle and firm which curled her toes and had her body exploding. She'd never had a lover like him. He knew when to tease and when to be serious. He knew when to go slow and when to speed up. He knew what she needed before she realized it herself.

Sighing, she pushed herself to wash her hair and body. She had to be at work soon. It had taken some convincing, but Zane agreed to bring her home to shower and get ready for work. They were alone in the house. Maggie had offered for Mathias and Marlowe to stay another night, and she'd been surprised when the kids agreed. They had taken to Maggie, acting much like they did with her parents. She was certainly a better alternative than the kids staying at home alone, even if a bodyguard kept vigil outside.

Once she dried off, she couldn't resist donning a matching bra and panty set of brilliant red lace. The cut of both flattered her figure. She usually went with more

comfortable underwear for work, but something about wearing the sexy lingerie under her scrubs made her feel decadent. She refused to believe her choice was because she hoped Zane broke the one rule she set for their night of passion and seduced her into more sex after her shift.

She dried her hair and brushed the top strands back from her face, twisting them into a messy bun and securing it with a hair tie. She kept her makeup light but applied enough eyeliner and mascara to emphasize her deep brown eyes. Once she slipped into black scrubs and her comfortable shoes, she went to the living room to search out her sexy bodyguard.

Bridget stopped short when she saw Zane sitting at the end of her couch, the TV remote resting on his knee. His body was slumped low against the cushions, his head tilted back, his eyes closed. His chest rose and fell with each steady breath. The planes of his handsome face were relaxed, his dark lashes brushing against the top of his cheeks.

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Zane was devastating enough when he was awake. Asleep, he was gorgeous, peaceful. She fought the urge to call in sick to work and curl up against his side. It would be easy to forget her responsibilities for another night, and that was exactly why she'd insisted the two of them enjoy one night and no more. She was already risking making her situation more complicated than she was capable of handling.

Bridget stood in front of him, watching him a moment longer before touching his knee. She pulled back when he jerked awake. He sat straight up, his hand hovering over his gun in his side holster.

“Zane. It's me. Relax.”

He blinked as he stared up at her, and then he collapsed against the cushions, his hand rubbing his face.

“Shit. I'm sorry. I don't usually sleep that soundly. Some bodyguard I'm being right now.”

She smiled. “You should go home and rest. I can drive myself to work. The hospital has security. I'm sure one of the guards can walk me to and from my car. I already told you Seth works on a different floor, so there's no reason for our paths to cross.”

He stretched his arms over his head and then stood. “He's not there.”

“Really? How do you know that?”

“Payton asked her social worker friend at the hospital. Jay had her call and check, so

we'd know what we were dealing with when you went back to work. He's not been at work since he was arrested. Her friend said the rumor is he took an indefinite leave of absence."

She nodded. "That's a relief. I'm a little surprised though. I would have thought he would have shown up to defend himself. I'm sure word has gotten around about what happened. A hospital is a hotbed for gossip, as you know."

He encircled his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. "I'm relieved too. I hated leaving you at work when he was there, even if Sam watched over you."

"You're leaving me at work? I mean, that's fine, but I thought you were my security detail for the night."

He kissed her. "Sorry, baby, but I have something going on tonight with another case. Sam said he was good to wait at the hospital during your shift. He's going to meet us there."

She ignored the pang in her chest and planted a smile on her face. "I understand. It's probably good you're not there. I have to focus on work, and you would make it too tempting to sneak into an empty room and have a little fun."

"Are you having second thoughts about our one night?"

Her attempt at levity backfired, and she hesitated, wondering if she would scare him away if she told him the truth. His eyes watched her intently, and she realized he would see right through any lie she told. How he'd come to know her so well in a short time was beyond her.

"Maybe having conflicting thoughts is a better way to put it."

He fingered the strands of hair at her temple. “Tell me.”

Bridget sighed. “I want more than one night, but it’s not a good idea. Last night was incredible, but if we keep it up, we’re making things complicated. We were trying to avoid that, remember?”

“I want more than one night, too.”

She couldn’t fight the smile which split her face. “So you had fun last night?”

He returned her smile. “Yeah, I did. We could always take it one night at a time. No commitments, no plans, no strings.”

“Why does that seem unrealistic? I mean, can two people really make a no-strings-attached relationship work?”

“We’re not like everyone else. This doesn’t have to be about anything more than what it is. Than what we want it to be.”

She rested her head against his chest, squeezing him around his middle. “I hope you’re right.”

Zane tightened his embrace before nudging her away. “Come on. Let’s get going, or you’ll be late. Then later, I’ll be here when Sam brings you home. We’ll spend a few moments together before we go pick up Mathias and Marlowe. I’ll even make breakfast.”

“You know how to cook?”

“Oh, baby, there’s so much about me you don’t know.”

She laughed, and together they stepped outside. They talked about nothing in particular while he drove them to the hospital. He placed his hand on the small of her back when he escorted her inside the lobby, where Sam waited for them. She wished she could kiss Zane goodbye, but with Sam watching, she settled for him squeezing her hand and heading back out to his truck.

“How are you doing?” Sam waited to ask her until they were alone in the elevator.

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She smiled at the investigator, knowing very little about him but finding him friendly from what little time she'd spent with him. "I'm fine. Just ready for things to get back to normal, whatever that means."

"Not to bum you out or anything, but you know you won't get back to the normal you remember, don't you?"

She glanced at his profile, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Chloe told you about what happened to her?" At her nod, he continued. "She and I have gotten to be close friends through all of this. She would be the first to tell you, after you survive an attack like that, it's hard to go back to life as if it never happened."

"My situation is different from hers. Zane got there before I was actually..." She couldn't bring herself to say the word.

"You were assaulted, Bridget. Whether he raped you or not, he attacked you. I don't mean to upset you by bringing this up. I was thinking, Chloe comes here sometimes for a support group meeting. I forget the name of it, but she said it's helped her a lot. I know you haven't worked here long, and I thought you might like to know."

She could see the turn in conversation left him uncomfortable, and her heart softened. This tall muscular guy who was armed and ready to protect her from any unforeseen threat was trying to show her compassion and support. She smiled at him, hoping to ease his nervousness.

“Thank you, Sam. You didn’t upset me, I promise. I know you’re right, and I think I’ll check the support group out. I’m sure my supervisor can tell me which one it is.”

He nodded, satisfied with her response, and their conversation trailed off. When the elevator doors swooshed open, butterflies appeared in the pit of her stomach, and she hesitated before stepping off the elevator.

“You okay?” Sam asked.

“Um, yeah. I just...I don’t know. I’m nervous, but I’m not sure why.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder and waited for her to glance at him. “I’ll be close by all night. You say the word, and I’ll get you out of here.”

His offer did make her feel better even if it didn’t chase her nervousness away. “Thank you. I’ll be fine. I think it’s not knowing how people are going to react when they see me. I just want a normal shift.”

“The sooner you get the initial few minutes out of the way, the sooner you can get to your normal shift.”

She smiled. “Right. Here goes.”

She showed Sam where he could wait, and then she walked up to the nurse’s station. Amy was on shift but barely acknowledged her standing there before she was up and heading into a patient’s room. With a sigh, Bridget took her usual seat and started familiarizing herself with the patients on their floor.

“You’re here.”

Bridget had become engrossed in work, so she hadn’t noticed Charlotte walking up to

her from the other side of the desk. She held her breath as she turned to face her supervisor, whose expression was unreadable.

“I’m here. I’m sorry for having to bail on my shift yesterday. I just need a few minutes to catch up on patient files, and then I’ll get to work.”

Charlotte moved closer and dropped in the chair next to Bridget. “I’m sorry. I should have called to see how you were doing. I...I didn’t know if you were up to talking or...I didn’t know what to say.”

Bridget released her breath. “I didn’t know how people were going to react about me or how much of what they heard was true. Are they blaming me? Do they know the whole story? Has Seth told people a version to make them hate me? I wasn’t really up to knowing what was being said.”

“What people are saying or what they know is not important. If someone is rude to you, please let me know, and I’ll handle it. If you need more time, I can call in someone to take your place for this shift. I want to be here for you.”

“I need to work a normal shift. That’s the best thing for me right now.”

Charlotte smiled. “Then that’s what you’ll get. Mr. Stutler has been asking after you.”

“I saw he was back. What’s wrong?”

“Gallstones. He’s better. He’ll be released tomorrow probably.”

“I’ll go check on him. Oh, and um, I’m sorry. I know you warned me about Seth, and I didn’t listen. I was stupid.”

“No, you weren’t. What I knew of Dr. Masters never gave me an inclination he would

try to force himself on you.”

Bridget saw Amy return, though she kept her distance from them. Amy didn't seem to pay attention to what they said, but she decided it was better to end the conversation now.

“It's in the past now. I want to focus on work. Oh, and in case you're wondering —” She pointed over to where Sam sat staring at his phone, though she was sure it was more for show. He likely had his eye on everything going on and every person present on this floor. “That guy is with me. He's sort of watching out for me while I'm here. Just in case. He won't be in the way, I promise.”

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A gleam of admiration shined in Charlotte's eyes as she studied Sam from head to toe. "He definitely gives us something nice to look at on our shift."

Bridget grinned as she glanced over at her bodyguard, noting his thick blonde hair falling over his forehead, his slender, muscular form too tall and too broad for the waiting room chair he sat in, his gaze which took everything in with one sweep even while he appeared bored and uninterested.

"He's nice to look at and nice to talk to. He's a good guy. He works with some friends of mine, and they're worried Seth might approach me again. They're watching out for me."

"You've got to be kidding me." Amy said the words in a low tone, never glancing at Charlotte or Bridget, but there was no mistaking they were aimed at her.

"Amy. Show some respect," Charlotte chastised her.

Amy slammed a file to the top of the desk and turned to face them, one balled-up hand resting on her hip. "I'm sorry, but I can't feel sorry for somebody who was asking for it."

"Amy!" Charlotte gasped, and Bridget's eyes narrowed as she glared at her coworker.

Bridget stood. "You know, Amy, you shouldn't talk about things you obviously don't understand."

"I understand everything. You didn't think you could hide your reputation from us,

did you? Everyone in this hospital knows what a slut you were back where you came from, and you've been taking all your breaks in the stairwell just so you could flirt with him."

Bridget knew she shouldn't let Amy bait her, but she couldn't seem to stop herself from going on the defensive. "He flirted with me. He sought me out to ask for a date. I told him no, and he tried to...Regardless what you think of me, that's wrong by anyone's standards."

"You aren't the only one who's dated Seth. I know he's a nice guy who likes rough sex. That's no crime. It's not his fault you're a tease."

With a glare so intense, it could have set Bridget on fire where she stood, Amy turned and walked away. Charlotte stood and rested a hand on Bridget's arm.

"Don't worry about her. I'll talk with her and set her straight."

Bridget shook her head. She glanced over her shoulder and waved a hand in Sam's direction to let him know there wasn't a reason for him to intervene. "Don't bother. She looks for reasons to not like me, and I can't say the feeling is not mutual. Amy and I have never been destined to be BFFs. I'm just sorry she had to bring all of this up now."

"Don't you worry about that. She won't be talking about this again. I'll make sure of it. I'll leave you to get to work, but if you need anything, I want you to know I'm here for you."

On impulse, Bridget reached out to hug Charlotte. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

With a lighter step, she grabbed a patient cart and moved to Mr. Stutler's room.

???

Bridget's feet were aching by the time she paused by Sam's chair. Other than shifting positions, the man hadn't moved from his post all evening. She knew he had to be tired, and she wished she could send him home.

"Thank you for being here. I'm sure there are other places you'd rather be."

"It's part of the job," Sam returned with a smile. "You okay?"

"Other than some coworker drama and a patient who proposes whenever he sees me, yeah, I'm good."

"He proposes? What do you tell him?"

"I keep reminding him I have kids at home. A single mom is pretty effective in turning men away, even if they aren't serious with their proposals."

Sam chuckled. "Well, I can't say I blame him for trying. A pretty nurse waiting on him hand and foot? Kind of every man's fantasy."

Bridget rolled her eyes. "And that would be why men are full of shit."

Sam barked a laugh. "Touché."

"So I'm going to take a little break. My go-to place is usually the stairwell. I was going to let you know in case you were searching for me."

"I need to come with you, Bridget. You're probably wanting a moment alone, but unfortunately, I have to be close by. I can be quiet though to give you a chance to decompress."

She nodded. “Okay. This way.”

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Sam leaned against the wall behind her as she settled on her step. She fired a text off to Mathias, making sure he and his sister were okay and behaving while at Maggie's. While she waited for his reply, she turned to lean against the wall, stretching her legs on the step in front of her, and watched Sam trying to be unobtrusive.

"What's your story? You married? You have a nickname like the rest? You like sushi? Tell me something. It's weird having someone I barely know following me around."

Sam studied her. "I've never thought about it, but I guess it is. I'm not married, but I have a girlfriend, Monica. We've been together for a while. We have a son, Aidan. He's four. I had a nickname, but it's never followed me around like some. I like sushi, but my girlfriend is obsessed with it."

"All right. Let's see it."

He raised a quizzical brow. "See what?"

"I know you have a picture of your son, so you might as well show it to me."

He pulled out his phone, but before he could flip it around to show her, footsteps echoed in the stairwell.

"Bridget. Bridget, I need to talk to you."

She whipped her head around to the man coming up the stairwell toward her and scrambled to her feet. "What the hell? You aren't supposed to be here."

Sam reacted in a flash, placing himself between Bridget and Seth Masters, his hand resting on his firearm. “Get back to the nurse’s station. Now.”

Seth held up his hands in a no-harm gesture. “No, please. I have to know what went wrong. My entire life depends on it.”

She stepped on the top landing so she could see over Sam’s frame and stared down at Seth. “What went wrong? You tried to rape me, you son of a bitch. How dare you even approach me?”

“I was set up. You have to believe me. If you don’t drop the charges, my career is ruined.”

“Are you saying this is my fault?”

“I need you to listen to me. They paid me to seduce you. They told me you would like it, and they wanted the video to get you to do what they wanted. They told me you liked it that way and that would you tell me no as part of the game.”

“You’re insane!” Bridget felt her body shaking, and the tears fell on her cheeks. “Who the hell would pay you to do such a thing? And why would you agree to do it? You’re a father, and you thought nothing of attacking me with my children in the next room. And now you’re worried about your career without any thought to what your behavior will do to your son. You make me sick!”

“Bridget, go to the nurse’s station and stay there,” Sam ordered her. “I got this.”

This time, she needed no other encouragement. She bolted through the door back on her floor. Instead of going to the nurse’s station, she ducked into a supply closet, rested her head against the one of the shelving units and allowed the tears to fall unchecked. She suspected her shift would be hard. She had no idea it would leave her

an emotional wreck.

That was how Sam found her. He didn't bother to stop the tears or give her platitudes that everything would be alright. He waited for her to collect herself in her own time before he spoke.

"Security is holding the doctor until the police can arrive to arrest him for harassment. Sydney is working with an attorney Tristin uses from time to time to file a restraining order against him. It seems like all of this is connected to the people who want to sue you for custody of your niece and nephew. The doctor was hired to seduce you into some rough sex and get it on tape. The point was to show what you do when you're supposed to be watching over your niece and nephew. They were going to use the video to prove you're an unfit guardian. At least that's the story the SOB's sticking to."

"Oh, my God!" she wailed. "I can't believe my sister's in-laws would go to such extremes. They basically paid this guy to rape me. That's sick and pathetic and..." Her voice trailed off as sobs clogged her throat.

"We can use his statement to help us get all the proof we need to show what they've done, and we can use it to keep them from getting custody of the kids. I'm sorry you're having to go through this, but if there was a silver lining, it would be that. Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I need a few minutes. Would you mind telling Charlotte I won't be long? She's my supervisor in the black scrubs. I want to check on Mathias and Marlowe before I continue my shift."

"I understand. I'll be close by if you need anything."

She was already pulling out her phone when he stepped out of the closet. The other

nurses would probably start gossiping that she'd brought her boyfriend to work just to make out with him in the supply closet, but she was past caring about what the people in the hospital thought. Her focus was on hearing her kids' voices and reminding herself of the important things in her life.

Chapter Twenty-One

"You good to go through with this?"

Zane's eyes narrowed as he tugged his ball cap firmly on his head. He didn't face Wings as he answered. "Yeah. As much as I can be. I hope Jay's plan works."

The Alpha Team planned for this. They reviewed every scenario multiple times so they walked into the situation prepared. But no one could prepare for the unexpected.

"Plan A probably won't. More than likely B and C won't either. But D is usually a sure bet. We just have to play out the first three to get to the fourth."

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Wings' assessment did little to ease Zane's anxiety. "Shit! We're nuts to take these people on. The feds have tried and failed. A lot. What the hell are we thinking to believe we can end this?"

Wings chuckled. "Never seen you lose it. Have to admit, it's funny."

"Dammit, Wings."

He punched Zane's arm to get his attention. "Cool it, man, all right? I don't know what has you twisted into such a knot, but I'm not going into this op with you like this. Pull it together or pull the plug. You have thirty seconds to decide."

Zane slammed his palm against the steering wheel. He had no idea why he was anxious about seeing this case through now, but he suspected it had something to do with the night he spent with Bridget at his side. It was just sex — probably the best sex of his life. They agreed to no strings, but he couldn't shake the guilt that he should be with her instead of trying to meet with someone who played a role in his stabbing. He wasn't a cop. This wasn't his job. He could walk away and know he put in his time and gathered enough evidence for the feds to move this case forward.

So why wasn't he pulling the plug already?

"Z, this is the job. Whether we're serving our country or working for Tryst. If we considered how we could fail before we started any mission, we'd get killed. We can do this. We rely on our training because if we don't, bastards like De la Peña gain power they don't deserve, and they use it to hurt innocent people. We go after them because even if we fail, we at least put a dent in their empire. We make it harder for

them to gain power.”

“So you’re saying we’re not nuts to do this?”

Wings grinned. “Hell, no. We’re bat shit crazy. That’s why we make it work.”

Zane rolled his eyes. “Wipe the damn grin off your face. We’re doing this, so I need you to look like a scary-ass man and not a douche.”

In the blink of an eye, Wings’ grin disappeared. His face hardened, his long hair giving him a wild, frenzied appearance. Zane nodded.

“That’ll work. You come up from behind. We’ll box him in.”

“Copy that.” Wings slipped from the pickup, and Zane followed suit, mentally morphing into Cane Black’s persona.

Bridget would call the sock mill creepy, and Zane would have to agree. Windows broken by vandals, graffiti on the outside, trash in the parking lot. It was a forgotten structure, once a source of prosperity for residents of Grayson Cove and now an eyesore they were using to take down a mob family.

The lock on the door was busted, but the Alpha Team had already scoped the place out. They cleared it of any vagrants or low-level gang members using it as a hangout. Then they wired the place up with mics and cameras in preparation for the meet. Even with back-up out of sight, but nearby, Zane had his guard up as he and Wings stepped inside. The situation reminded him too much of the night he was stabbed.

They walked into an open area with high ceilings, the space cordoned off by towers of crates and boxes. Garbage and drug paraphernalia were scattered around the dusty floor. The place seemed deserted, but a prickling stirred the fine hairs on the back of

his neck.

“He’s here,” he murmured loud enough for Wings to hear.

“Then flesh him out so we can get this done.”

“Thumper!” Zane’s voice echoed eerily. “No point hiding.”

The big guy stepped out from behind a piece of rusted equipment. Dressed all in black, he pulled a gray golfer’s cap down low on his forehead as he hurried forward. He froze when he realized Zane wasn’t alone.

“Black, are you messing with me? Who the hell is this?”

Playing the part, Wings crossed his arms over his chest, making him appear bigger and more intimidating as he stared Thumper down. He didn’t say a word, deferring to Zane to guide the meet.

“The last time I met you in person, I was stabbed. So I brought back-up this time. Don’t mind him. This is between me and you.”

“Then he needs to go. What I have to say is for your ears only.”

“He stays. So talk. What do you have to say that I need to hear?”

Zane stiffened, and he sensed Wings doing the same as Thumper moved closer. He stood directly in front of them, close enough for Zane to reach out and strangle the guy around his thick throat if Thumper failed to make this meeting relevant.

“I wasn’t the one who set you up, Black.” His voice was so low, Zane wondered if the mics would be able to pick it up.

“I’m not stupid. You knew what was happening before I showed up.”

“Yeah, and I was going to warn you, but Singer wouldn’t let me out of his sight. He was the one who set you up. He found out your name is not Black.”

“And I found out you’re related to Cal Russo. You need to start giving me something worthwhile, Jubel, or we’re walking out of here.”

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Thumper jumped as if he received an electrical shock when he heard Zane use his real name. Zane knew a bit of satisfaction that he took away Thumper's upper hand.

"It was Singer. He never trusted you, and then a buddy of his recognized you. Told Singer exactly who you were, so Singer fingered you as a spy to get in deeper with Armando. But he didn't tell him you were a mercenary like he is. He told Armando you were a Fed."

"Why not tell Armando who I am? He probably would have had me killed either way."

"Because he didn't want Armando connecting him as a mercenary same as you. He had his own agenda, so he's started going completely against our plan."

"To get revenge for your nephew and his girl?"

"Hell, Black, how much do you know?"

Zane ignored his question, instead doing an interrogation of his own. "Why does Singer believe I'm a mercenary?"

"Because you are, man. No point in hiding it anymore. His buddy said you were one of the guys who had his cousin killed. He paid Singer a shitload more money to set you up to be killed. They're not happy you survived. That's why I'm warning you. They're still out to get you."

"It doesn't make sense, Thumper. Who's his buddy and the cousin? Why are they

targeting me? Why are you even telling me this if you've been working with Singer this whole time? You need to start telling me what the hell is going on."

He held up his hands in a sign of surrender. "Okay, okay. You already know what my end game is."

"You're actually working for Cal Russo and Max Morrison."

"Right. Well I needed help getting in with Armando. Since he found out it was Cal's son and Max's daughter in the accident, he tightened his circle to protect himself. So Max called Gary Tarrant to see who he recommended to act as my partner. Tarrant hires mercenaries to work for him all the time, and he put us in touch with Singer. He said he worked with Singer before, and he was as cool as a cucumber under pressure. He's a psycho, but he served my purpose so I could care less about his own agenda."

"Did you say Tarrant? As in Tarrant Security?" Wings and Zane exchanged a glance, a silent communication showing they both were connecting the dots. Somehow Joe Albert and Reggie Singer were connected, and they were the ones to set Zane up to be killed. But Zane had his doubts that all of this was happening solely because of Einstein's death.

"Right. But Singer's going rogue. He wants to take down Armando and Elian, so he can step in and take over. Then he's going after Cal and Max. I told you. The son of a bitch is crazy."

"Why are you telling me all of this? I thought you wanted to take down Armando and Elian."

"I do, and I know you want to. That's why we should work together. We can take them down and stop Singer from going after Cal."

“We don’t work with criminals.”

“Of course, you do. You’re a damn mercenary. If you don’t work with me, you’re dead before you can make any of this happen. You need me. I’m the only one who knows what Singer is up to and how he thinks.”

“Why the hell should we believe you?” Wings finally spoke, and Zane whipped his head to stare curiously at his partner. His normally booming voice came out in a low, menacing tone meant to scare and intimidate. He knew Wings was good, but he had no idea his teammate could play the undercover role so convincingly.

“You can’t afford not to.”

“What’s Singer’s plan?” Zane demanded.

Thumper shook his head. “You get nothing more from me until you agree we work together. I want Armando to pay for what he did. He’s gotten away with it long enough.”

Zane stared at Wings again, and the guy shrugged. “It’s your call.”

Zane nodded. He faced Thumper and studied the man. He could understand the man’s desire for revenge. That’s how he felt when Emmett Carter terrorized and kidnapped Sydney and then when his foster brother Danny Dawson raped Chloe. He didn’t trust the man, but if they could use him to take down the De la Peñas once and for all, it would be worth partnering with him.

“We don’t want to see anything but Armando and Elian arrested and convicted and their operation shut down. If you have in mind to kill either of them, we’ll take you down too.”

“Understood. But if I get the chance to kill either or both of them, I’m going to take it.”

“Understood, but you won’t get the chance. We’ll make sure of it.”

Wings reached behind him. “Turn around.”

“Hell, no!” Thumper protested.

Wings held up a couple of zip ties. “If you think you’re coming with us without being secured first, you’re full of shit. Turn around.”

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The two stared down for several seconds, and then Thumper finally turned around. Wings secured his hands behind his back and searched him for any weapons. He lifted a concealed gun and switchblade, and they led Thumper out to their truck. As Wings and Zane were about to call for back-up to transport the enforcer, two SUVs screeched to a stop behind them, and Jay climbed out. From his intense expression and quick stride, Zane knew the news wasn't good.

“Wings, you and BB take Thumper back to KSI and get him secured. Zane, you're coming with me and Panther now.”

“What's going on?” Zane asked even as they moved to do as Jay ordered.

“Sam called. Something's up. We're heading to your mom's place.”

Zane froze as Jay handed him his personal cell phone. Going into the op, he carried only the burner phone assigned to his alias. He left his personal phone with BB in case his mother or Bridget needed something. Seeing the several missed calls and voicemails from Bridget had his stomach sinking to his feet.

“We need to roll. Now.”

Zane climbed into the passenger seat while Jay sat behind the wheel. They tore out of the sock mill parking lot with BB and Wings following close behind. Zane started listening to the voicemails, his unease growing with each one.

“Hi, Zane. It's me. I know you're busy, but I thought you should know. I saw Seth tonight. He showed up at the hospital to talk to me. Don't worry. Sam was there to

keep me safe. He's talking to Seth now. Something weird is going on. I don't know what. I just know I wish you were here. Anyway, I'm going to check on the kids and get back to work. They must be having a good time with your mom because Mat hasn't texted me back yet. Be safe, Zane. I can't wait to see you later."

"Zane, it's me again. Something's wrong. I've tried calling the kids, and neither of them are answering. I don't know your mom's number, so will you call her? I'm starting to freak out."

"Sam and I have left the hospital. No one is answering my calls, and I'm really worried. We're heading to your mother's now. Call me when you get this."

"Zane, where are you? They're not here. The place is a mess, and Maggie and the kids are gone. You have to get here. I can't lose them. I can't..."

Zane whipped his eyes around to Jay as they sped in the direction of his mother's house. "What the hell is going on?"

"The doctor was told to attack Bridget. He was paid well to put on a show for the cameras planted at her house, and he was told she would like it and would give him the ride of his life. Sam got the whole story and called me. Then Bridget told him the kids weren't responding to her calls and texts. They left the hospital to head to your mother's house. There's evidence of a break-in, and Maggie and the kids are gone."

Zane's heart pounded, and he felt all the color drain from his face. "You're telling me someone kidnapped them? Where the hell was their security detail? Holy shit! It has to be the De la Peñas, but why take Mom and the kids? What the hell are we missing?"

"Don't lose your shit on me. Lex was there, but he was jumped doing a perimeter check. He's okay, and he's leading the investigation into what happened. Tryst has

every investigator and the rest of the Delta Team over at your mother's house to collect evidence and start chasing down leads. They're also cleaning up as they go. Whoever took them wants leverage against you, so they won't hurt them until they get what they want. That'll buy us some time to track them down. And we will. You know we will. They've come after our family, and we'll stop at nothing to get them back. Copy?"

"Copy. But I better call Bridget. She's has to be freaking out."

He dialed her number, guilt eating at him. He should have been there for her. Instead he was taking a meet which hadn't put him any closer to taking down the De la Peñas. Maggie tried to tell him his place was with Bridget and her kids, and he'd pushed them to the side because he couldn't admit his case could be closed without him. He never wanted his family to be touched by what he did for a living, but now his choices have put danger right in his backyard.

When Bridget answered, he could hear her sobs as she spoke. "Zane. Oh my God! Someone took them. I should have been here. They have to be so scared. What if they're hurt? I can't...I can't handle losing them too. I don't know what to do! My mind is going to some dark places."

"Baby, you need to breathe. I know you're scared and worried. Tell me what you're thinking. Let me take that on for you. Let me help you sort through it."

He listened to her taking one deep breath after another, and he wished he could be there to take her in his arms.

"I'm okay. I wish there was something I could do. I, uh, I almost called their grandparents. I was so close to accusing them of doing this. But they wouldn't put the kids through this, would they? They wouldn't take your mother, too, right? But who else would take them? Oh, my God. What if it's some human trafficker or something?

Zane, I'm freaking out here. There are people going through everything with a fine-tooth comb, but I can tell they're not finding anything. What if we never find them?"

"Wait, Bridget. Are you talking about the Williamses? Aren't they in Georgia?"

"That's where they live, but they're still in Grayson Cove. When I checked Mat's phone — he left it behind in his room — there was a voicemail from them. They heard about Seth, and they wanted Mat to come see them at their hotel. They told him they wanted to make sure he and Marlowe were okay, but they never asked to see her. Just him. I never would have believed they would be capable of this, but people do things which are out of character when they're desperate, right?"

"Right. Bridget, keep taking deep breaths. You're not going to be any good to the kids if you're hysterical. Hang on a minute while I talk to Jay. I'm not hanging up, though. I'm still right here."

"Yeah. Yeah. Okay."

He turned his phone into his shoulder, so she couldn't hear him. He knew Jay heard every word he said to her, so he didn't beat around the bush.

"She thinks the grandparents took them. Apparently they're still in town and tried to see Mathias after Bridget's attack."

"They're connected to Tarrant, and after what Thumper told you, it's probably time for us to talk to them. Panther, have Sam and Gennessey pick them up. Make sure they leave Isobel in charge of Bridget's security detail."

"Copy that," Cole said as he dialed his cell.

"I want to be there when you question them," Zane insisted.

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“You will be. So will Bridget. I’m going to have Sam and Gennessey bring them to your mom’s house, so they can see the mess left behind by the guys who did this. I think it’s time Bridget had her say with these people. She’s earned the right to tell them to go to hell for putting her and the kids through this.”

Zane nodded as he put his phone back to his ear. “I’m here, baby. I’m not going anywhere. We’re going to investigate the Williamses to see if they’re involved. Keep telling me what you’re thinking. Let’s talk through this. I’m here for whatever you need.”

He was met with silence. He glanced at his phone screen to make sure they hadn’t been cut off, but the call was still connected. He was about to speak again when she beat him to the punch.

“Is this my fault?”

“Hell, no, baby. None of this is your fault. You’ve done everything right. Your sister and brother-in-law would be proud of all you’ve done for Mathias and Marlowe. They chose the perfect person to be their guardian.”

“I don’t know about that, but I’m glad they did. I’m not sure when it happened, but Mat and Lowe are my life. I should call my parents to tell them what happened, but I’m scared. What if they blame me? What if they want to take the kids away from me? I think I need the kids more than they need me.”

“Your parents aren’t going to blame you. I think you should call them. They can offer support. Hell, if they want to be here for you, Tryst can arrange to have them flown

here. If you think it would help you, I'll make it happen, baby. I promise."

More silence, but this time she broke it quicker. "I've always taken care of myself. I've been proud of how I've never needed anyone else. But I need them, and I think...I think I need you too. Does that scare you?"

His heart squeezed, and a slight smile curved his lips. "No, baby. It doesn't."

"It scares the hell out of me. This is unknown territory for me."

"We'll figure it out. I'll be there soon. Call your parents, and I'll call Kat. She and Tryst will work out arrangements for your parents, so they can be here."

"Yeah, okay. I will. Thank you, Zane. For everything. I...I'll never be able to repay you."

"There's no need. You're one of us, and we look out for family."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Prior to leaving the hospital, Bridget was seized with panic. Since taking in the kids to live with her, she was never out of touch with them for this long, and she made a point to be reachable for them too, even at work. With Dean and Jennifer's death happening so suddenly, they couldn't stand being away from each other for even a short length of time without checking in. It was an unspoken rule they'd adopted from the beginning.

One of the first things she checked when she couldn't raise them on the phone was her location app. When it still showed them at Maggie's home, she and Sam immediately left the hospital to go and check on them, only to find them gone with their cell phones left behind. After that, chaos ensued as the entire staff of KSI

ascended on the house and went to work. Bridget tried to stay out of their way even as her thoughts spiraled into worst-case scenario land.

When she first wondered about Oran and Ivy's involvement, she'd felt guilty almost immediately. Whatever her differences with them were, they loved Mathias and Marlowe. They were grieving for their son, and while their choices hadn't been in the kids' best interest, she couldn't believe they would risk the children's safety to get their way.

Standing in the kitchen doorway, partially hidden behind Sam, she watched them where they sat in the living room. They wore stoic expressions. Ivy's lips were pursed as if she'd sucked a lemon, and Oran's anger had turned his skin an ugly puce hue. Even with Jay pacing in front of them and Brick and Cole standing nearby appearing almost dangerous, the Williamses still managed to peer down their noses at everyone, their haughtiness oozing from their stiff postures.

"Mr. Colter, I think it's time you explain yourself. Why are we here, and what does this have to do with our grandchildren?" Oran demanded.

"No need to pretend, Mr. Williams. We already know about your involvement. We just need you to give us a location before we turn you over to the authorities. We know deputies with the Sheriff's Department pretty well, and they take cases of kidnapping very seriously, I assure you."

"Kidnapping?" Ivy gasped. "Are you saying...Oh, Oran, they think...the children!"

Oran gripped his wife's hands tightly. "I demand to know what is going on. Now!"

Zane walked from the back of the house where he'd been searching his mother's bedroom. He heard Oran's last demand, and he crossed the room to stop in front of the man, towering over him from his considerable height.

“I’m betting you know exactly what’s going on.” Zane’s voice was scarily calm, almost evil in its tone. “You know exactly who took your grandchildren, and my mother in the process. You know exactly where they’re being held. And you’re going to tell us what you know. Because at this point, I have nothing to lose by doing everything I can to make you tell me the truth.”

“Are you threatening me?” Oran gasped.

“Hell, yeah. Now you’re catching on. So tell us. Did you get fed up with waiting for the court to award you custody? Is that why you took Mathias and Marlowe?”

“Oh, my God. They’ve been taken? Why haven’t you called the police? The FBI? Oh, my God. Why are you wasting your time with us? We had nothing to do with this,” Ivy wailed. “How could you even think such a thing?”

“Anyone who hires mercenaries like Tarrant Security is pretty much capable of anything. So did they charge you extra for the kidnapping? Why take my mother if they were after the children?”

Oran opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, reminding Bridget of a guppy hunting for food in a pond. “What — they would never. We would never.”

“We didn’t pay them to do anything but protect the children. We wanted them to collect evidence against their slut of an aunt. The children belong with us, but instead the court left them with her. She’s a terrible influence on them. She’s ruining their lives. We’re trying to save them from her!” Ivy stood, emboldened by her passionate speech.

And Bridget had heard enough.

Storming into the living room, she stood toe to toe with Ivy Williams, glaring straight into the older woman's eyes.

"Your son is dead. He is not coming back. You cannot replace him with Mathias. Mathias may resemble his father and have some of the same interests, but he is not his dad. He is his own person, and you would do well to remember that."

"How dare you!" Ivy spoke with such force, her spittle landed on Bridget's cheek.

Bridget swiped it away, her anger growing. "I swear if you had anything to do with those precious kids being kidnapped and traumatized, I will move heaven and earth to see you prosecuted and buried under the jail. As far as me being a bad influence, how terrible of a person do you have to be to spend your time and money worrying about my affairs? I've done my best when it comes to Mathias and Marlowe, and I would lay my life down for those two kids. Can you say the same?"

"I love them more than two petty people like you could ever understand. We could have been raising them together, but no, you could only think about yourselves and your own pain. We're hurting too. We lost Dean and Jennifer too! But we leaned on each other. We didn't turn on each other!"

"I'm begging you. If you have any idea where Marlowe, Mathias and Maggie are, tell us. Don't waste another minute of putting their lives in danger to get your way. You'll end up losing more than custody of the kids. I can promise you that."

“You don’t deserve them!” Ivy screamed, her composure slipping. “We can give them anything. They will never want for a single thing with us. You leave them alone to pursue a career which will take you from them more often than you can be there for them. You involve yourself with these people who have questionable backgrounds. Don’t you realize your involvement with them is what led to my grandchildren being taken? It’s your fault they’ve been traumatized. You did this to them, you shameless, promiscuous bitch!”

Bridget reared back and swung her arm with all her might. Her palm almost connected to Ivy’s cheek when Zane’s hand grasped her wrist and pulled her back. Before she could protest, he dragged her back into the kitchen and forced her to sit. He kneeled in front of her.

“Damn. I knew you were passionate, baby, but I never thought you’d come out swinging. Remind me never to cross you.”

Bridget’s body shook with barely contained rage. She was on the verge of tears as she met Zane’s concerned gaze. “I hate them. I truly hate them with everything that is within me. They treated my sister like she was nothing. Then they came after me, and now they’ve done this to my kids and your mother. She deserves more than a slap to the face. You should have let me hit her.”

“I would have if they weren’t looking for an excuse to arrest you. Don’t worry. If anyone can get them to admit what they’ve done, it’ll be Jay. We’re the best at what we do, baby. You can trust us.”

“You guys aren’t just security guards, are you? The way you’re handling this, the secretive cases you work, the fact you had to go undercover for something which got you stabbed. Are they right? Is the fact I’m involved with you and your friends the reason my kids were kidnapped?”

She couldn't have taken him more by surprise if she'd punched him in the gut. He knew he'd have to have this conversation with her if they continued to see each other — even if all they did was sleep with each other. He did not expect to have this conversation in the middle of the search for her niece and nephew and his mother. He was acutely aware of the people who surrounded them, trying to appear inconspicuous but probably hearing every word they said.

Zane stood and grabbed her arm to help her to her feet. "Come with me. Let's talk outside. Sam, you call us when Jay gets a lead?"

"Copy that."

Zane led Bridget out to the patio, his mind instantly recalling their conversation from two nights ago. The conversation which led them to her room, to have sex on the floor and in the bed and in the shower. The night was one of the best he'd spent in a long time, and he was about to implode his relationship with her with the truth that was his life. Sometimes his life sucked.

"Please don't lie to me, Zane. I can't take it. Not now. I've trusted you with all of my drama and baggage. Was my trust misplaced?"

"No, but I'm afraid you'll think so."

"Just tell me. I promise my imagination will make it much worse if you don't."

"Almost six years ago now, I was finishing my last tour in the Army. I don't regret a single day of serving my country, but I was ready for something new. I wanted to come back home, to reconnect with my family. Tristin made me a job offer which was what I was hoping for. KSI was getting off the ground, but he had a vision he was determined to make work.

“There are two sides to KSI. We do have private investigators and bodyguards, as you call them. We handle typical PI and private security cases. That is all true. But the other side to the company is where I work. We have two teams called Alpha and Delta. I serve with the Alpha Team, along with Panther, BB, Wings and Jay. We’re considered a covert ops team. We take operations and cases which are high-risk and highly confidential. The PI side of the company allows us to fly under the radar. We partner with law enforcement and government agencies for a lot of our cases. They are the cases traditional agencies can’t close for a lot of reasons, so they contact us. We’ve been highly successful because we can operate on that fine line between legal and illegal.”

“So you’re like the A Team. Like a commando group of veterans or something?”

He bit back a smile at her knowledge of the ‘80s action-adventure show that as entertaining as it was unrealistic. He and Zaida used to watch reruns and dream of forming their own version of the vigilante team who worked outside the law.

“We’re not criminals and have never been accused of a crime. Ever. What we do is completely legal, but we keep it quiet for our own safety and the safety of the people in our lives. There aren’t a lot of people who even know what we do.”

“So what Oran and Ivy said is true, isn’t it? They aren’t behind the kidnapping, are they? Someone came after your mother to get to you, and my kids got in the way. My kids are in danger because of you and some secret case. That’s it, isn’t it? That’s what happened.”

“I don’t know. Honestly. I haven’t figured this out yet, but yes, it’s a possibility. But, Bridget, you have to know I would never—”

He reached for her as he spoke, but she pulled away and put distance between them.

“I can’t believe this,” she said, almost to herself though he heard every word. “It is my fault. I trusted you and your friends. I believed you when you said we were part of the family. I believed you when you said you would keep me and my kids safe. If I hadn’t trusted you, if I hadn’t let you into my life, none of this would have happened.”

“Stop it! None of this is your fault. You are not to blame for any of this.”

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Her glare pierced him through the chest directly to his heart. “You’re right. It’s not my fault. It’s yours. If anything happens to Mathias and Marlowe, you’re the one to blame. Their blood will be on your hands. I hope you can live with that because I know I definitely won’t be able to. You find my kids. You bring them home to me. And after you do, you walk away from us and stay away. I want nothing more to do with you.”

“Bridget, please —”

“Zane.” Sam suddenly appeared in the door. From his guarded expression, he realized he had interrupted something, but obviously what he had to say couldn’t wait. “You’d better come inside. The Williamses are talking. Bridget, your parents are here. They convinced the Williamses to spill their guts. Oh, and Zane, your sisters are here.”

He expected his sisters to arrive. Zoe touched base with Maggie every day, and when she couldn’t be reached, Zoe probably checked in with Zaylee and Zaida to see if they’d heard from her. Once they realized no one had spoken to their mother, they rallied together to show up at the house. He probably had a few missed calls from them as well. He’d hoped he had more time before they showed up. They would demand an explanation, and he didn’t have enough information to give them one.

“Thanks, Sam. We’ll be right there.”

Bridget started to storm passed him to go inside, but he grabbed her upper arm to stop her.

“We’ll finish this later. I want to explain—”

She refused to glance at him, and when she jerked her arm, he released her. “There’s nothing left to say. When this is over, I expect you to walk away from us and never look back. That goes for your friends too. I don’t need you or anyone else to take care of me or my kids.”

Zane watched her disappear inside and tried to shake the feeling that he’d lost something special. This was more than finding out Sydney would never return his feelings. This was more than losing a lover. He couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was, but his gut told him he’d likely never find anything like it again.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bridget walked into the house and straight into the waiting arms of her mother. She buried her face in Audra Kincaid’s hair and found comfort in the strawberry scent of her shampoo. She felt her father’s comforting hand patting her back like he used to when she was sick as a kid. The gesture was too much for her. She didn’t deserve their comfort. Not when her choices put her niece and nephew in danger. They would take her children away even if the court didn’t, and she deserved it.

“It’s all my fault,” she murmured, her words muffled.

“Stop that,” Audra admonished. “Mr. Knight told us everything when he called to tell us about the flight. How can any of this be your fault?”

Bridget pulled away, forcing herself to peer into her mother’s kind eyes. “I brought this into our lives. I chose to move here and befriend these people. It’s all backfired and put the kids in danger. Jennifer and Dean trusted me, and I let them down.”

Wyatt Kincaid wrapped his arm around his daughter’s shoulders. “Come with me.”

He led her to the back of the house into her bedroom. Audra followed close behind,

and they all settled at the foot of the bed with Bridget in the middle and her parents on either side.

“I spoke with Mr. Knight when he called. He arranged for a car to pick up me and your mother to take us to the airport. He had a private plane waiting, and he had a car waiting for us at the airport as soon as we landed. He arranged for someone to get our bags and bring them here so we wouldn’t have to wait on them. This whole time, he and his wife are calling and texting us all the details about your situation and what they think happened to Mat and Lowe. He also provided me with background on who they are and what they do.”

Bridget shook her head as more tears slid down her cheeks. “You don’t know everything, Dad. I didn’t know everything until a few minutes ago. It’s all so crazy.”

Audra placed a hand on her daughter’s arm. “We do know everything, sweetheart. Mr. Knight told us he was sharing private information not known to the general public because of safety reasons. We assured him he could trust us with his privacy. We only wanted to know what happened and how we could help.”

“I also checked them out.”

Bridget stared incredulously at her father, taking in his white hair, still thick and wavy as when it was its original dark brown, the deep lines around his eyes and the self-satisfied expression on his face. He wasn’t the most tech-savvy person she knew, so his response floored her.

“You checked them out? Do you even know how to do that?”

“I helped him,” Audra confided.

“The how doesn’t matter. What I found does. They’re veterans, Bridget. All of the

ones I've found online served very distinguished careers in the military. They are men and women I would have liked to serve with when I was in the Army. The work they do is dangerous. But shutting them out of your life doesn't protect you from danger. Protecting your heart from ever getting close to other people won't save you from being afraid or hurt. You won't ever make all the right choices with your life or with the kids. But moving them here and trusting these people are choices you got right. If anyone can bring our kids home, it's these folks. I trust them. You should too."

"I don't know what they told you, but it's obviously not—"

"They told me the truth. I'm not some naïve, old man, sweetheart. I know good folks when I meet them. There's one guy in the room in there who's worked himself into a frenzy over your niece. If he finds the people who took her, he'll probably rip them apart. He's big enough to do it too. I'm glad he's on our side."

Brick, she thought with a smile. "He and Marlowe have a special friendship. I think she has a crush on him."

"I can see why. He's cute."

Bridget gaped at her mother, who just grinned. She shook her head, appreciating her parents' attempts to bring her off the ledge. If only their words erased the guilt eating at her...

"I hate feeling useless. I don't know what to do."

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“I’m feeling some of that, myself,” Wyatt said. “I think the best thing we can do for the kids is to hold ourselves together. We don’t know what they’re going to need from us when they’re found. We need to be ready to give them all they need.”

Bridget reached up to kiss his weathered cheek, letting him know she realized how right he was. “How did you get the Williamses to talk?”

“That was your mother.”

She turned to stare at Audra, who’s expression turned stubborn and angry.

“I appealed to them as one grandparent to another, though I’m not sure they deserve the title, trying to tear my grandbabies apart like that. I hope they’re ashamed of themselves. They should be.”

“Grief makes people do crazy things, sometimes.”

Audra whipped her head around to stare at Bridget. “Oh, no, don’t you do that. Don’t make excuses for them. They don’t corner the market on grief. I lost my daughter that day too. Their son was like a son to us. We’re all hurting, but we’re dealing with it. Grief doesn’t give them the right to tear apart those kids’ lives any more than they already have been.”

“I know you’re right. I still feel sorry for them. I don’t think they’ll ever understand what they’ve missed out on.”

“Learn a lesson from them then,” Wyatt said. “Don’t let yourself miss out on

something special because of things which are beyond anyone's control. If you want to blame someone, blame the bastards who kidnapped my grandkids and the nice woman who watched over them while you were at work."

Bridget rested her head on her father's shoulder as she squeezed her mother's hand. "Oh, I do, Daddy. Believe me, I do."

???

Zane's stare fixated on the doorway through which Bridget disappeared with her parents. Even as he tried to explain to his sisters what happened, he noticed the Kincaids leave the room and couldn't stop wondering what was going on. Did her parents blame him too? They had every right too, but he desperately hoped they didn't. If they didn't, they could help him convince Bridget to forgive him. Especially when it didn't seem like his sisters were going to forgive him anytime soon.

"Dammit, Zane! I thought you guys were professionals. If you thought for one minute Momma was in danger because of backlash from one of your cases, why did you only have one man watching over her? Why didn't you tell us, so we could keep an eye out too? Of all the irresponsible things..." Zoe's voice trailed off, her flailing arms coming to rest at her sides. But she paced, faster and with heavier footsteps than Zane when he paced. Zoe was the mother of the bunch when Maggie wasn't around, so Zane felt his sister's disappointment was more painful than a proverbial trip behind the woodshed for a spanking.

"There was no evidence, until today, that my true identity had been leaked, and without that, there was no danger of tracing my connection to you guys or Momma."

"You can't have it both ways, Zoe." His older sister shot a withering glare at Zaida, who wasn't the least bit fazed. "You're always bragging about your baby brother who saves the world. I've heard you tell people how awesome he was for serving in the

military and now he's like a superhero working in the private sector. You can't have a super brother with a job like his and not accept the risks which come with it. Momma would be the first one to tell you that, and you know it."

Zaylee ignored the other two and placed a hand on her brother's arm. "You'll find her? And Bridget's kids? Won't you? I can't stand the idea of what they must be going through, but I know Momma. She'll hold on to the hope you'll find her. So you have to, Zane. Whatever it takes, you have to."

The tears shimmering in Zaylee's eyes was his undoing. He wrapped his sister in a bear hug, blinking back his own tears. He couldn't let them see him upset. He had to be strong for them because they were counting on him to bring their mother and Bridget's niece and nephew back. Then he glanced at Zaida and realized she saw through his tough guy façade. She stood and joined their embrace. After a moment's hesitation, Zoe eventually joined in too. He drew strength from his sisters, all special women like their mother. He would bring their mother home for them. Whatever it took...even if it meant his life.

They jumped apart when Zane's cell phone rang. He almost dropped it trying to pull it from his pocket. The screen showed the call came from an unknown number. Considering what they were dealing with, he should deny the call, which probably came from a telemarketer. But his gut churned, forcing him to take a chance and answer it.

"I've been waiting for you to find me, Black. Or should I say Wilder."

Zane moved away from his sisters, waving to Jay to alert him to the phone call, knowing his team leader would understand. He stepped outside for privacy. "How did you get this number?"

He'd heard many sinister sounds over the course of his career, but the laugh which

bounced in his ear sent a chill down his spine. “You should know by now how deep my resources go. If not, then I overestimated you.”

“And I underestimated you, Reggie. Was it your idea or Joe Albert’s to come after my mother?”

“Your mother got in the way. It was the kids we were after. I would have thought you guessed that.”

Zane’s fist itched to pulverize Reggie Singer, and he couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t the next time he saw him. He heard the door open, and Jay and Cole stepped out on the porch. Cole was on the phone, probably to someone at KSI to try and trace the call. He could hear pandemonium inside as people tried to talk over each other to find out what was going on, but once the door closed, he had enough quiet to hear the call.

“Let’s be real, Singer. If you only wanted the kids, you had several opportunities to jump us and take them. I’m guessing Albert convinced you to seize the opportunity when they were alone with my mother because he wanted the maximum impact possible. He does know I wasn’t the one who shot his cousin, right? That guy’s in jail.”

“We know exactly who played what role in everything. But that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Let me guess. You want a ransom for my mother and the children, right? How much do you piles of shit want to be paid?”

“It’s not money I’m after, Wilder. I have plenty of that from my line of work. I want something else.”

“What the hell is that?”

“I want the heads of Armando and Elian De la Peña on a silver platter. And I want you to be the one to kill them and bring me proof of their execution. Then you might get your mother and these brats back in one piece.”

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“Stop bullshitting me, Singer. I’m burned when it comes to Armando and Elian. You know I can’t get close to them, much less execute them. The only way out of this is to bring your hostages back and turn yourselves in.”

“Stop dicking around, Wilder. I want the De la Peñas executed, and I want it done by you. My sources tell me you’re one hell of a sharpshooter. If you’re creative enough, you won’t have to get too close in order to take them out. You have twenty-four hours, or I start sending the hostages back a piece at a time.”

Singer ended the call before he could negotiate proof of life. Zane battled the urge to fling his phone against the side of the house, knowing he should have asked for proof upfront instead of taunting Singer to prolong the call. He shoved the phone back in his pocket and glanced up at Jay and Cole. “I’m guessing you figured out the gist of the call.”

“The only way to get your mother and the kids back is for you to kill Armando and Elian,” Jay said.

Cole hung up, his expression grim. “The call was bounced over multiple towers. BB said the call didn’t last long enough for them to pinpoint a location. We’ve got nothing. Do we really believe he’ll release them even if Zane kills the De la Peñas?”

“Hell, no,” Zane answered. “And we have twenty-four hours to figure out what we’re going to do, or I get to add assassin to my resume.”

“Then let’s hope Thumper has some answers. Let’s regroup with the rest of the team at KSI. It’s time to end this once and for all.”

The door opened in the middle of Jay's suggestion, and Zane stared into the determined face of Bridget Kincaid. She closed the door behind her and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm coming with you."

"It's better if you stay here with everyone else," Jay protested. "We'll leave a few people here with you to be safe, but I doubt the kidnappers will come back at this point. We'll have Kat and Sydney keep you all posted every step of the way. You have to let us do our jobs. We'll bring everyone home. It's what we do, and we're good at what we do."

"Well, you'll have to forgive me if I don't exactly trust any of you right now. I want to be there for my niece and nephew whenever you find them, no matter what. It's what my sister would want. I've already let Mat and Lowe down. I'm not doing it again. I'm going with you even if I have to walk there myself."

"We don't know how traumatized the kids are going to be when we find them. It's a good idea to have someone along who's a familiar face to them," Cole added, and Jay considered their arguments.

"All I agree to is for you to come to KSI with us. We'll play the rest by ear. We can't do our job if we're worrying about your safety, too, so if I tell you to stay put, you'll stay put. Understand?"

For a moment, Zane thought she would disagree. But then she nodded her head. They turned to go inside as Sam opened the door.

"You guys need to see this."

They stepped inside to hear a deep beep which reminded Zane of an underwater

sonar. Everyone had gathered around the TV in the living room, and Zane fought his way through the crowd to see what captured their attention. Cole and Jay came up from behind to flank him. They stared at the map of the county which filled the TV screen. A red dot flashed from a northwest quadrant of the map.

“What the hell?” Zane drawled. “What is this?”

“It popped up on the TV out of nowhere,” Zaida explained. “I swear no one touched it.”

“Is this some kind of locator beacon?” Cole asked.

“Oh, my God!” Bridget exclaimed, effectively drawing everyone’s attention. “It’s Marlowe.”

“You don’t think...” Audra’s voice trailed off as she glanced from the TV to her daughter and back.

“She’s right. Damn, if Marlowe didn’t somehow send us her location using the TV satellite,” Wyatt explained. “She told me the last time we talked on the phone that she was hoping to use something like this for her project for the Technology Fair. She was having trouble figuring out exactly how to make it work, but she thought it would be helpful in tracking missing persons. This has to be her!”

“You can’t be serious!” Ivy exclaimed, glaring at Wyatt.

“She’s just a girl,” Oran jumped in, and Bridget would have jumped across the room to slap them both if Zaida hadn’t placed a restraining hand on her arm.

“Panther,” Jay started, but Cole quickly replied with an “On it!” before placing a call on his cell. When BB answered, Cole gave him the details of what they were seeing

and then sent a picture of the TV screen. After a few final words, Cole hung up.

“We need to go. BB said he should have something by the time we get there.”

“Yeah, I’m coming as back-up,” Brick said. “We have enough people here to keep an eye on everyone, and I want to take down the bastards who messed with our family.”

Bridget glanced at her parents. “I’m going too. I want to be there when they find the kids.”

“Well, we’re coming, too,” Oran interjected, but Wyatt sent him a glare that was highly effective in having others obey him. It served him well in the military and worked for the most part with his daughters.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort. You are going to wait here with the rest of us, and you’re going to use this time to get your priorities straight.” Wyatt glanced back at his daughter. “Go, honey. They’ll want to see you. Keep us posted and be safe.”

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Zane touched her elbow and was surprised when she let him lead her outside to the waiting SUV. She refused to peer at him or talk to any of them on the ride back to KSI. Zane prayed silently they would get to his mother and the kids before it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“You ready for what we find in there?”

Zane stared through the binoculars at the lone house situated in a grove of trees. The place seemed like something out of a 1950s sitcom, complete with manicured lawn, white siding with black shutters, and a picket fence, for crying out loud. Yet, this is where the beacon led them. He hated to doubt a thirteen-year-old mechanical genius, but in this instance, he wondered if they were on a wild goose chase.

He finally turned to face Brick, decked out in the same tactical gear he wore. “We’re not sure they’re even here. I mean we’re following a weird satellite transmission we think came from Marlowe. But we don’t know the beacon was anything but a fluke.”

“Heat signatures in the house and the garage.” Kat’s voice filtered over their earpieces, and Zane returned his binoculars to his face. “Four in the garage, but the way they’re situated, three could be hostages. Four inside the house, all clustered on the east end.”

“Singer and Albert have help,” Brick murmured.

“Alpha, we breach the house. Delta, breach the garage. Zane and Brick, you’re our

sniper coverage. Kat, keep us posted on the movement of those heat signatures.”

A round of “copy” and “copy that” sounded through the coms at Jay’s orders. Zane itched to be involved on the breach, but as the team’s expert gunman, he admitted he could best serve his team from his sniper’s nest.

“We’ll get ‘em, man.” Brick must have temporarily switched off his coms because Zane could hear his voice from right next to him instead of in his ear.

“I know.” Zane didn’t break his stance or his watch over the house. “I’m trying not to imagine what they’ll be like when we get to them. I swear if they hurt my mother or those kids, I’ll...”

“We’ll kill the bastards. No one messes with our family. Whatever it takes, man.”

This time, Zane did glance over at his teammate – his friend. “Whatever it takes.”

Jay’s voice returned over the coms, checking in with Delta Team leader, Adam “Rock” Davis. Everyone was in place, ready to breach. Zane’s nerves started to sing, and he forced himself to focus on his breathing. In, then out. In, out. Slow and steady and focused. Brick took position beside him, his rifle trained on the scene. They waited, hearing the low voices over the coms and their own breathing.

Three. Two. One.

The teams went in hot, using flash bangs to create enough confusion to take their targets by surprise.

“Target down,” Panther confirmed.

“Target secure,” Wings said.

“Zane, rabbit heading your way,” BB shouted.

Zane set his sights on the man bolting from the house, gun drawn as the target hauled ass toward the wooded area behind the garage. He took a deep breath, steadied his rifle, and fired. The shot pierced the back of the man’s head, and he went down flailing his arms and legs.

“Target down.”

Gunfire crackled over the coms, and Zane tried not to panic at the lack of communication from the Delta Team. He had to focus on his job, but for once in his life, the job wasn’t foremost on his mind.

“Targets secure. Location’s clear.”

Jay’s voice set Zane’s nerves on edge as more gunfire erupted on the coms.

“Delta, SitRep.”

“We’re pinned under fire. Request back-up.”

“Shit!” Zane pushed up to his knees, taking his rifle from its stand.

“What are you doing?” Brick demanded.

“My mom is down there. I’m going in.”

Brick turned away from the scene below to pierce Zane with a hard stare. “Two of the best teams of trained operatives have this handled. Don’t flatter yourself into thinking you can barge in there and save them all on your own. Do your job. Don’t go cowboy on us.”

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Brick's claim he would go off on his own, or cowboy, rankled him almost as much as the man being right.

"Alpha breaching to the west."

Brick ignored Zane and turned his attention back to the scene below. The gunfire continued, and Zane knew a moment of indecision. Then he saw movement at the back of the garbage.

"Brick, on your 10."

Brick shifted his sights to the left, following Zane's instructions like he was following the hands on a clock, just in time to see the target disappear into the woods.

"Got a rabbit," Brick announced on the coms. He gazed at Zane. "It's Singer."

"In pursuit." Zane moved before Brick could stop him. He knew Brick wouldn't leave his sniper's nest, and the others were occupied. He needed them to secure the hostages, so it was up to him to snare Singer.

"Zane, the heat signature was about 200 yards ahead of you, but I lost it among the trees."

"Copy," he relayed to Kat.

His training came into play as he tracked Singer, his rifle at the ready. Starting in the direction Kat sent him on, he paused periodically to study the terrain as he went. His

eyes noted the brush and limbs around him, checking for any sign to indicate someone or something had passed by. He could feel he was getting close when he saw something on the ground as he ran through. He backtracked to examine the dried leaf lying in the brush, its rough brown exterior sporting dark, rust spots which seemed suspiciously like blood.

The directional droplets pointed toward another path that wasn't consistent with the trail he ran on. The blood could be animal, but his gut churned too much for him to ignore it. He shifted his steps, moving slower, ever watchful and on alert. After a few steps, he spotted more blood. Singer suffered an injury during the breach. It explained the blood and gave Zane hope he would catch up to his target.

He reached a strange cluster of trees, their bases surrounding a clearing while their limbs entangled with each other the taller they rose. He'd never seen trees grow this way, forming the perfect hiding place for someone able to climb the bark and reach the perch among the leaves. Zane never dropped his stance nor lowered his weapon, but he turned in a circle to sweep the clearing as he moved to the center. Singer was here. He could feel it.

The coms crackled, and he heard Jay's voice give the SitRep he wasn't expecting to hear.

"Targets secured. Hostages in the wind. Repeat. The hostages aren't here."

He reached a hand to tap the com in his ear, switching off the voices as he continued to move in a precise circle. "I know you're here, Singer," he called, his words bouncing off the tree trunks, seeming to echo in the small clearing. "I know you're hiding like a little chicken shit. My team is on their way. You can hide from me, but you can't hide from all of us."

He heard a rustling from somewhere behind him, and he whirled around to scan the

area, keeping one eye on his six in case the noise was a distraction. But the rustling continued until Singer stepped out of the brush. He moved with a noticeable limp, and Zane noted a stain on his pants leg around his calf.

“Hands behind your head. Move toward me. Slowly. Remember I’m a certified sharpshooter who won’t hesitate to light your ass up.”

“You won’t kill me,” the man sneered. “I’m the only one who knows where they are. I’m guessing you’ve heard. They aren’t being held at the house. That would have been too easy.”

“Then it’s good you’re up to talking. You can tell me where to send my team to find them.”

“That would spoil the fun.”

Zane struggled to keep his anger under control. His finger itched to pull the trigger and rid the world of Reggie Singer, but if saving his mother and the kids meant playing this game with Singer, then he’d suffer through it now and kill the SOB later.

“Why take them? They have nothing to do with any of this. Why not kill Armando and Elian yourself?”

Singer started moving to the right, a slow sideways step made awkward by his injury. With his rifle still raised, Zane followed his move.

“Think I’m going to tell you about my plan while we wait for your team to catch up to us? I’m not an amateur. I knew you would try to track us down. I didn’t expect you to actually do it, but just in case, I made alternate plans.”

Zane blinked as the answer occurred to him. “Holy shit.” He took a step closer, and

Singer stiffened as if waiting for him to start shooting. Zane smiled, pleased he was able to put Singer off guard. “They figured out who you are. You can’t get close enough to kill them without getting killed first. You even used Thumper to get me out of the way so you could go after the kids. Damn. Nice try, asshole.”

“Did you really think you could hide your girl and her brats? I knew what would draw you out. Getting your mother was just a bonus.”

“But now I have you and Thumper. There’s no one left for you to manipulate into killing Armando and Elian. Your plan failed.”

Singer’s mocking expression fell. He stopped his sideways shuffle, and he seemed poised for flight back into the trees.

“Don’t even think about it,” Zane warned, taking another step closer and aiming his rifle directly at Singer’s chest to let him know he was ready to shoot if Singer pushed him.

“There’s no stopping them.” This time Singer took a step forward. “You spent a year trying to get close enough to do that. You know I’m right. Killing them is the only option.”

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“I’m sure as hell not going to be blackmailed into doing this. Drop to your knees, hands on your head. Tell me where you’re keeping the hostages.”

Singer stayed on his feet, his arrogant smirk returning. “So how did you know where to find me?”

Zane raised his head to peer over his rifle, his own mocking smile curving his lips. “You mean you don’t know? A thirteen-year-old girl outsmarted you. She figured out how to send me a location pin which brought me directly to your little house with the picket fence. Who did you trick to get the house to use as a hideout anyway?”

“The old lady could care less who’s using her house now. She was ancient, so you could say I did her a favor when I slit her throat and took her house.”

“You sure that’s wise? Confessing to murder in front of me?”

“You have no proof, so why not? It’s your word against mine. You don’t even have proof I’m holding anyone here against their will. That location pin which brought you here? You have no proof as to who sent it. It could have come from me. How do you know all of this wasn’t a trap?”

“Because you’re not smart enough to pull something like that off.” Zane was tired of the standoff with Singer. He needed an idea to force the man to tell where he was holding his mom and the kids, but all of his energy was focusing on not letting the guy get away.

“I was smart enough to figure out your undercover assignment. I was smart enough to

follow you for months without you knowing. I was smart enough to get you away from your precious mother's house. I was hoping the pretty nurse would be there, so I would have even more leverage to get you to do what I wanted. There's no incentive like a good piece of ass. And I've watched her. A lot. She is a hot piece of ass. I may have to go back for her. I wouldn't mind—"

"What makes you think you're going anywhere but to prison, you sick son of a bitch?"

"Because if you don't let me go, your mother and those brats are as good as dead. If you don't kill Armando and Elian, they are dead. Your only choice is to walk away from me with that gun and do what I told you too. The clock is ticking."

Zane's finger hovered over the trigger. He stared into Singer's cold, dead eyes and knew the man told the truth. He saw no other way to save Maggie, Marlowe and Mathias except by doing what Singer wanted. He wanted to scream or hit something or do anything to change the situation. Instead, he lowered his weapon and took a step back.

"Big mistake, Black. Because only one of us is walking away from the clearing. And it ain't gonna be you."

Singer reached behind him and withdrew a Glock from his waistband. He gave a maniacal laugh as he aimed the muzzle at Zane's head.

"Drop the gun! Drop it now!"

The shouts went up as the Alpha Team stepped into the clearing, rifles aimed at Singer. Startled by the commotion, Singer whirled around with his gun pointed right at Jay. The roar of rapid gunfire drowned out Zane's scream of "No!" Taking multiple hits, Singer hit the ground, his gun landing beside him. His head rolled to the

side, his wide dead eyes staring at Zane.

Zane fell to his knees, dropping his rifle and beating his fists against his thighs. His team had his back and prevented a target from killing him. But in the process, they succeeded in killing his mother and Bridget's kids.

And he felt his world crumble around him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Acoppery taste filled Bridget's mouth. She pulled her hand away to see she'd bitten her fingernail down to the quick, causing the spot to bleed. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and the back of her hand against her jeans. Her eyes burned from lack of rest, strands of dark hair falling from her messy bun to stick to her face. She could smell her own body odor from the sweat caused by the excruciating heat in the surveillance van.

She tried to talk to the guy watching the monitors into letting her step outside — what was his name? Digger? No, Rigger. He was adamant that she would blow their cover by stepping outside. But being inside was wreaking havoc on her peace of mind. Since Rigger was monitoring the activity going on at the house up the street, she heard every order given and every round of gunfire. But what made her heart stop in her chest were the words coming over the microphone after the gunfire died away.

“The hostages aren't here.”

The tears fell unchecked, and fear seized her lungs, making it hard to breathe. “Tell me I can go outside now.”

Rigger barely glanced over his shoulder, obviously annoyed at the interruption. “What?”

“Tell me I can go outside now,” she said a little louder. When she went unanswered, her voice rose even higher, shouting at Rigger to listen to her. “Tell me I can go outside now! I need to go outside now!”

Rigger jumped, gaping at her outburst. After a few seconds, he collected himself enough to nod. She needed no other encouragement. She shoved the back doors of the van open and all but fell out onto the curb. The doors automatically slammed closed behind her, but she barely noticed. She gulped as much fresh air as she could, but her stomach turned queasy. She barely stumbled over to a nearby ditch before she retched until her stomach was completely empty. Then she collapsed on the ground, pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. She rocked back and forth, trying not to wonder if her kids were still alive.

Why would Marlowe send them the location pin if they weren’t here? She knew the beacon came from her niece. She’d never been so sure of anything in her life, and yet nothing was making sense. They had to be here. They had to.

The longer she rocked, the more her mind traveled a path of its own making. Memories of Jennifer and Dean with the kids, of her and Jennifer as kids, of their parents going overboard at Christmas, of the rush of working the ER in Charleston.

She suddenly released her knees and sat up straighter as a realization occurred to her. She had two patients come through the Charleston ER one night, malnourished and severely abused. The cops were called to the house on a noise complaint, and one of them noticed the neighbor’s dog pawing at a black grate at the side. The cops told her they checked the grate and saw nothing. They speculated an animal had died under the house and attracted the attention of the dog. Instead, they found the children huddled in an underground bunker.

Could it be? They would have torn the house and garage to pieces searching for Maggie, Marlowe and Mathias. They wouldn’t have missed finding a basement or an

attic or anything like that. The house was like something her parents would live in, so there was no way it would come with a hidden bunker. Would it?

She was up in a flash, pushing her legs to run faster than they ever had. She could hear Rigger yelling after her, but she never stopped or glanced behind her. Her eyes were on the house just a short distance away. She started shouting as she stepped onto the property, but before she could reach the house, a strong band of steel grabbed her around the waist and picked her up until she was running in mid-air.

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Her fists beat at the arm holding her, and she struggled to no avail to escape.

“Bridget, calm down. You can’t go in there. We’re still securing the scene.”

“Brick, put me down. They’re here somewhere. I have to find them. They’re counting on me. I can’t let them down. I can’t.”

Her words spilled from her mouth in a random order of gibberish which stopped making sense to anyone but her. Panic seized her, and she started begging to be released. Brick adjusted his hold until he pinned her arms to her side.

“Stop struggling before you hurt yourself. They’re not here. We’ve looked.”

“But Marlowe sent the beacon. They’re here. I know they’re here. Please! We have to keep searching. They are counting on us to find them.”

“Bridget, we think Singer moved them after Marlowe sent the beacon. Zane went after Singer on his own, so we need to help him out. Once we have Singer in custody, we can get him to tell us where he moved them to.”

“What if they’re hurt? What if he never tells us where they are, and we lose them for good? I can’t tell you how I know, but I know they’re here. I know if they had been moved, they would have found a way to get word to us. My kids are brilliant and resourceful and awesome. I can’t give up on them. Please don’t make me give up on them. You guys go after Zane. I’ll stay and search for the others.”

Twisting her around without loosening his hold, he stared at her for several minutes.

She used her eyes to plead with him to understand. She didn't have a mother's bond with her niece and nephew, but she believed she would know if they weren't close by. She believed she would know if something worse had happened to them.

Brick raised his voice to carry over the yard to where some of the others stood. "Jay, can you and Alpha handle back-up for Zane? I need Delta to help do another sweep of the premises. I want to be sure we didn't miss anything."

"Copy that," Jay agreed. "Alpha, let's head out."

Bridget almost collapsed in relief. "Listen, around the foundation to the house, did you notice if there was a door or a grate or something? There was this case of abuse back where I used to live. The kids were kept in this underground crawl space. Could there be something like that here which you might have missed?"

Brick gazed over her head to address the men who were left behind. "Fan out. Check for any crawl space or hidden trap door—anything we could have missed. Leave nothing unsearched."

Bridget started to follow behind them, but Brick held her fast. "Let them look. You need to take a moment. When we find them, they need you to be strong."

She nodded. "I know, but I don't think I can. I've never been so frightened in my life."

"But everything you do is for those kids, and you do a damn good job. You can do this, and if you feel like you can't, you lean on me. Got it?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I got it. Just find them. I can't lose my kids too. Zane and his sisters can't lose their mother. This cannot end in tragedy. Not today."

He nodded. "Come on. You're with me."

He grabbed her hand, and they ran toward the house. Some were inside, and some were outside, walking the space slow enough to study every nook and cranny. She saw nothing that could lead to a space where they were being held. Each minute that ticked by left her spiraling.

"Come on." Brick tugged her hand. "These guys have the house covered. I want to check the garage. Kat said the heat signatures could indicate Maggie and the kids were in there. If there is a hidden spot somewhere, it could be in there."

She ran after him, her legs barely keeping up with his long strides. She drew up short once inside, but she wasn't quick enough to avoid bumping into an old car in the center of the garage. She stumbled and fell right on her ass, anhummpffescaping her throat.

"Bridget!" Brick called, turning to come back and help her up, but she waved him away.

"I'm good. Just look."

Then she saw it, lying under the bumper of the car on the ground. The white plastic guitar pick. Leaning back, she stretched her arm as far as she could and used her fingertips to push it closer to her until she could grasp it in her hand. She pulled it up in front of her face and almost sobbed at the red logo printed on it, too worn and faded to be legible. But Bridget knew exactly what it said.

"Brick!" she shouted. "We need to move this car. I think it's covering something up."

"How do you know?" He appeared at the back of the car, peering over the trunk at her.

She held up the guitar pick. “This is from Abernathy’s Guitar Store in Atlanta. It belonged to Dean, and Mat carries it around. He’s never without it. I found it under the car.”

Brick pulled her to her feet, instructing her to wait off to the side. He squeezed behind the wheel, reaching underneath the steering column for a few minutes before the car fired to life. He threw it in reverse and backed it slowly out of the garage. Once the car passed her, Bridget moved to the front, searching the floor for a sign of...anything. It wasn’t long before Brick joined her. His thick-sole boots stomped the floor. She didn’t ask why. She trusted he knew what he was doing, and whatever he was doing would give a clue as to how to find their family.

Then she heard the noise, different from the racket Brick was creating. She caught his arm with her hand and placed a finger to her lips to stop him. Once the garage was quiet, they could better hear the softtap, tap, tapwhich caught her attention. She glanced at him then dropped her gaze to her feet. Nothing about the floor seemed anything but solid cement, and her heart caught in her throat.

Please don’t let them have been buried alive!

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With a gentle shove, Brick pushed her to the side, twisted his head and yelled in a voice so loud it pierced her ear drums.

“Delta, in here! They’re under the floor. Bring anything we can use to get to them. Double time it!”

Bridget was shoved further out of the way by five well-muscled guys who moved like their clothes had been set on fire. As they worked to figure out a plan, she stood to the side, chewing on her non-existent nails, and prayed.

She bargained with God to spare the lives of Maggie and the children. She asked Jennifer and Dean for forgiveness for exposing their kids to danger. She swore to find a job which would keep her at home more often. She promised to only bring people into their lives who would serve as role models for Marlowe and Mathias. When her nerves got the better of her, she started pacing. Her mind went to a dark place, and she kept her eyes averted, certain by the time they got to Maggie and the kids, they would be pulling corpses from the crawl space.

“What the hell?” she heard one of them shout, and she squeezed her eyes tight at the sound. “This section is not concrete. It’s painted and textured to appear like it, but it’s not as solid.”

“Brick, wait!” another shouted. “Wait. I think I’ve got it. The damn thing is mechanized. Everybody move back!”

Despite her fear choking off her oxygen and causing her heart to pound in her chest, Bridget whirled around to find out exactly why they were moving back. They

couldn't stop working. They had to get to them. Dead or alive, Maggie and the kids could not stay in the godforsaken spot their kidnapper put them in.

Brick was eyeing something on the wall, hidden behind a rack of tools which had been disturbed during the search but deemed irrelevant. "It's a bio scanner. Probably programmed specifically to Singer."

"I got it."

Bridget jumped, not realizing anyone had walked into the garage behind her. But there they were – Jay, Cole, Wings, BB and Zane. BB brushed passed her, slipping a pack off his back, but Bridget only had eyes for Zane. He was sandwiched between Jay and Cole, and she'd never seen him appear so broken. He didn't meet her gaze and his broad shoulders slumped as if the weight of the world threatened to crush him. She thought she was all out of tears, but fresh droplets pricked her eyes.

She wanted to go to him. Was he imaging the worst as well? Was the guilt and grief becoming too overwhelming to bear? He was hurting, just as she was, but she held back, a small part of her still blaming him for endangering her children.

"That's it! We're in!"

Bridget jerked her head around in time to hear the scanner give a distinctive beep as the floor groaned and popped open like it was on a spring. The men ascended on the spot, and she couldn't see what was happening. Voices mingled to create a deafening cacophony. She couldn't distinguish the words being said.

Then they parted, and Bridget's hands flew to cover her mouth. Dusty with her hair falling from its ponytail, Marlowe stepped from the group and ran toward her sobbing. Bridget scooped the girl into her arms, the weight of her niece's body coupled with the relief flooding through her brought her to her knees. She ignored the

jolt of pain that came from hitting the concrete floor. She clung to Marlowe with the intention to never let her go.

Then she saw Rigger gripping a hand and helping someone else crawl out of the space. And Mathias stood tall, his clothes dirty and ripped in a couple of places, his face pale, but the sight of him one of the best Bridget had ever seen. She extended one arm toward him while the other clutched her niece. Mathias stepped into her embrace, the group hug awkward but something none of them wanted to break. She had so much to ask them, so much to say, but all she could do was hug them close and sob.

Zane broke away from his team to rush over to the open space. He reached in and pulled his mother through the opening and crushed her in a bear hug. She watched him pull away for a moment.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere? Everything okay?”

Maggie placed a loving hand to her son’s cheek, her own tears leaving wide paths in the dust on her face. “I’m fine, sweetheart. The men weren’t very nice, but they were careful not to hurt us.”

Bridget collected herself enough to pull back and ask her kids the same question. “What about you two? Are you alright?”

Marlowe studied her with wide eyes which weren’t blinking. “I was afraid. I tried to be brave, but they scared me. I didn’t think I would see you again. I...”

Her voice broke, and Bridget wrapped her in a tight hug. “Oh, my girl. You are so brave. I know you were scared. I was too. But you figured out how to send us a signal to find you. That was you, wasn’t it?”

Marlowe nodded against her shoulder, but when words failed the young girl, Mathias patted her on the back and picked up the explanation.

“She said she thought she could link the TV satellite here with the one at Mrs. Maggie’s. We weren’t sure it was going to work, but we figured we could at least try. She used a remote control we found in the house before they moved us out here, but we couldn’t be sure it actually worked.”

“It did work. But why are your clothes torn?”

He glanced down at his ripped jeans and T-shirt as if seeing them for the first time. “We couldn’t risk them catching on to what Lowe was doing. So I was the distraction. I ran away. I knew I couldn’t outrun them, but I kept them occupied while Lowe did what she needed to. They tackled me, and my clothes got torn. That’s when they decided to move us out here.”

“Mat! You shouldn’t have done that. They could have hurt you for trying to escape.”

He shook his head. “Mrs. Maggie heard them say they were ordered not to hurt us. I didn’t put up a fight when they caught me to make sure. We’re alright. I promise.”

“We’re getting you guys to the hospital anyway to be checked out.” Jay moved forward to drop an arm around Mathias’ shoulders and placed his other hand on Marlowe’s back. “I’m glad you’re okay. And you don’t have to worry about the guy who did this. He won’t be bothering you ever again.”

Bridget caught the meaning behind Jay’s words. She’d dedicated her life to helping people and saving lives, but she couldn’t be sorry at knowing Singer was dead.

She shifted to try and stand when Cole was behind her to lift her and then Marlowe up to their feet. They moved as a group to where they’d left the surveillance van and

SUVs. Jay spoke with one of the guys from the other team, who was staying behind to coordinate with local authorities to secure the crime scene and take care of the men who were apprehended during the takedown.

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Before she could usher her kids into the back of an SUV, Marlowe broke away. She ran over to hug Maggie tightly, and the woman smiled through her tears as she returned the embrace. Then the thirteen-year-old raised her head to grace Zane with a shy smile.

“We knew you would find us. Thank you. For coming for us.”

“You’re welcome.”

He watched Marlowe run back to her. Their eyes met and held. Bridget could read the regret and guilt in his eyes, emotions mirrored in her own. She couldn’t explain it, but she knew his thoughts ran along the same lines as hers. They started out as friends and became lovers, but what came of that was the spark of something which could have changed both of their lives for the better.

They thankfully were not grieving the loss of their loved ones, but the sense of loss was still there. The loss was for something which had the potential to be wonderful but now would never be.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Zane leaned against the window frame overlooking Lenfield Medical Center’s bustling parking lot, his back facing the pane. He watched the doctor examine his mother while a nurse adjusted her IV bag. They provided Maggie with a hospital gown, so she could change out of the dirty clothes she wore.

When he’d called to update his sisters on what happened, Zoe promised to bring

clean clothes. Maggie was staying long enough for the bag of fluid to alleviate her dehydration, so he tried to talk his sisters into waiting to see her until she got home. He knew his argument would fall on deaf ears, but he at least tried to give his mother a few moments of peace.

Once they were left alone, Zane pulled a chair to his mother's bedside. He clasped her hand as he sat.

"You're not to blame for any of this." Maggie's smile was warm but reflected her fatigue.

"We both know that's not entirely true."

She pulled her hand from his and touched his cheek, rough with a day's worth of stubble. "So much like your father. He would be so proud. I'm so proud. When those men broke into the house, I was able to use all the tips you showed me on protecting and defending myself. I probably could have gotten away if I wasn't worried about the children getting hurt. I told them we had to hang on because you were coming for us."

He turned his head to kiss her palm. "I'm sorry you had to go through any of it. I never wanted my job to touch you, Zoe, Zaylee or Zaida that way."

"Your job is a part of who you are. We love you, and that means accepting that part of your life. I can't say I don't worry about you, and when you were stabbed, I wondered if I could bear for you to continue. But when I was with Mathias and Marlowe, and I could give them hope in knowing you were moving heaven and earth to find us, I realized what a blessing your job could be. You've helped so many people. The only way to shield us from that part of your life is to shut us out completely, and I won't allow that. Neither would your sisters."

He grinned at her, trying to hide how much of a balm her words were to his battered psyche. “I think you might be a little biased, but I appreciate it.”

Her smile faded, and she studied him intently. He could almost see her mind working through something, so he waited for her to say what was troubling her.

“It’s not over, is it?”

He didn’t have to ask what she meant by her question. “Singer is never coming after you or anyone else ever again.”

“That’s not an answer to my question, Zane.”

“I know, but it’s all I can give you right now.”

She sighed. “It’s not over for Bridget either. I’m guessing the kids’ grandparents will use this against her. It’s not right. Mathias and Marlowe love her, and she’s sacrificed so much to provide for them. It’s such a shame. She needs someone in her corner to support her as she stands up to these people.”

“I doubt she would accept my help even if I offered. Mathias and Marlowe wouldn’t have been targeted if they had never met me.”

“You are not the cause of bad things that happen because of bad people. Bridget was worried and upset and rightfully so. She needs time, but she needs you too. And I think she knows it. She’s afraid to say it out loud.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Playing matchmaker, Momma? I would have thought you were too busy for that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll drop it. But only if you agree to go and eat something.

I know you have to be hungry, and I want to rest before your sisters get here to fuss over me.”

He nodded, recognizing her need for solitude. When he needed to decompress, he went to the gun range. His mother would hide away alone, allowing the quiet to reset her troubled mind. He rose, kissed her head and stepped outside the emergency room unit, pulling the curtain closed behind him.

His hand rubbed the back of his neck, his body crying out for a warm bed and a night of uninterrupted sleep, but he would settle for the caffeine jolt of a cup of bad hospital coffee.

When he turned to find his way to the cafeteria, he saw Mathias hovering nearby, a sheepish expression on his face. Zane studied him curiously as he approached.

“Hey, Mathias. Everything alright?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Lowe scraped her knee. The nurse is cleaning and bandaging it before she’s released. Aunt Bridget is with her. I, uh, I wanted to check on Mrs. Maggie.”

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Zane smiled. “She’s resting, but she’ll be pleased to know you asked about her. They’re giving her some fluids since she was a little dehydrated, then she’ll be good to go home.”

“That’s good. Your mom’s cool.”

“I think so. Your aunt’s cool too.”

Mathias grew quiet, staring at his feet as he shuffled his weight from one to the other.

“What’s up, Mat?”

“They’re probably going to take us away from her. My grandparents. They blame her for what happened.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Tristin Knight approached them from Zane’s side, his easy smile putting both Zane and Mathias at ease. “I’ll make sure of it. I have a friend, Antonia. She’s a kickass attorney, and she’s agreed to represent your aunt for free. She likes to do battle against assholes who try to break up families.”

“Tryst.” Zane glared at his friend. “They’re still his grandparents.”

“Sorry, but I wanted you to know you guys don’t have to worry. Antonia has it handled.”

“Thanks.” Silence stretched between them until Mathias cleared his throat and started to move away. “Will we see you later?”

Zane hated to dim the hopeful glint in the boy's eyes. "I think I'm the last person your aunt wants to see right now."

Mathias gave him a sly smile. "I think you'd be surprised."

He headed down the hall to the unit across the way, where he disappeared behind the curtain to his sister's room. Once Mathias was out of earshot, Tristin nudged Zane with his elbow.

"The kid has a point."

Zane glared at him. "What do you know about it?"

"I know you've got a thing for the aunt, and if she didn't have a thing for you, she wouldn't have gotten so upset."

This time, Zane rolled his eyes. "I got her niece and nephew kidnapped and buried in a bunker. She's got every right to be upset."

"Maybe in the moment. But now? I saw how she watched you when you guys got to the hospital. She's not ready for you to walk away. She doesn't know how to go back to the way it was before things got complicated."

"You make it sound like we're a married couple who had a fight. We barely know each other."

Tristin crossed his arms across his chest and nodded like he was considering what Zane said. "Then why are you wishing you could go back to the way it was?"

Zane opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out. Tristin grinned and slapped him on the back.

“I’m going to check in with everybody. Let me know when you get your mom home and settled. We’ll talk later. We still have to figure out what to do about the De la Peñas.”

“Tryst, I don’t know—”

Tristin held up a hand to silence him. “Not now. It can wait. You have more important people to see to. Call if you guys need anything.”

Zane stood by the wall outside his mother’s room, his need for coffee forgotten. His mind was a mess, consumed with concern for his mother, desire to be there for Bridget and her kids, yearning to question Thumper, and frustration that he hadn’t ended things once and for all with the De la Peñas.

He remained tortured by his own thoughts until his sisters arrived. Zoe and Zaylee barely acknowledged him before barging through the curtain to see their mother. Zaida hung behind, studying him closely. He avoided meeting her eyes because she would know in that instant what he was struggling with.

“One at a time, baby brother.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You can’t save the world in one move. You have to take care of one thing at a time. Momma is fine, and we’re here to help you take care of her. Your undercover case can wait. That leaves one thing. An important thing. I don’t think it can wait anymore.”

He met her eyes then, her meaning clearing his troubled mind. He dropped a kiss to Zaida’s cheek and hurried out to the parking lot to his truck, where Wings and BB parked it for him after they left Thumper with the Sheriff’s Department.

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His tires squealed as he sped out of the parking lot. It was time to take care of some loose ends.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bridget scanned all the names of the books on Marlowe's shelves, checking for the particular title her niece requested. It took her two passes until she finally found the publication with the slick black book jacket and red lettering. Shaking her head at how she'd missed the book with the first pass, she retreated to her bedroom to add it to the overnight bag.

After she zipped the bag, she glanced around her room, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Yearning stirred within her. She longed to spend the night in her bed, sleeping until she forgot the last forty-eight hours. But when Sydney and Cole opened their home to them so they wouldn't have to be alone after their ordeal, she could read relief in her niece and nephew's faces. They wanted to stay. They felt safe with the couple, and that was more important right now than her own wants.

When the doorbell rang, she stiffened. She had assured Cole she was fine going to the house by herself, but she wasn't expecting anyone to come by. After her confrontation with Seth at the hospital and what happened to Maggie, Marlowe and Mathias, she debated whether or not to hide instead of answering the door.

When a knock followed the doorbell, she hurried to the living room to peer through the peephole. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight, and she leaned her head foreword to carefully rest it against the wood without making a sound.

It was a sin for Zane Wilder to look so good after the day they'd had. Exhaustion was etched in every line of his face, but his strong jaw, beautiful mouth, and breathtaking eyes did crazy things to her insides. They spent one night together, and she could still feel his kiss against her skin and his fingertips making her nerve endings zing. Even now, she grew damp thinking of his cock moving inside her.

He was more of a complication than she ever bargained for. He was under her skin and entangled in her life.

"I know you're home." His voice was muffled as it carried through the door. "I should give you a lecture for coming here without a bodyguard, but I'm glad we're alone. We need to talk."

"I can't," she called.

"Please. Hear me out. If you want to hate me the rest of your life after that, I swear I'll walk away."

"If I let you in, I won't be able to let you go." She had no idea where the words came from or why she thought it made sense to share them with him.

"I'm sorry. I never meant for you or the kids to be hurt. I never thought my job would ever touch you and them like that. I'll never be able to make it up to you. I don't blame you for hating me after all of this."

She pushed away from the door. "Dammit, I don't. I want to, and I should, but I don't hate you. You're a decent man, and I haven't met a lot of those. But I'm not ready for you."

"Open the door, baby."

She opened her mouth fully intending to order him away. Forever. But no words came out. Even if her brain insisted it was the thing to do, her body refused to allow it to happen. So she opened the door with a flourish...and turned away before she fell captive to his intense eyes and heady presence.

She heard the door close. Muscular arms wrapped around her, holding her arms to her sides with a grip loose enough for her to break free of if she wanted to. She closed her eyes and gave in to the temptation to lean into his body. His breath stirred her hair as he rested his lips against the part in her hairline.

“My mom was the reason I enlisted in the army. I was content to live out my days working and taking care of her and my sisters. I was young when my dad died. My mother described him as a hard-working and honorable man, and that’s how I remember him. He wanted to enlist when he was right out of high school, but they wouldn’t accept him because he was deaf in his left ear. Momma told me how proud Dad would have been to know I served my country like he always wanted to.

“I knew I was never a lifer. I’m proud of the time I served, but I was ready to step out after two tours. That’s when Tryst called me with the chance to work for KSI. The job was a perfect fit for me. A lot of what we do is kept under wraps for safety reasons, so Momma doesn’t know the true nature of my job. But I always felt my dad would be proud of the work I’m doing too.

“For the first time in the last two days, I’ve started to reevaluate certain aspects of my job. I hate it touched the people in my life. I thought I’d managed to protect them all from it, but I failed. For the first time, I considered walking away. For good. If I thought it meant you would forgive me for exposing your children to danger, I would walk away without a second thought.”

She turned in his arms. She folded her arms between them until she was able to cradle his face in her hands.

“You can’t walk away. You’re a protector. It’s in your blood. There are people left in this world who need you, and I don’t want to be the reason their hero doesn’t save the day for them. You’re drawn to people who need to be rescued. That’s why you’re so attached to Sydney and why you and I connected. I understand that. I don’t hate you for what happened, but I do realize we’re not meant to be more than friends.”

“Is that what you want? To be friends and nothing else?”

“We could be friends with benefits, I suppose, but we’ve already said we don’t need the complications we bring to each other. You’ve done your job with me, so it’s okay for you to step away and move on to the next damsel in distress.”

He grasped her hands and pulled them away from his face. As he bent her arms to lower them to her side, he jerked her closer to him, her breasts mashed against him. Her head tilted at an unnatural angle as she peered up at him. His irises smoldered with a fiery passion she wasn’t expecting to find.

She saw his head lowering. She knew what he had in mind. Even as she admitted to herself it wasn’t a good idea, she didn’t pull away. His lips fused to hers, his tongue teasing the seam until she opened her mouth in response. His tongue swept inside, tasting every inch of her mouth. It tangled with her tongue, and she was lost to the sensations rocking her body. As she was melting against him and surrendering to the passion of their kiss, he pulled away. His lips curved into a sexy smirk, and she almost leapt into his arms to continue what he started.

“You, baby, are full of shit.”

She blinked, caught off guard by his words. It took a second for her fury to catch up, and she pushed against his chest with as much force as she could muster. He swayed on his feet but didn’t stumble or fall.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m the guy who’s gotten under your skin. The same as you’ve gotten under mine. I don’t want a damsel in distress. I want a fiercely independent woman who keeps me on my toes. Last I checked, that description fit you perfectly.”

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She'd never met someone who could make her furious one minute and cause her to melt the next. Then Zane Wilder walked into her life.

She inhaled deeply, releasing the breath on a sigh. "What are you saying?"

He raised a finger to caress her cheek, and Bridget shivered. "Our lives are complicated, but I don't want to use it as a reason not to be with you. I don't know what the future holds, but I know I want to see where this goes. I want to date you and get to know your kids and have you get to know my family. I want more nights of touching every inch of that sexy body and having you fall asleep in my arms. You can tell me that's not what you want, but I won't believe you. The way you kiss me and respond to my touch tell a different story."

She pulled his hand away from her face and held it in between them. "What happens when we get to know each other and our families, and then it doesn't work out? My kids will fall in love with you only to be heartbroken when we break up. I have a feeling I would be kind of wrecked about it too. I'm not sure it's worth the risk."

"You weren't sure about the other risks you've been taking with your life — moving to Grayson Cove, starting a new job, stopping to help Sydney when she was stranded on the side of the road, following your hunch about where to find the kids and my mom. Those all worked out. There's no reason why this won't work out too."

"Other than the fact you're in love with a woman who's planning to marry your friend?"

Once the words left her mouth, she realized they were at the heart of her hesitation.

Risk didn't scare her, even if she often second-guessed her choice to take it. But dating a man who wanted a substitute for the woman he couldn't have wasn't a risk which interested her, no matter how irresistible the man was.

"I'm not in love with Sydney. She's my best friend. There's a lot I love about her, but she and I were never meant to be together. She opened me up to the possibility of being with someone. My life has always been my career or my family. Sydney helped me realize I want more. I want what she has with Panther. I'm not saying I think we'll have that, but I can't walk away from an incredible woman when that possibility is there."

Then she was enclosed in his embrace again. His forehead rested against hers, his lips hovering so close she could tilt her head the slightest bit to kiss him. She breathed in the scent that was all him, a scent which haunted her dreams from the moment they met. Her resolve was weakening, and still she couldn't give him what he wanted.

"You can tell me you don't want this, but I'll keep coming around. I don't give up when it's something I want. I want you, Bridget. I want you more than I've wanted anyone in a long time."

She closed her eyes and whispered, "I'm scared."

He smiled. "You wouldn't be if you didn't want this too."

As the silence stretched between them, Zane began running his hands in slow even strokes up and down her back. The motion soothed her even as she felt lust pool in her belly and spread to her limbs. Her brain was muddled by the haze of desire his touch put over her. The urge to say yes to him was strong, but she had a commitment to her kids and the life she was trying to build for them.

"I have to go. Marlowe and Mathias are waiting for me at Cole and Sydney's. Now is

not a good time to be having this conversation.”

“This conversation couldn’t wait, so I called Panther already. He said to tell you, no worries. The kids are fine, and they know you’re with me.”

“What about your mother? Doesn’t she need you after what she’s been through?”

“I left her in my sisters’ capable hands. Plus if she knew what I was doing, she would wholeheartedly approve of me being here. She loves you and your kids. She wouldn’t hesitate to kick my ass if I let you go.”

Bridget giggled. “So are you here because your mother told you to be?”

“Hell, no. I’m here because I want to be.”

She gave into temptation and lightly kissed his lips. “I want you to be here too.”

He pulled her closer until their bodies were flush against each other. “What else do you want?”

She kissed him again. “You. I want you, Zane. I want everything you said — the dating, the getting close to our families, the touching and the kissing...and more.”

He crushed her mouth with his as he lifted her into his arms. She held him around his shoulders tightly as he carried her to her bedroom. He placed her in the middle of the bed, crawling onto the mattress until his body covered hers. His weight pressed her into the soft mattress, and she gave herself over to the moment. The feel of him was almost too exquisite to bear.

He devoured her mouth as a thirsty man having his first taste of water. Her hands snaked up his shirt, his skin warm to her touch. The muscles of his stomach flexed

under her fingertips, and her hands found their way up to his chest, memorizing the feel of him. He broke their kiss long enough to whip his shirt over his head and reach to do the same for her. He made quick work of pulling off her bra. His eyes darkened with desire as he stared at her breasts, his gaze making her feel cherished and beautiful.

Knowing she affected him as much as he did her empowered her. She pulled him down to her, her breasts rubbing against his chest as she touched her lips to his, sweeping her tongue between them. He broke away to capture a nipple with his mouth. His tongue teased, and his mouth sucked until she was writhing underneath him, pleasure washing over her. He moved his mouth to shower the same attention on her other breast and continued to go back and forth until her moans filled the quiet bedroom. The sensation built within her until she thought she would die from sheer bliss, but she held his head to her breasts so he wouldn't stop. When his hand fondled her free breast while his mouth made love to the other, she could feel the pressure building until she exploded, her vision blurring as she succumbed to the orgasm which took her on a ride she wasn't expecting.

Her body usually required more than attention to her breasts for her to come, but Zane's skillful tongue and strong hands showed her what was possible. He dropped feather-light kisses in the valley between her breasts as she rode out the wave of ecstasy, his eyes never leaving her face. She came down from her high, and her lips curved into a satisfied smile.

"Beautiful," he drawled as he moved down her body. "I think you definitely need to do that again."

"Are you trying to kill me?" she teased as he flipped the button open on her jeans and drew down the zipper in one deliberate motion.

"Would you like me to stop?" He yanked her jeans and underwear off, leaving her

completely naked under his heated stare.

“Don’t. You. Dare.”

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He rose long enough to shed the rest of his clothes and roll a condom over his impressive cock. Then starting at her toes, he kissed his way up her body, pausing at the juncture between her legs. His finger circled her clit until her breath quickened, and then it dipped inside her, curling to hit the spot that had her hips bucking off the mattress.

“Oh, God, Zane. Please!”

He grinned. “You’re so wet, baby. So ready for me.”

“Yes,” she moaned as his finger went back to rubbing her clit, increasing the pressure to bring her to the brink of another climax before slowing down, drawing out the moment and making her wonder if she would lose her mind.

He kissed her, and her hand snaked down to grip his cock at its base. Their kiss grew frantic as her hand glided up and down his manhood, feeling it grow at her touch. She tilted her hips until she could rub his cock against her clit, the motion steady and smooth and sexy as hell. She turned her head to break their kiss, her desire mounting until she had to cry out in pleasure.

He pushed her hand away and lined his cock up with her entrance. His hips bucked as he slid inside her to the hilt. Her slick channel instantly gripped him tightly, and he paused and moaned, savoring the feel of her around his cock.

“You feel so good,” he murmured as he dropped kisses on her cheeks, across her nose and finally on her mouth.

“Please, Zane. I need...more.” Her body wanted to succumb to the urge to move, but his body pinned her.

He moved, in and out, in a steady rhythm which pushed them to the edge but wasn't enough to send them over. She felt too good for him to rush it, so he kept up the smooth pace and the passionate kisses until her hands gripped his shoulders tightly before moving to cup his buttocks. She pushed against him as her hips thrust upward, changing the position of his cock to hit her sweet spot. Her responding moan was enough to drive him mad. His hands clutched her luscious hips, and he picked up his pace, pounding into her.

She was so close, the need to come overwhelming. She finally moved her hand to reach between them, her finger rubbing her clit in time with his thrusts.

“That's it, baby. That's it. Come for me, baby. Come all over me.”

As if his words flipped a switch, she tumbled over the precipice which sent her careening into her release. She cried out as ecstasy rolled through her body, robbing her of breath. With one final thrust, Zane groaned as his climax hit him with the force of a landslide, blinding him to everything but the feel of being inside this woman. Pleasure rocked them until they were lost to the passage of time.

After what felt like a while but was probably a few minutes, Zane collapsed on top of her, supporting the brunt of his weight with his arms. He didn't pull his cock from her right away. She wrapped her arms around his back to hold him close, and they were content to stay in that position for a bit, their breathing the only sound in the room.

When he finally did rise, Bridget watched him walk to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and enjoyed the view of all his naked glory when he returned. He grabbed the blanket she kept folded across the foot of her bed and covered her. He slipped underneath it and gathered her in his arms. She molded her body to his and rested her

head against his chest.

“We should go. The kids...I want to be there for them.”

Zane placed a lingering kiss against her hair. “Go ahead and rest for a few minutes. Then we’ll go see the kids, and I’ll call to check in with my mom.”

“Sounds good,” she said on a sigh as her eyes drifted close.

Epilogue

One Month Later

The sun shone bright over the lush green lawn of the hotel garden. Rows of white chairs adorned with gauzy bows faced a rustic wooden arbor covered in ivy vines and mingled with fresh flowers of vibrant pinks, purples, yellows and blues. A violinist stood to one side, guiding the bow over the stringed instrument until romantic melodies swirled around the small number of guests.

Zane smiled as he scanned the guests. They were the closest friends and family of the bride and groom, and that meant members of his chosen family were among that number. It was a gathering that the team members and investigators of Knight Security and Investigations deserved after all they’d been through within the last couple of months.

His undercover case was still open pending the trial of Armando and Elian De la Peña, but he had gratefully handed it over to the ATF and FBI. After the case put those he cared about in danger and almost ruined one of the most special relationships in his life, he’d requested to be taken off the case, which Tristin had no problem with. Of course, the work Zane and the rest of the Alpha Team had done made the arrest of the De la Peñas possible. Well, their work and the testimony of Jubel “Thumper”

Riesling, who opted to be a federal witness against the crime family in exchange for immunity and a stint in witness protection. With Armando and Elian out of the picture, there was no longer a possibility of them seeking vengeance against the Alpha Team for the death of Armando's younger son Oscar or possibly wanting custody of Oscar's daughter, Davi.

For Zane, it meant the book closed on one chapter in his life, giving him the opportunity to pursue the next one.

The minister stepped from a cluster of trees to take his place behind the arbor. Following close behind was Tristin and Cole, regal in their Navy dress blues. The music flowed into the lilting sound of the wedding march. The guests stood and turned to face the collection of trees at the back of the garden. As the maid of honor, Chloe Stephens started her walk down the aisle to stand to the side and wait for the bride's appearance.

Zane smiled down at Sydney as he tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "That's our cue."

"Do I look okay?"

He took note of her brilliant red hair swept up into a series of braids which wove around her head into a bun at the nape of her neck. Sprigs of baby's breath rested among the strands and mirrored the sprigs accenting the large colorful bouquet in her hands. Her makeup was expertly applied to accent her wide eyes and high cheekbones, but barely dulled the appearance of the freckles dotting her cheeks and nose. She wore a dress of ivory lace and tulle with a see-through back closed with a long line of buttons. The sheer fabric sleeves were adorned with more lace, and the illusion neckline gave her modesty while the sweetheart dip hinted at her cleavage.

"You're beautiful. Panther is going to forget to breathe when he sees you."

Sydney's smile was wide. "Then let's not keep him waiting."

Her full skirt glided across the ground as they made their way down the white satin cloth laid in the middle of the aisle for her entrance and approach to the arbor. Foregoing the trend of sneaking a secret first-look moment with Cole prior to the ceremony, Sydney opted to wait until the beginning, when she made her way to her groom, for them to see each other for the first time in their wedding attire.

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Zane first noted the moisture in Cole's eyes, but when he turned to smile at Sydney, he could see the sheen of unshed tears filling her eyes. When Zane handed Sydney off to Cole at the end of the aisle, he placed a light kiss to her cheek. He stepped back, the significance of the moment hitting him in the chest. He'd reached a point where he could let go of what wasn't meant to be, and it was time to embrace the future that was his for the living.

He took the empty seat at the end of a row next to Bridget, who was flanked on her other side by Marlowe and Mathias. The sight of the three of them together warmed his heart. The Williamses had given up any attempt to split the small family apart, and though they tried to arrange visitation with their grandchildren, Bridget had refused at the kids' request. Without the threat of a custody suit hanging over their heads, the small family was thriving.

He glanced up in time to see Cole whisper something in Sydney's ear that caused her skin to take on a pretty blush, but then his gaze returned to the woman at his side. Her hair was swept up on one side and secured with a jeweled barrette, giving him an unobstructed view of her profile. He had never considered how sexy the slope of a woman's nose or the gentle line of her jaw could be until he met Bridget.

Of course, there were a lot of things he hadn't realized until Bridget came into his life. Like how much he could enjoy surprising a woman at work with a delicious picnic dinner, or how much he liked hanging out with her teenage nephew or how much he engaged in conversation with her genius niece. Like how much fun sharing intimate banter with a woman over the phone could be. Or how content he could be spending the evening watching a movie with the same woman nestled close to his side.

When Sydney and Cole began to recite their vows, he turned his attention back to the front, but not before he reached for Bridget's hand and held it securely in his on the top of his thigh.

"Cole, I haven't always made the best choices with my life, and I started to believe having a less-than-happy life was all I could hope for. I lived in fear for so long, but once I was brave enough to run from it, I ran straight into your arms. And it's in your arms I found a joy I never knew existed. You make me feel strong and cherished. With you by my side, I've started to dream of better things, of a home and a family. You've made my dreams a possibility. You've given me the gift of hope and happiness and love. To think it all started right here, in this very garden, is surreal, but I vow to you today, in this place where we first met, that I will love you always. I will support you and be your friend and your lover for the rest of our lives. I love you, Cole, more than you'll ever know."

"Sydney, I knew the first time I saw you that you were special. I knew you were meant to change my life, and you did in the very best way possible. I'm not usually good at this kind of thing, and as much as you deserve to hear every word of praise and devotion I could think of to say, I think this sums it up. I love you, deeply and completely. You are a part of my heart and my soul, and when I think of our life together, I feel the most amazing peace. I love you, Syd."

The minister brought the ceremony to a close. Cole and Sydney shared a lingering first kiss as husband and wife. Their guests applauded as they made their way down the aisle, followed by Tristin and Chloe. The celebration moved to the ballroom inside the hotel for the reception.

Zane turned to escort Bridget and smiled to see the tears glistening in her eyes. He hadn't realized she was such an emotional sucker for weddings, and he found the newfound knowledge oddly sweet. He withdrew a handkerchief from his inside coat pocket — his mother had always insisted he carry one to any formal or social affair

— and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, wiping her eyes as she fell into step beside him. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t usually cry like this at weddings. I mean they’re happy occasions.”

“I thought women always cried at weddings,” Mathias said from behind her. “Momma always did.”

Bridget smiled at the innocent reminder of her sister, who possessed a hopeless romantic streak a mile wide. “Your momma cried at everything. I usually don’t, but I don’t know how anyone couldn’t tear up a little today. I mean if you know even a little of Sydney and Cole’s story, then you know how romantic and sweet today is for them. They are such a great couple.”

Zane shared her smile. “Yes, they are.”

As Bridget, Mathias and Marlowe preceded him into the ballroom, he was struck by how he could barely remember what his life was like before this little family came into it. A day didn’t go by that he didn’t remind himself how close he came to losing them and how much he was willing to sacrifice to keep them in his life.

The bride and groom shared their first dance as husband and wife, but soon, the band had the music pumping. More couples filled the dance floor, and everyone enjoyed a true celebration of love and friendship. Zane twirled Bridget around the dance floor as the band played an upbeat dance number. She laughed each time he spun her into his arms, their hips gyrating against each other.

Then the song slowed, the strains haunting and romantic. He pulled her close, relishing the feel of her against him. She tilted her head back to peer at him, her smile radiant.

“Thank you for inviting me. I’m having a great time.”

“There’s no one else I want to be here with.”

She rested her head against his chest. Their bodies moved as one in a seductive dance which had them blocking out everyone and everything around them. They were the only two to exist in this world they retreated to. He wasn’t a dancer, but he would continue for the rest of the night if it meant he could keep her in his arms.

“I love you.”

He wasn’t sure she heard him at first. Then she stopped swaying to the music. She kept her head down, their right hands still interlocked, their left arms encircling each other’s waists.

“What?”

His heart started pounding a rhythm which failed to match the slow strains of the song. “I’ve fallen in love with you, and I wanted you to know.”

They continued to stand on the dance floor, drawing curious stares they chose to ignore.

“When?”

“What do you mean?”

She raised her head then, her dark eyes searching his for what, he wasn’t sure. “When did you fall in love with me?”

He grinned because he knew the exact moment.

“Do you remember the day the kids brought Happy home?”

Mathias and Marlowe had been leaving Johnson Rainier High School one day when they noticed a stray dog hanging around the parking lot. Skittish and malnourished, the dog ran from anyone who approached until he saw Marlowe. Then his tail wagged so fast it was a blur to the naked eye. He ran up to her, laid on her feet and rolled on his back with his paws in the air. Marlowe had reached to pet his belly and convinced her brother into bringing the dog home. She'd named the dog Happy before Mathias parked the car in the driveway of their house.

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“How could I forget the day I added another mouth to feed?”

He chuckled. “Well, when I got to your house, I found you and the kids attempting to give Happy a bath in the backyard. You guys were a mess trying to keep Happy still long enough to shampoo and rinse his hair, but you were laughing so hard at his antics. When you said hi to me, your smile was beautiful. Your eyes were bright. Your hair was wet and clinging to your face. Your clothes were molding to your sexy body. And it hit me. How much I love you.”

“The morning you were at my house when I finished a shift at the hospital. You’d made breakfast, and after the kids went to school, you sat with me on the couch and rubbed my feet. That was it for me. When I realized I love you.”

He kissed her, hard and fast but with all of his love behind it. He pulled away and relished the dazed look in her eyes.

“So how soon do you think we can slip out of here? As much as I love our friends, I have a strong desire to be alone with you.”

He grinned. “Soon, baby. Very soon.”

And they sealed their promise and their love with another soul-searing kiss.

Kat watched Zane and Bridget with a tired smile and failed to notice her husband coming to join her at the table.

“Think they’ll be next?” Tristin said even as he studied his wife closely.

Kat shrugged. “Probably. I think it’s getting pretty serious. I hope he doesn’t blow it. I like Bridget, and those kids are pretty awesome to be around.”

“Ours will be too.”

Her smile deepened, and her hand rested on her stomach, slightly round with pregnancy but not enough to be noticeable yet. It would be a matter of time though.

“When do we want to tell them?” Tristin asked as if reading her mind. “I mean they’re investigators, so we can’t hide it from them forever.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m having twins, Tryst. In another few weeks, I won’t be able to hide it from anyone. I’m going to look like I swallowed a beach ball.”

He chuckled and dropped a kiss to her cheek. “You’ll be beautiful. And I’m ready to have a celebration of our own.”

She leaned against him, and his arms came around her as they watched the dance floor.

“We’ll wait until Syd and Panther get back from their honeymoon. I like keeping this between us for the time being. It’s fun having a secret that’s just ours.”

“If that’s the way you want it, sweetheart, I won’t spoil it. It’s getting harder to keep the secret though.”

“In due time, my love.”

After a few minutes, he kissed the top of her head. “Want to dance?”

She shook her head. “No. I want to stay right here, like this, and watch our family. We’re lucky, you know. Our babies will grow up with all of these people in their

lives, loving them and protecting them.”

“Yes, we are.”

When he started Knight Security and Investigation, he did so with a vision for his company. But now that vision had grown from a business to a family. It was more than he ever hoped for, and he was anxious to see what the future held for all of them.