



# Knot Guilty

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Action

**Description:** Sadie has seen and done it all as a badass Marine Raider and now top operative at Knot PMCs. She likes her regimented routine, that's free of messy complications. Maxen, a former Delta Force soldier, crashes through all her neatly constructed walls, determined to show her what real passion is. The sexy operative lights her world and bed on fire in the best ways, taking Sadie on the ride of her life. A ride that comes to a screeching halt when a mission to Iran deals a devastating loss to her team. Too late to save a group of US soldiers from a massacre, including one of her own, all Sadie's team can do is handle cleanup and return home. Grieving a teammate and close friend is hard enough, but things take a frightening turn when her partner and best friend, Aaron Hosfeld, is blamed for the attack. Aaron refuses Sadie's help to clear his name and disappears, making matters worse. With the feds convinced they've got their man, a manhunt for the rogue contractor ensues, leaving Sadie and a small group fighting the clock to prove Aaron's innocence.

The search for the real culprit sends Sadie and Maxen back to the beginning, but what she finds out about her friend might mean the end for them all.

**Total Pages (Source):** 85

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am*

“I ordered you to stand down, Marine!”

“Sir, if I don’t—”

“If you do, you’re both dead!”

The panic in Dillan Knot’s voice is the only reason Aaron locks down impatient muscles itching to run toward the dilapidated shack. The hovel where Sadie is currently fighting for her life.

Aaron followed Sadie’s kidnappers from Manila, aided by the tracking watch she and all Knot operatives wear. The watch was taken from Sadie, along with all of her clothes, before the kidnappers locked her in the hut’s small second room with a single, dingy cot.

The crudely constructed prison is only able to hold the former Marine thanks to the bars bolted over the two small window openings.

“They don’t want her dead, Hosfeld,” my boss says through the radio.

“Maybe not, but they don’t seem to have any qualms about raping her!”

So far, only one has tried, the one currently being suffocated between Sadie’s clenched thighs. Aaron watched the slime ball creep into the makeshift cell while Sadie pretended to sleep. She was naked and vulnerable, and he couldn’t do a fucking thing to help her.

Knot speaks calmly, despite the worry both men feel. “She won’t let that happen.”

Aaron doesn’t bother reminding his boss that his partner is being held prisoner by six men. “Oh, shit!”

“What?!” Knot bellows.

“The others heard the struggle.”

Aaron’s stomach falls as the other five kidnappers rush into the small room. Two grab for their friend while the other three beat Sadie to get her to let go of the would-be rapist.

“They’re killing her!”

“No, they’re not, dammit. These guys may be amateurs, but they’re greedy fuckers. They don’t want to miss their big payout.”

Aaron watches helplessly as Sadie’s body goes limp, finally succumbing to the vicious beating. Her attacker is pulled free, but the asshole’s already dead. Sadie doesn’t move.

The men drag the dead guy from the room, leaving Sadie listing off the filthy cot. Aaron holds his breath as he watches her bare chest hoping for signs that she’s still breathing. There. Shallow, though.

“Aaron, SitRep!”

“They got their man and left her. Sadie’s hurt. I don’t know how bad, but she’s alive, at least.”

“Lieutenant Hill’s SEAL team is close. As soon as they jump, we’ll patch them into your radio. Until then, you keep a cool head. This isn’t over yet.”

Aaron again focuses his long-range scope on Sadie’s naked, battered form and whispers to himself. “Hold on, Sadie. I’m getting you out of here.”

It’s another half-hour before the former Marine Raider hears from Lieutenant “Fish” Hill. Aaron doesn’t have to worry about guiding the warriors to his location. They’re following the signal from his own tracker.

The eight-man squad finds Aaron holding in a grove of trees one hundred yards from the building. The guy is in noticeably lousy shape, barely containing his rage. “Update, Hosfeld,” Fish orders the distressed man.

“One of the guys put his hands on Sadie. She fought him off, and during the struggle, she got her legs around his neck. The other guys came in and started beating on her to get her to let go, but she wouldn’t release him until she’d been knocked unconscious. By then, the guy was already dead, and two others carted him off in the truck. They haven’t come back yet.”

“What about Sadie?”

Aaron looks away and takes a deep breath. “She’s still unconscious, naked, and a fucking bloody mess, but she’s breathing.”

Fish sighs in relief and asks, “Which way did the undertakers go?”

Aaron points northwest, and the SEAL lieutenant squares his shoulders and issues orders to his team. “So, we’ve got two loose ends that could come back at any time. Hawk, I want you watching that road in case they do. Devil, you move to the edge of the trees and take out anyone that even looks at Sadie once we start closing in on the

building. Judge, you and Skin move to the north side of the hut and catch any runners. Wrench, Ink, and I will take the front. Bandaid, you've got Sadie."

"I've got Sadie!" Aaron insists.

## Page 2

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“Hey,” Fish whisper-yells. “I don’t need any loose cannons on this. You’re too worked up to be anything but a liability. Your ass stays right here until we call for you.”

The big former Marine looks ready to fight the SEAL leader but backs down, knowing he’d have to take on all of them if he tried. Aaron growls out a warning to the SEALs, “If you get her killed, there won’t be anywhere you can hide.”

Fish gives Aaron a solemn nod, and the SEAL team disappears into the jungle. The men move like ghosts, surrounding the shack and taking down the kidnappers in a matter of minutes.

The second the last man falls, Aaron drops his gear, racing through the jungle to reach Sadie. As he nears the shack, an arm suddenly falls across Aaron’s chest, barring him from entering the makeshift prison. The SEAL holding him back speaks with an Australian accent, “Hold on, mate. Let the doctor check out your friend and get her covered.”

“Doctor?” Aaron asks skeptically.

“Bona fide MD,” the man answers with a grin.

From inside the structure, the so-called doctor calls out, “Ink, come get a shirt from my pack or hand me one of yours. Better yet, see if Skin has any spare clothes. They’d fit better.”

“You don’t need it,” Aaron says. “I grabbed some of her stuff for when we found

her.”

Aaron’s eyes plead with the man called Ink, who finally releases him. Fish walks by and claps him on the back. “Evac should be here in fifteen minutes.”

Overcome with relief, Aaron stares through the hole in the wall, needing a second to steel his nerves before entering. When he finally walks inside, the doctor is dabbing at a cut on Sadie’s cheek. She’s now lying squarely on the cot, having been righted by the SEAL. Bandido spares a glance at the worried operative standing over his patient and accepts the shirt Aaron pulls from his pack.

“She’s going to be all right. Concussion, for sure. Possible fractured arm and ribs.”

A quick scan of Sadie’s injuries finds a splint on her left arm to go with the numerous scrapes and bruises forming all over her body. “She’s safe to move, so help me get her covered.”

Aaron keeps his eyes firmly on the crumbling block wall while helping the doctor put some clothes on the unconscious woman, his partner and best friend.

Not that he could admit this to any living human, but seeing Sadie naked was something Aaron had only imagined in his dreams. However, he would rather have the experience with Sadie awake and not hurt. And in his arms.

The familiar whomp of an approaching helo signals time to leave this hell hole. The doc pulls something from his large pack that resembles a portable litter. Before he can begin assembling it, Aaron bends down and lifts Sadie’s still body from the cot.

Sadie’s head lolls to his chest, and Aaron presses his nose into her hair, whispering, “I’ve got you, Mein Engel.”

Aaron carries Sadie across the dusty ground, lit by the helo's lights. The SEALs have a pallet prepared on the floor of the helo, where Aaron lays her down gently. He sits beside her, takes her hand, and leans his head against the wall. Only then does his heart settle back to normal.

A few minutes into the flight, Sadie begins to stir. Aaron quickly releases her hand, placing a few inches of space between them. Sadie opens her eyes a short time later, and Aaron leans into her line of sight, unsmiling. "Welcome back, Marine."

Three Months Later

Sadie

"Sadie!"

My surroundings waver, but the icy grip on my heart remains.

"Sadie, let him go!"

Aaron's voice breaks through the shrill calls of the lemurs and squawking birds found in the Luzon Rainforest. The jungle sounds fade as I wake, leaving only pained grunts in the otherwise quiet area. I'm not in the Philippines.

Heart thumping in my chest, I open my eyes to a room full of people, all of them staring at the man struggling in my grip. Not again. I allow my legs to fall open, releasing the man's neck from the choke hold I had on him. He falls to the floor, gasping for breath as he scrambles away from me.

Shit.

The man I nearly killed, one of our newer guys, rubs his neck while staring at me as if



I were crazy. What's his name?

“Everybody out,” Aaron booms.

The crew jumps, quickly grabbing their shit and heading for the door. I don't blame them. Aaron “Grim” Hosfeld can be damned scary.

Aaron and I met at basic training as Marine recruits. Like most of the women at Parris Island, I noticed him right away— chiseled jaw, wise countenance, and warm, green eyes. He stood out in any crowd. Hot as hell.

## Page 3

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He came to the Marines already packed with muscle, which only increased with training. The man was larger than life, the true-blue loyal type... and married.

That silicon band meant he was untouchable. But as it turned out, Aaron was as beautiful on the inside as he was on the outside, and he made one hell of a friend—my best friend, actually. We were Raiders together until I retired to start working with Dillan Knot. A couple of weeks after I moved to Virginia, Aaron resigned his commission, and I convinced him to join Knot's organization.

We've been working together now for eleven years. He's always had my back, even when I was at fault, and he's chewed my ass out when I've done something stupid, like now.

Feigning a stiff neck, I drop my head to hide my burning cheeks. My eyes remain on the floor until the last of my teammates file out of the small warehouse we're using as shared sleeping quarters.

Holding the door open for the victimized operative, Brock whacks him on the back of the head as he walks past. "I told you not to wake her up like that."

Brock kicks the door closed, leaving only Aaron and me inside. I scrub my hands over my face to mask the redness, and when I open my eyes again, Aaron is kneeling in front of me, holding out a bottle of water.

His warm eyes are full of concern, without a trace of judgment or pity. He doesn't push for an explanation for why I nearly killed New Guy. Not that he needs one. He's intimately aware of the nightmares that plague me.

I accept the bottle from his hand and take several long draws of the cool water. “What happened?” I ask.

Aaron chuckles. “What happened is that DC learned a valuable lesson.”

He pulls out his satellite phone and shows me the screen. The messaging app is open and currently displaying a text update on the status of our transport. “Looks like our ride is an hour out,” he says.

At my nod, Aaron tucks the phone back into his pocket. “DC came in here to wake you up but decided to ignore Brock’s warning about how not to do it.”

The smile then fades from Aaron’s face as he studies mine. “You were back in that Philippine jungle, weren’t you?”

“I wasn’t, no. At least not until that idiot put his hands on me.”

Aaron shudders at the memory that will forever haunt us both. “I’m sorry, Sadie.”

I shrug my shoulders. “It’s not your responsibility to look out for me, though you’ve always done a good job of it.”

Aaron drops his head, no doubt, as images from that day filter through his mind. My team of Knot PMCs was serving as undercover security for an American diplomat to the Philippines. He was attempting to negotiate with the Filipino president to renew the US armed forces treaty after he abruptly withdrew from it and kicked US forces out of the country

Without the treaty, the diplomat wasn’t allowed military security. Given that the Philippines was and still is a hotbed for terrorist activity, there was no way the US government would send an attaché without protection. Out of all the options

available, the State Department contracted Knot's company for our ability to operate undercover.

I was the diplomat's main bodyguard, posing as his love interest. Late on the last night of the trip, some asshole ambushed me in the hallway outside my room. I was drugged and kidnapped for ransom.

My boss, Dillan Knot, somehow worked it out with the Filipino government to allow a Navy SEAL team to attempt a rescue. Fish and his team were guided in by Aaron, who refused to evac with the rest of the PMCs.

Fortunately, the tracker all Knot operatives wear allowed Aaron to track my location, following the kidnappers from Manila to San Vicente. I was stripped of my valuables and clothes and thrown into a fortified room in a dirt-floor shack.

By the time Aaron and the SEALs got to me, I was bloody, concussed, and had a broken arm from fighting off a would-be rapist and paying dearly for it. The worst part was learning that Aaron watched the whole scene. He's never gotten over it.

I suppose I was lucky. God knows things could have been so much worse. Even so, I still have the occasional nightmare from that mission to go along with so many of the others from my time serving as a Marine.

Since that day, I've fought off the bad memories by spending more time at the range. Aaron seems to cope by being fiercely overprotective of me, walking me to my car, calling to check on me, and not allowing me to suffocate morons that wake me up the wrong way.

"Is DC ok?" I ask.

"Don't worry about him. He may be a little sore for a while, but I'm betting he'll be a

little wiser too. What about you?”

My heart’s still beating a mile a minute, but whatever. “I’m fine, thanks to you.”

Aaron’s face softens, and he places a hand on my knee. “Damn right. I’ve got you, Mein... Sadie.”

At the odd stutter, Aaron shuts down completely, blanking his face of all emotion. He snatches his hand off my knee, pushes off the floor, and turns his head toward the ancient building’s entrance. “Come on,” he urges without looking back. “Let’s get something to eat before the helo gets here.”

That’s another thing about Aaron that’s changed since the Philippines. He switches from comforting and warm to ice cold in the blink of an eye. I don’t know what sets him off, but whatever it is, it has him receding into himself for a few hours.

With a sigh, I shove up from the cot and follow my best friend out in search of coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.

## Page 4

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Five months later

Sweat drips off my nose, and traces of blood from my lip leave a coppery taste on my tongue. More than a dozen deadly warriors surround me, but the only sound I hear is the wild pounding of my heart. I draw in a ragged breath and stare daggers at the man stalking his way toward me. He's going to attack again at any second.

My ribs are already aching from his last blow, one I didn't see coming but should have—a massive failure on my part and one I can't repeat. Dammit, Sadie, you're not a damned girl scout. You're the first and only female Marine Raider ever. You're the toughest bitch on the planet. Kick this guy's ass!

Unlike men usually do, the hulking man glaring my way didn't underestimate me, attacking with his worst the instant I was on his radar. For that reason, I abandoned my usual strategy: letting a man's pride and bias become his painful downfall.

Still, I've spent my whole adult life busting my ass so I could kick the enemy's. Like a good Marine, I adapted my strategy for this opponent. Now, it's time to overcome. What's your move going to be?

Given my sex and men's bias toward women, he won't expect me to be able to outlast him. He may be planning to wait me out.

And there we have it, my new strategy. I'll act as though my stamina is failing to get the guy to lower his guard. Keeping my hands up by my head, I fake a tripped step and swipe my forearm across my brow. Some of those watching read into the weakness, just like I want them to. Their body language relaxes, thinking the fight

will be over any moment now.

“I’m not going to fall for that shit,” says the man wearing my blood on his knuckles.

Ripped arms and abs dance and flex as the Natural Born Killer shifts his weight. Rivulets of sweat trail down his chest, meaning he’s expending a considerable amount of his own effort on me. That’s right. This bitch isn’t so easy to take down.

Presently, he’s baiting me to strike, dropping his hands slightly and turning his body to expose his most vulnerable spots. I don’t bite as he wants. One of the first things I learned in the Corps was to be patient when haste might get you killed.

Subtle cues from his body language clue me into what he might be planning. I just have to keep my hands up and my feet moving while I read him. His weight is balanced on both feet, with the right foot slightly forward... Left. He’s going left.

The man grins wickedly as if he’s figured out my next move. I set my feet, expecting him to move left.

In my next breath, I learn that I’m not always right. You can’t anticipate crazy, and this guy must be batshit. He fakes right as expected but doesn’t follow through with a strike from his left. The bastard drops to the ground. Before I can adjust, he grabs my front leg and spins, negating my protective stance.

I lose the fight to gravity and unexpected momentum, toppling down onto my back, only to be covered by a solid body a fraction of a second later. Knowing I can’t beat my opponent’s apparent upper body strength, I switch gears in my brain to ground fighting tactics. Priority one is escape. I thrust up my pelvis, arching my back high off the floor, preparing to shrimp my way out of the man’s hold.

“You that hot for me?” he whispers.

“Over my dead body,” I spit back.

“That would be no fun at all.”

I lunge upward and to the side, rolling us both over and landing me on top of him, straddling his hips. The shock factor of my breakout allows a brief opening in which I make a quick but brutal strike to the man’s kidney.

Ha! Take that, bitch!

In the same fashion I did, the man thrusts his pelvis off the floor, but the result is different. I’m launched over his head and have to throw my hands forward to keep from face-planting.

Time is running out. If I don’t gain the upper hand soon, it’ll be over for me. Even a well-trained woman has to rely on speed and smarts to end a fight with a stronger opponent. A long, drawn-out battle being outmatched physically would see my body fade before any man of his build, and this guy knows it.

It just pisses me off that he can read me well enough to know when I’m faking and when I’m not. Turning my head around, I focus my glare on the man’s dark blue eyes as his real strategy dawns on me. Shit. This whole time, he’s only been playing with me.

And that’s just damn insulting.

There’s a reason my former and current team calls me Fate. You tangle with Sadie Phelps, and you’ll meet your fate.

Now it’s time for this guy to meet his. I shove up from my position on all fours, but not before a hard smack stings my ass. Oh, hell no.



My dwindling energy has just been topped off by my pissed-off reserves. Instead of trying to get up, I pull a move similar to a break dance spin, enjoying the satisfying grunt of pain coming from the man when my foot connects with his chin. Asshole should have gotten up when he had the chance.

Not allowing him a chance to recover, I execute a sideways half-somersault over him, landing on his chest. My knees plant on either side of his head, with his arms pinned beneath my shins.

My breaths come in ragged pants as I consider ending things violently for the smack to my ass, but the guy isn't fighting back anymore. My muscles remain tense, fist poised over his face in case he gets the idea to try anything.

"That's enough!" a gruff voice barks from a few feet away.

The man looking up at me from between my thighs grins, his teeth bloody from the kick to his face. He winks, shifts his gaze to my crotch, and licks his lips, giving me the idea that even though it appears I won, he let me do it. The slimy bastard.

## Page 5

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I roll my eyes in response to his crude gesture. “Ugh. You’re such an asshole.”

I push up to get off him, but Maxen, my current sparring partner, throws me to the side and rolls over, pinning me beneath him. Spatch lets out an ear-shattering whistle in response before yelling, “I said that’s enough!”

Maxen takes his time climbing off and stands to tower over me. The visual sparks some unexpected dirty thoughts of my own. Stop eye-fucking Maxen, Sadie. He just played you for a fool in front of the whole damned company. The internal order goes ignored.

Built like all the other men here, Maxen should be just another face in the crowd. The unwelcome heat in my middle says he, indeed, is not. Regrettably. Maxen is a distraction that I don’t need.

When I’m looking to get laid, all I need is a body that can keep up with mine. Preferably one that doesn’t work for Knot Corp.

Inside these walls, all I want to know about a man is how well he’s trained. And with Maxen joining Knot’s PMCs from Delta Force, he should be our most well-trained fighter. Unfortunately, Maxen has these eyes that draw me in. They’re his one feature that has always had my full attention when we’re in the same room.

His smooth, dark blue, almost navy irises with silver specks look like galaxies in a night sky. They’re rather captivating. And though I hate to admit it, I could stare at those beautiful eyes for hours.

Not to say the rest of him is subpar. The man is classically handsome with a dangerous edge. His dark hair is close-cropped on the sides but slightly longer on the top. Typical for men in this trade. Dark stubble lines his jaw more often than not, also typical. Maxen's diversion from the norm is a pale strip of bare skin running through the left side of his beard scruff. A scar from his days in black ops.

Approaching steps pull my gaze away from Maxen, leaving me to realize that it's been a long moment since Spatch blew his whistle.

The impatient trainer walks over to the pair of us, looking pissed. "Either of you want to tell me just what the hell that was? It sure as fuck wasn't two elite paramilitary operatives sparring as though their lives depended on the level of their training. I've seen better moves from my dog humping a couch cushion."

I hold Spatch's glare, even as my cheeks heat in embarrassment. Maxen and I had been in pretty intimate positions no less than two times during that match. And all with an audience.

Outright losing to Maxen would have been better than our poor display of discipline in fighting, and Spatch is right to call us out, even if I hate hearing it.

That's the thing about Austin "Spatch" Madden. He doesn't care about position or seniority. He does his job without prejudice, sympathy, or preference. His intense training ensures our people have the best chance of coming back alive from our missions. On his training floor, he won't hesitate to give anyone hell about their form, from the newest rookie all the way up to Dillan Knot himself.

And dishing out his particular brand of hell is exactly what he's doing right now, tearing strips off Maxen and me for what he sees as a lackluster sparring match. "If you two can't do any better than that, I don't ever want you sparring one another again," he barks.

I slide a glance over to Maxen, who's grinning salaciously. I'm sure that isn't helping, dickface.

“Lawson, Hosfeld, get your asses over here.”

The two men jog over as Dillan Knot, CEO of Knot Corp, walks into the training gym. Spatch acknowledges the owner but doesn't ask what he wants. Knot wouldn't expect him to, either. Because on the training floor, Spatch is god, CEO, and general. No one escapes from here until he's done with you. By then, a spatula will be needed to peel you off the floor, thus the nickname Spatch.

Spatch turns away from Knot to glower at Maxen and me for a moment longer before turning his attention to Brock and Aaron. “Lawson, I know for a fact that you won't pussyfoot around a fight with Phelps. Tomorrow morning, I want you to kick her ass.”

Brock “Stick” Lawson levels a mischievous smile my way and follows it up with a wink. “With pleasure, sir.”

I roll my eyes at Brock's enthusiasm, still burning in embarrassment over my brain misfire that led to a shitty performance on the mat.

A former member of my team, Brock has been a private military contractor for the Knot Corporation for five years. Before becoming a PMC, he'd served in the Air Force as a rescue squadron chopper pilot and did similar work as an NYPD SWAT cop.

His quick smile, bright eyes, and blond hair make him seem younger than he is, young enough that some people treat him like a kid. Like most men here, his looks and physique ensure he's never short on female attention.

A couple of years younger than me, Brock's always been like a brother, and yes, he would have no problem attempting to kick my ass.

"Hosfeld," Spatch continues, "you get Gates."

Aaron flexes his neck and glares at Maxen. He's always been the no-nonsense, serious type, and right now, if looks could kill, Maxen would be dead.

Spatch ignores the pissing match going on and says, "A Knot PMC match should end only one way, exhausted operatives with no clear winner."

The rest of his usual spiel goes unsaid, though we know it by heart. Any loss here means someone isn't training enough. The only loss in a fight with a Knot operative should be had by an enemy combatant.

Sensing Spatch is finished with his sermon, Knot pushes off the wall he had been leaning against and approaches the group. "I want to meet with the team heads. The rest of you, find somewhere else to be."

Spatch and the others clear the training floor toward the showers or outside while Aaron, Maxen, Bastien, Brock, Chelsea, and I hang back to meet with the boss. Knot Corp has five more teams than the number represented here. Each is currently deployed as a security support force in the Middle East.

All eyes are on the six-foot-five black man with a shaved head and a thousand-dollar suit. He's been on the hill early today. Despite his CEO appearance, we all know who the guy is: a former SEAL who's kicked more asses than we've even fought against.

## Page 6

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“We have a new contract. The Iranian government has lost some of the pallets of cash so generously provided to them by US taxpayers. Army intelligence reports that this US currency is now in the hands of arms dealers with plans to use their contacts to move it out of the country.

“The administration believes the information was intentionally released to give the Ne?am plausible deniability for the cash’s intended purpose. The CIA is convinced that Iran’s government is using the network of arms dealers to funnel the money to various terrorist organizations that the Ne?am supports. The treasury department just wants their money back.

“The whole US Intelligence community has been tasked with hunting down these shipments and finding evidence of the government’s involvement, proving the state-sponsored terrorism theory. Or, at minimum, that the money is in the hands of terrorists hustling guns. Either of those scenarios would be a deal breaker, proving the Ne?am is in breach of the nuclear deal and making it legal for the US to seize any cash found.

“You all know that a hell of a lot of money was sent to those bastards. Recovering as much as possible is a big priority. Making sure that all the currency found is repatriated will be difficult as no one knows how much is being moved around.

“The US Treasury’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Bureau and the CIA are working to identify cells involved and intended recipients. The army has selected a team to execute raids based on gathered intelligence and seize the cash and any weapons found. FinCEN personnel will wait in the wings to take over after each cache is captured and secured. However, they’re concerned that stacks of bills might go

missing between capture and relocation. They want assurances that all the cash will be repatriated. That's where you come in.

"Since FinCEN agents aren't combat trained, they won't be involved in the raids. You guys will and are going to police the ops until the raid sites are secure and FinCEN can take over."

"As part of the contractual agreement for this work, the army has asked me to remind you that these are good women and men you'll be working beside. Your job is only to act as a deterrent to lessen the temptation that comes with being around shit-tons of untraceable cash.

"Because the Army is responsible for mission security, I'm only sending enough operatives for a three-shift rotation of unit watch. That will include the six of you plus one more as a backup."

Knot turns to me, silently placing responsibility for the operation on my shoulders. "Once you arrive at Shindand, you'll be briefed by Colonel Heathman, who is to be your main point of contact."

Addressing the whole group again, he adds, "You leave the day after tomorrow. Zero five hundred."

Knot walks away, likely headed back to command central, and Aaron ducks around Maxen to stand in front of me. The rest of the group closes in for an impromptu first strategy meeting. "Who do you want for this?" Aaron asks.

With the three teams currently not deployed, I have seventeen people from which to choose a backup. Since I was involved in the hiring of most of them, I know what I'll be getting and don't have to worry about regretting whoever I choose.

The extra wheel on this mission will be more than a backup. I'm going to use them to liaise with home base here in Virginia when I'm on watch duty, so I should probably go with someone on my team.

"Let's take Zach. I figure the Army guys will be less likely to give any shit to someone that wore the same uniform."

Aaron nods in agreement but then scrubs a hand through his hair. His body language is tense, and he looks like he wants to say something.

"All right, you guys get out of here. I'll keep you posted if any changes happen."

Aaron watches the others walk away, tracing the movements of one person in particular. I follow his gaze to where Maxen is tucking gear into a gym bag.

"What happened in that match, Sadie?"

I slowly turn back to my friend, noticing the concern pinching his brow as he studies me. I'm not sure if I'm more uncomfortable with the question or the answer, well, half-answer. Something about Maxen throws me off. We had never sparred against each other before today, so I expected a bit of a learning curve. As for what Maxen is up to, I don't have the first damned clue.

Aaron hasn't moved, still waiting on an answer, so I decide to be completely honest, if a little vague. "Officially, I think I won, which, despite what Spatch preaches, I shouldn't have been able to do against a Delta. Maxen was sandbagging. What I can't figure out is why."

Aaron openly stares back at me, his expression a mix of irritation and something else I can't interpret.



“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. I’ll go talk to Zach and get him up to speed.”

Aaron walks out of the training room, mumbling something about blindness. His question and accusing behavior have left me puzzled. Just because I haven’t figured out what Maxen is up to does not mean that I’m the one being obtuse. I grew up with four brothers, so not blind. Just not interested in analyzing men’s neuroses.

My gaze wanders to the row of world clocks on the wall. It’s time for range practice. Now that’s something that makes sense and is exactly what I need after this brain fuck of a morning.

Bullets don’t behave one way today and then the complete opposite the next day. You load bullets into a magazine, point, and shoot. The shots go where you send them, no questions asked. Why can’t men be as simple as bullets?

I guess the same question could be asked of women, but I wouldn’t know how to answer that one either. I’m an only daughter, raised by a widowed stone mason and four older brothers. You’d think I’d have the male mind figured out growing up around all that testosterone, but not so. Sure, I could tell when one was about to pound me for one reason or another. That’s how I first learned to fight. Since I was an annoying brat, more often than not, I got plenty of practice.

My brothers weren’t mean. They were just brothers. My raising probably would have been different if my mom were still alive, but she died in a car accident when I was six.

Neither my dad nor my brothers knew what to do with a girl. The woman next door, Mrs. Bea, a friendly older lady, is the only reason my father and I survived the female version of puberty. For the rest of the time, I was treated like just another son, with

the same expectations, bickering, and play fighting as my brothers. That lasted until I was about sixteen, when others began noticing I was a girl.

After a Friday night football game, Michael Baxter grabbed my ass on the field. That was the first time I saw what it looked like when my brothers were angry for real.

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That day, I learned two things about life and my family. Number one, I learned that my brothers loved me and were fiercely protective of me. Second, that I wanted to be just like the bastards.

Three of the four brothers joined the military, Mike, the Air Force, Brandon went into the Navy, and Wes joined the Army. I wanted to round things out and become a Marine.

You would think these overgrown apes that had teased and tortured me my whole life would try and talk me out of such a target. Not my brothers. None of them questioned my choice or believed I'd fail. They cheered and pushed me as hard as any of my instructors.

And you can bet your ass that when I graduated basic training and, later, Raider school, all four of my brothers and father were in attendance.

The funny thing is, though I could probably beat any of my brothers in a fight now, they'd still try to come between me and a drunk, handsy asshole in a bar.

It's been months since I've seen any of them. They've all retired from the service and settled near home in Tennessee. At the thought, a wave of homesickness hits me, something that hasn't happened in a long time. I should call my dad. I need to go home for a visit. I'll do both soon, but right now, I need to get back to work.

With a final scan around the training floor, I grab my gear and walk out. The range is calling.

Now this feels right.

Cold steel sits heavy in my hand. Its smooth barrel and rough, textured grips are more familiar than a lover's touch. And there are few here that handle them as well as I can. Guns, I mean.

Marksmanship is a vital part of the maintenance training required of all Knot private military contractors. Every operative must train at least five days a week when not deployed. Our training includes physical fitness, mental acuity, and range practice. On the range, we're required to maintain a minimum accuracy score in both stationary firing and moving drills. We may no longer be military, but we operate as the soldiers, marines, and sailors we once were.

Like all other PMCs, my typical day starts early in the gym. Running and strength training ensure that on the ground, we're well-balanced and have endurance for days. The training regimen is the same for all of us but is more demanding for a woman whose physiology isn't geared toward war.

After gym work, operatives place themselves in the sadistic hands of Spatch. Originally from Montana, Spatch is a former ranger and ranger school trainer, meaning he's made it his life's work to torture people on a daily basis. As brutal as his sessions can be, every bit of pain an operative goes through under his watchful eye ensures that our chances of survival are better than our enemy's.

After Spatch's close combat training, PMCs usually hit the showers and get food before range practice. Not me. I prefer to run shooting drills when I'm tired, hungry, and sore from hand-to-hand combat practice. This is more realistic to the battlefield conditions I'd face on the job.

The only unrealistic element of Knot's moving and shooting drills is the lack of battle noise. For that, I blast thrash metal through my Bluetooth ear protection. The music is

heavier than I like, and the speed keeps me from settling into an easy rhythm.

To further imitate field conditions, I load out in typical Marine style, including full body armor, headgear, a Glock 19 with three magazines, and my trusty carbine, the MK18 forty-five millimeter. Coming in at around thirty-four thousand dollars, this get-up is my favorite outfit. The only thing missing from my days in the Corps is my marine MARPAT uniform. That look was traded in for plain, black TDUs when I joined up with Knot.

No other operative runs daily drills in a similar fashion, but I figure a good score in training means nothing if I can't replicate it under life-threatening conditions.

With Slipknot blasting in my ears, I slam the start button to begin the randomized course. My next few minutes will be spent sprinting, firing, and diving from beginning to end. The diving is necessary as the targets on this course fire back. The animatronics we use are armed with only paintballs, but they still hurt. And death in here means death out there.

At the end of the course, one final shot to a timer paddle stops the time on my run. Winded and with my hands on my hips, I check the readout screen on the wall to find that I've finished a little off my typical high score. "Dammit," I whisper.

Frustrated, I exit the course and shed all the heavy gear, securing it in my designated equipment locker. From there, I'll head to the showers, which are usually empty by now.

The pulsating spray pounds against my back, and I'm content to stand with a bowed head as the steaming water drips from my long, auburn hair. As the massaging showerhead works on my abused muscles, my mind replays the match with Maxen.

I'm evaluating all the ways I went wrong and keep getting stuck on the look in

Maxen's eyes when I had him pinned between my thighs. Needless to say, I was rattled. Primarily because of the way my body responded to it.

Until now, I've been pretty good at ignoring all kinds of looks, comments, and condescending, contemptuous behavior from men for all the usual reasons. Some feel threatened, others resent a woman in what they consider a man's job, and some assume I've slept my way up. The list is endless.

I am well aware that there are things a female body will never do as well as a man's body can. Just like there are things the male body can't do that the female body can, and I'm not even considering things involving birthing children.

I'm talking about those things that would make a woman an asset to a team on the battlefield. That's what I want to be known for, nothing else. But I learned a long time ago that people will believe what they want to believe.

That type of bias has reared its ugly head a few times at Knot Corp, though men with that attitude don't last very long here. I guess that's what throws me off so much about Maxen.

Not once since joining our team, has there been a problem with him working or training alongside any of the other female PMCs. And up until now, I had no reason to doubt him.

Maxen has been part of The Knot Corporation for over a year, is a team leader, and is one of our top operatives. There has never been any friction between us, and we've had plenty of opportunities for any prejudice to surface. Though we haven't deployed together, we have had to work side by side, planning mission strategy, training updates, and candidate selection.

In all our encounters, Maxen has always come across as highly intelligent, respectful,

and dedicated to his work. Until today. The man should have beaten me. Why didn't he? He wasn't taking it easy on me because I'm a woman. I've seen him spar with Chelsea and Dani without all the bullshit theatrics.

Today, something was different. This was our first time sparring with one another and the first time Maxen had ever treated me as less than equal. Maybe all this time, he's only been tolerating me, never really respecting my role in this team. He wouldn't be the first to make that mistake and probably won't be the last.

I drag a hand over my face, disrupting the flow of the falling water. Maxen was playing with me. Of that, I have no doubt. What I don't understand was his look. It was... hell. I don't know what it was. That's what really threw me off. I can deal with condescending assholes just fine, but I had no idea what to do with Maxen this morning.

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My pride hopes his tactics were just that, a technique to distract and defeat an enemy. Of course, I'm guessing that particular strategy only works on women and gay men. The only problem with that theory is that I beat him. Sort of. Hell, maybe I should be patting myself on the back because I didn't fall for his ploy.

My frustration mounts, and I decide I'm doing myself no favors by overanalyzing the pathetic match. Lifting my face to the sprayer, I shake my head to clear away the confusion and finish cleaning up. Afterward, my damp hair goes into a braid, and I dress in fresh TDUs and a black t-shirt with the Knot Corp logo emblazoned on the left. My first order of business is food and then logistics.

I slide my tray next to Aaron's in the cafeteria, though most of the other contractors have finished and cleared out. "How was the score today?"

"About as good as that match," I answer with a roll of my eyes.

Aaron's brow furrows, and he presses his hand against my forehead.

"What's that for?"

"I don't know. My mom always did it when she thought something was wrong with me."

I brush his hand away and groan. "There is nothing wrong with me. Shouldn't you be at the range by now?"

Aaron grins and stands up, grabbing his tray and one of my corn nuggets before



scampering off. I finish eating alone and then leave to check in with Birdie.

Birdie Crenshaw is the badass intel genius at Knot Corp, and besides Aaron, my closest friend. She's in her late twenties and a few inches over five feet tall. With her sparkling blue eyes and her naturally wavy brown hair, she reminds me of a fairy.

Birdie is a total tech phenom and could leave most of the techies in the CIA in her dust. Lucky for us, she did a little hacking as a teen and ended up with a juvie record. That kept her out of the CIA, leaving her for us to snatch up. She's the perfect mix of sweetheart and bitch, which serves her well in this business.

I traipse through the open door of her chaotic office, plop into one of the bohemian guest chairs, and swipe one of her prized truffles from a bowl on her desk. And I'm probably the only living person that can get away with doing so.

"I hear you and Maxen almost made it on the training room floor this morning."

"Oh, god. Stop."

"Please. You spend all your time surrounded by delicious alpha males. Do not act like you're immune."

I push out of the comfy chair. "Nope. I'm done here. I don't even care if we get turned around at the airport."

"Oh, sit down and shut up."

Without further teasing, Birdie and I work through government red tape ahead of our deployment, even though we were invited and are being paid to attend this party. Afterward, I spend some time studying the jackets of the officers we'll be dealing with during our deployment. There are those in the service that see private military

contractors as sell-outs and treat us like the enemy. On the flip side, just as many are jaded by the military system and are genuinely curious about how we work. The worst type I've come across are those that hate authority and wrongly think of military contractors as power-hungry mercenaries that abide by their own set of rules.

They couldn't be more wrong. Knot's system of command is every bit as strict as any branch of the US military. But without all the waste, political influence, and constant begging for better equipment many of our servicemen and women have to deal with.

Fortunately, the background I have on Colonel Heathman, our host on this mission, indicates that he has worked with PMCs before, if not ours. The network of contacts we maintain from other PMC organizations report this Heathman is a good guy that doesn't have a problem working with contractors. I can only hope he still feels that way, given our mission is serving to guard dog his people.

After studying all available details, I'm feeling pretty good about the mission parameters and logistics and figure it's time to head out. It's after seven, and all but security and the night shift mission support staff have probably cleared out by now.

The Knot Corp compound never entirely shuts down. There is always some combination of teams out on deployment. Subsequently, a corresponding unit of revolving support staff is always holed up in tactical operation support, or Tacos, as we call it.

I push away from the desk, stretch my arms above my head, and then shut down my work area. The halls are quiet as I walk to the locker room beyond the gym to retrieve my bag. On my way out, I detour through the dimly lit training room, pausing at the edge of the sparring mat. I stare at the empty floor, thinking through the odd match between Maxen and me.

A sound coming from the training room door has me whirling around to find Maxen

standing in the opening, bracing his hands on both sides of the frame. He's backlit by the hallway lights, rendering a somewhat intimidating image.

I'm surprised to see him here. I figured he'd have left with all the others at the end of the day. A backpack sits at his feet, and his hair is damp as though he's fresh from the shower.

"I thought I was the only one left," he says as he takes a single step into the room.

I turn to face him but hold my ground on the forty-by-forty training floor. "I had a few details to research ahead of our deployment."

Another step. "You find many details to work out in here?"

"No. I was analyzing the strengths and weaknesses revealed by the day's training."

A filthy grin unfurls on Maxen's face. "And did you identify any of my weaknesses?"

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A few more steps have him circling wide to position himself on the opposite side of the door from me.

“I’m still working those out. The only thing I’m sure about is that you threw that match. That could mean one of two things.” I tick off each point using my hands. “One. That shit was part of your strategy to throw me off my game until going in for the kill, but Spatch ended the fight before you got the chance. Two. You feel it beneath you to train with me because I’m a woman.”

Maxen’s eyes go wide just before he lets out a howling laugh. He recovers quickly and presses, “And what are my strengths?”

The man isn’t responding like I’d expected, throwing me off-balance. I have no idea where this odd conversation is heading, and Maxen’s mysterious gleam is back. No doubt, he’s trying to get under my skin again.

Unfortunately, the heat in his stare still wakes up parts of me better left dormant, and I hate it. Fighting to regain my focus, I answer, “I wouldn’t know since you’re only as strong as your greatest weakness.”

Maxen lifts his hand to his chin, mimicking a thoughtful pose. “Only as strong as my greatest weakness,” he repeats sardonically. “I’d say that gives me an advantage.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

His head tilts to the side in bemusement. “It would if you knew what I know.”

The man is speaking in riddles, and I've just about had it. None of this ridiculous conversation is answering any of my questions. I could, and probably should walk away at this point, but my feet refuse to move.

“What about you, Fate? I'm sure everyone at this company could recite your strengths.”

Now, I'm rolling my eyes. “Right. My skill on the mat is legendary, and you've just given yourself away. You think matching with me is beneath you. You respect my training so little that you wouldn't even give me half-effort. Well, congratulations. Your piss-poor effort made us both look like assholes.”

Absolutely over the conversation, I turn on my heels and reach for my bag. Not a second later, I'm tackled from behind, landing on the mat with a thud. I never heard him coming.

I twist and roll, fighting with everything I've got to break Maxen's hold, but nothing is working. Every move I make is countered; every grab I execute, escaped. So, this is Maxen at maximum effort. Scary.

Since he's trying to prove a point, I resolve to do the same. I use every ground fighting tactic I know and break out of each hold, only to be placed in another half a heartbeat later. The only move not on the table is a head strike to his nose since we'll need him in two days. It's not like I'm getting an opening anyway. Just the same, Maxen isn't hurting me either.

I seize an opportunity to get my hand under his chin just before realizing I was lured into a trap. Maxen grabs that hand, twisting it up and to the side, and I'm pinned to the mat with one of his arms across my throat.

I could be dead by now if this happened in the field. Instead, Maxen leans close and

whispers, “Your weakness is that you’re blind. You’re so confident that you’ve got everybody figured out that you overlook changes in those closest to you. I don’t think you even recognize changes in your own mind.”

I struggle against his hold, trying to get up. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Maxen runs his nose over the shell of my ear, and his voice drops low. “You and I never fought before today. Ever wonder why?”

Still pinned and very pissed off, I grit out, “Because you didn’t want to get your ass kicked by a woman?”

Maxen shakes his head and grins, “You know damn well that I’ve fought with other female operatives. Stay on point, please. I didn’t want to fight you. But not for the reasons you’re assuming. I’ve been watching you for a year, Fate. I know very well what you’re capable of. You can kick anybody’s ass here except maybe mine. Next to Knot, you run this whole show, and every operative here respects your leadership, especially me. You’re an amazing woman, Sadie Phelps. You’re an incredible leader, a fantastic teacher, a fierce fighter, and a beautiful woman.”

I stare up at Maxen, stock still and in shock at what this little chat has turned into.

“People like you are a rare find, Sadie. It’s not been easy keeping my distance. I knew that if I ever faced off with you directly, put my hands on you, I’d lose the battle with myself. And you would lose the battle with yourself.”

I wrestle against his iron grip again, accomplishing nothing except being held tighter. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m saying I want you. I’ve tried many times in subtle and not-so-subtle ways to show you I’m interested, but you’re blind. You haven’t noticed any of the three men

here that would kill for one taste of your lips. And today proved you want me just as much, even if you don't realize it yet."

"That's one hell of an ego you've got there, so sure you know my mind better than I do."

Maxen drops his head to whisper against my lips. "I know you're so used to men seeing you as a threat or assuming you're a lesbian that you don't even register attraction or desire anymore. When you have... needs, you fulfill them with as much emotion as you have when reloading your weapon. You slipped up this morning, though. I watched you bite your lip when I had you pinned. Your nipples pebbled for me as you sat on my chest. You want me, Sadie. You're full of fiery passion and have just been waiting on someone that isn't afraid to get burned. Deep down, you know I'm that man."

A bone-deep shiver runs through me as though my body agrees with Maxen. Great. I'm not only out of my league but also outnumbered.

Thankfully, I'm not ruled by raging hormones. My brain is in control, and I'm tired of these mind games. Unfortunately, my gray matter is failing to come up with anything more than a weak argument. "You're crazy,"

Maxen's grin widens. "Maybe, but ask yourself this. If I'm wrong, then why didn't you really fight back this morning?"

Maxen lifts himself off me, grabs his bag, and strolls out of the training room as though we just shared a fist bump after work. Me on the other hand, I don't move for a long while, feeling like I've been cemented to the floor.

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Eventually, I peel myself off the mat, walk out to my waiting Camaro, and make the short drive to my condo near the naval base.

My bag gets tossed on the sofa table with a little more force than is necessary, and my takeout dinner is dropped onto the kitchen bar. Silence greets me, and today, it's unsettling. Damn Maxen.

“Don't look at me like that,” I warn Gunny, my copper rosetail betta fish, as I walk past his bowl. “All men are crazy. You included.”

I pull a beer from the fridge and fill a glass of water from the tap. I down the whole glass before walking back out to sit at the bar, where Gunnery Sergeant Fish Tail continues to judge me while I eat.

With a mouth full of sweet and sour chicken, I complain, “Just who does he think he is? I wasn't fighting back during that match because he wasn't doing much of anything.”

Gunny glubs in his tank as though he's not buying my explanation. I take a few more bites and look back up to see him still staring at me.

“Sure, I should have taken advantage and kicked his ass, but—”

The lazy fish gulps at the surface and spits out an air bubble, effectively calling bullshit.

“Fine. Take his side.”



I shove up from my seat and clear away the dinner mess. Next, I flop down onto the sofa and pull my boots off. The quiet is still getting to me, so I turn on the TV, going right to the History Channel.

The show about aliens that's playing doesn't exactly appeal to me. I flip through the channels, not paying enough attention to settle on anything. Several clicks later, a kissing scene from some chick flick catches my eye. Instead of blowing right past, my finger hovers over the channel down button for longer than I would have expected.

The couple on screen are obviously into one another. And why wouldn't they be? The guy is hot, and the girl is perfectly made-up with not a hair out of place. She pulls out of the kiss and suggestively moves her body before taking the man's hand to lead him somewhere more private. All with a finesse that I could never emulate.

I gouge my thumb into the channel change button to leave the scene and then again a few more times so I'm not tempted to go back. After my little moment of self-loathing, I'm right back to the aliens but can't focus on anything the narrator's saying.

That on-screen kiss after my two encounters with Maxen has me off-kilter. The worst part is recalling his deep, whispered voice so close to my ear while his body pressed against mine. Groaning out loud, I turn off the tv, tossing the remote back on the table.

It's early, but I'm restless and decide to head to bed before I'm tempted to do something stupid. In my room, I strip down to my hipster panties and pull on a USMC tank top. I lie on top of my covers, letting the ceiling fan cool my skin, but the moving air does nothing to chill my heated blood.

Time ticks by, with me growing more frustrated by the minute. Damn Maxen and his

mind games. And his eyes and his mouth.

The memory of his lips at my ear and his hot breath on my neck have me groaning. Maxen said he wants me. He's convinced that I want him just as much, but there's no way he can know that. Hell, I don't know that. Any woman could be turned on by a smoldering look from a man with eyes like that.

Maxen was just playing more mind games. Probably.

But what if it wasn't? What would be so wrong with finding out? This isn't the military. You wouldn't be breaking any rules.

"What if?" I whisper.

I make the mistake of imagining that mouth on me. Wonder what it would feel like if Maxen's voice vibrated his lips all over my body. And shit... I've just messed up any chance of going to sleep any time soon.

Slamming my fists against the mattress in anger, I roll over to reach my bedside table and open the drawer. My vibrator comes to life with the press of a button, and I cross my fingers that the battery has enough juice for what I need.

I swirl the purple tip around one fabric-covered nipple and then the other. You're only doing that because Maxen talked about your nipples. "Fuck." I want my inner bitch voice to be wrong. So much so that I draw the vibrator away from my chest. I'm way too worked up to quit altogether, though.

I slide my panties off, and my knees fall open, exposing my pulsing core to the circulating air. The first touch of the vibrator to my clit finds things already slicked up, making me curse Maxen again. I can no longer deny what he claimed. Whether I want to admit it or not, my body desires him. Nevertheless, I push those thoughts

aside and focus on the sensations the vibrator creates against my clit. It's just me and my buzzy little friend, no infuriating, sexy bastards needed.

"You'd better not let Fate catch you watching at her ass like that," Brock warns his team co-leader.

"Why? It's a nice ass. Do you disagree?"

Brock chuckles at Maxen while looking around them for signs that anyone is reacting to their conversation. Plenty of grunts and clanging weights ensure their subject can't hear their conversation. "I'm not touching that one. Just make sure you don't let her hear you talking about her ass, either."

Maxen finishes a set of curls and stops for a twenty-second rest. "Come on. Women love compliments."

The look Brock passes his partner is one of complete disbelief. Resuming his handstand pushups, he warns, "You've been here long enough to know that one doesn't."

"Maybe not from you."

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Brock lets his feet fall to the floor, ending up in a squat facing Maxen and wearing a guarded stare. Mouth open, ready to challenge his team co-leader, he's beaten to the punch by a new voice joining the conversation.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aaron snarls. He approaches the other two men, curiosity and maybe a little hostility tightening his features.

Maxen shrugs off the man's attitude. "All women like compliments. Sadie has a disdain for being patronized. You guys are confusing the two. Worse than that, everyone here seems to have forgotten that she even is a woman. Sadie doesn't want to be seen as one of the guys, equal in skill and strength. She wants people to recognize that the differences she represents are just as valuable to the PMCs as anything you or I bring to the table."

"I have always respected her as a teammate in the Marines and here and have never doubted her unique abilities," Aaron argues.

"I never said you did," Maxen counters, beginning another set of curls. "I merely indicated that the men she's known in her career are scared of her."

Brock laughs. "Now, you're just talking out of your ass."

"No, I'm not. I'm guessing that all her career, Sadie has been surrounded by men that are either threatened by her or afraid to be seen as anything other than a supportive teammate. I swear to god, that woman is begging to meet someone that fully trusts her to watch their ass in a fight and then grab hers when the battle is over."

Brock is no longer laughing. “Right now, I’m torn between respecting your insight and punching you in the throat for talking about a friend of mine like that.”

Maxen shrugs, unconcerned by his partner’s ire. “It’s just because you know I’m right.”

Aaron isn’t quite so ready to concede. “I don’t pussyfoot around Sadie, and I’m sure as hell not afraid of her,” he counters.

“Could have fooled me. You look like a spider hoping for the prey to fall into your web. That won’t work on Fate.”

Surprise and guilt color Aaron’s face red, and he turns sharply toward Brock, who’s wisely turned away, red staining his own cheeks. Aaron returns his glare to Maxen and explains, “The reason it looks like I’m not trying to nail Sadie is that I’m not. Sadie and I have worked together for eleven years. We’ve depended on each other to stay alive both in the Marines and after. She was a hell of a Raider and is a hell of a PMC. I have always respected her too much as a friend and teammate to do anything that would jeopardize her career or our friendship.”

Maxen nods solemnly. “You’re a good man, Grim. I’d feel the same way if I were in your shoes. So, it’s good that she and I aren’t on the same team.”

“Aww, hell,” Brock mumbles under his breath.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Aaron demands.

Maxen racks his weights, winks at Brock, and walks away. Aaron glares at Maxen’s back before turning on his heel and heading back to the opposite side of the gym. Brock watches Sadie a moment longer, then swipes a towel over his face and tosses it in a bin.

Feeling like the walls are closing in on him, Brock rushes from the gym, hardly noticing when he knocks elbows with another operative on the way out. He ignores anyone else he runs into during his sprint to the locker room. Once inside, Brock steps up to the long row of sinks, splashes cold water on his face, and glares at his reflection in disgust.

After a moment, he braces his hands on the counter and drops his head. He's fucked up, and he knows it. Brock couldn't say when he fell in love with Sadie, but he knows the exact moment he realized it. It was on his birthday ten months ago.

Weeks prior, Aaron, Sadie, and Brock had discussed dream cars during a mission just to pass the time. During a surprise birthday dinner later, Sadie gave him a toy model of his favorite car. She even made sure it was the right color.

Brock proudly displays the model car in his locker, but it's become a sad reminder of a missed opportunity. A car and a woman, he'll never have. For the most part, he believed like Aaron and wouldn't make a move on Sadie. Teammate or not, he kept his distance because Aaron is also his friend, and everybody knows Aaron is in love with Sadie. Everyone except for Sadie herself.

When it became clear to Brock that Aaron would never act on his feelings, Brock jumped at the chance to take an open leader spot on another team. With the ethical dilemma no longer an issue, he could finally ask Sadie out.

Fear kept him from doing it at first. If things didn't work out, not only would Brock lose Sadie as a friend, but he'd also alienate Aaron for trying. So, in the last four months, he's kept his mouth shut. And now, with Maxen publicly stating his intentions, it seems that Brock has likely missed his chance.

"I hope you're happy, asshole," Brock berates himself.

He pushes off the counter, dries his face, and lets the mask he wears slide back into place before walking back to the gym.

Sadie

“Last set, Sadie.”

I press against the platform, straining to push the two-hundred-pound weights outward using the muscles in my legs. The last two reps become even more difficult when Brock walks over and leans on the platform I’m currently trying to press. “Leg day before a sparring match,” he mocks. “Ouch. Looks like Spatch is teaching someone a lesson.”

“Shut up,” I groan as I lower the weighted platform for the last time. Brock laughs, taps my foot, and then walks back to the other side of the gym again. “You put him up to this, didn’t you?” I call out to him. “Need to get me good and tired, so you’ll have a shot at winning.”

His shoulders shake in silent laughter, but he doesn’t respond. I watch his retreating back, and Maxen’s words from last night come back to haunt me. Three men here would kill for one taste of your lips.

Maxen could have been spewing a bunch of bullshit, but what he said has made me hyper-aware and wary around the men I’ve worked beside for years. I’m now analyzing every gesture, spoken word, and physical show of camaraderie where before, these things were just a normal part of our working relationships here.

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What pisses me off the most is that nothing has changed. I trust the people here with my life. There's never been a reason to question any of these men or women, and there isn't one now. Except that there is. Damn Maxen.

An hour later, I'm flat on my back, breathing hard, while Brock stands over me, grinning like a fool. That had been too easy. "What the hell, Sadie? Have you lost your mojo?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Spatch growls.

I turn my head to avoid the glare of the strict instructor to find Knot's gaze on me. One eyebrow lifts, and the man turns to leave. Great. I've managed to humiliate myself twice in two days. Sitting up, I roll over to my knees and swear loudly, hitting my fists on the mat.

Several feet over, Maxen and Aaron are going at it, neither one of them having any trouble focusing on their efforts to best their opponent. Aaron seems to be especially motivated.

Aaron's fighting is vicious but fluid. The man's powerful body moves with a grace that defies logic. And apparently, I'm not the only one that notices. From my left, a group of women whisper about the match going on.

"God, I think I just got pregnant watching this. After today, I think men should always be required to spar shirtless."

"Which one would you pick? I'd take Maxen... as often as I could get him."



“Uh uh. He looks like he’d be high maintenance. I want Aaron. He’s got that laid back sexy. You know. The kind that could be ready at a moment’s notice and wouldn’t mind getting a little dirty.”

I watch the two men battle for a moment longer, drawn by the show of strength and skill. Then I lower my eyes to the mat, tuning out the women and the match. Spatch will bust my ass eventually, but for now, he’s leaving me to my own misery.

I remain on the mat long after everyone else has cleared out for the showers. Thankfully, no one attempted to talk to me as they left. Usually, at this point in the day, I’d be gearing up for shooting drills, but my head is too screwed up. I’m angry. Angry that I let Maxen’s words get to me, angry that he got in my head, and angry... because, fuck, I do want him.

Most of all, I’m angry that he wasn’t wrong about me. Regardless, he’s upset my world, which had been running smoothly before yesterday. And today was no better. And it will continue to get worse unless you get a handle on your shit.

Just this once, my inner bitch is right. I run a hand over my face and head for the range. At my equipment locker, I ignore all my usual loadout gear. All I want is my pistol, a target, and four full magazines.

The outer chamber of the range is dark as usual since I’m always the first one in. I slam my hand against the light panel and flinch at seeing the unexpected, lone figure leaning against the wall. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Maxen, still in his gym clothes, pushes off the wall and stalks forward. “Waiting for you.”

“Why? Is it not enough that I’m fucking up on the floor that you want to see how much you can throw off my aim?”

The man with the wolfish grin stops his advance and has the decency to look contrite. “You were frustrated on the floor today because of what I said. I apologize for that, but I wouldn’t take back the words even if I could. I meant them. You want me. I want you. You need to stop being so surprised by that.”

I close the distance between us and shove him against the wall with a firm hand on his sternum. “What I need is for you to get out of my head.”

Maxen keeps his gaze trained on me and says, “No, you should try getting out of yours.”

The heat from his skin seeps into my hand, which is still pressed against his hard chest. I should stop touching him. I should back away. I definitely shouldn’t just stand here watching as he lowers his head and brushes full lips against mine.

Maxen lingers for the briefest moment, his blue eyes still locked onto my shocked hazel ones. His breath whispers over my lips when he says, “I’m not trying to weaken you, Sadie. Actually, if we could ever stop dancing around this insane attraction we have, I’m convinced we could sharpen each other. But I’m not one to take from an unwilling woman. When you’re ready to stop pretending, you know where to find me.”

Maxen walks around me to exit the range door, and I sag forward as though I had been drawing strength from our brief connection. I’m frozen in place and don’t know if I’m angry still, turned on, or some strange combination of the two, and I don’t get much time to figure it out. Moments after Maxen leaves, the range door opens again, and the worst possible person walks in to see my flushed face. Aaron.

My best friend takes in my stunned features and glances back at the door. When he turns around again, a fire burns behind his eyes, painting strong emotion on his face.

Of course, I can't read him. In a fight, I have no trouble gauging anger, menace, and hate. I often use an opponent's body language and facial expressions to anticipate their next move. However, anything on the friendly side of the spectrum is like a foreign language to me. I'm absolutely clueless. As Maxen so confidently pointed out.

Unfortunately, Aaron doesn't suffer such a handicap. He reads me like a book and knows me better than anyone else. Wanting to avoid the questions I see brewing, I set down my bag and start loading several magazines with nine-millimeter cartridges. I keep my eyes down and ask, "Is Brock still gloating over beating me?"

Aaron walks over and picks up one of the empty mags. After inspecting it for a moment, he pushes down the follower and inserts a round. "I don't know. I haven't talked to him."

He loads two more rounds and adds, "Are you having a problem with Gates?"

I focus hard on keeping my voice even and answer, "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because you looked like a new recruit out there the last two days."

Feigning indifference, I shrug my shoulders, still keeping my eyes on my loader. "Maxen sparred with me because he thinks I rely too heavily on a presumed bias in fighting. He figured that if he didn't act as I expected, I'd be paralyzed and lose. It turned out that he was right."

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“Then what happened with Brock just now?”

“That was me overthinking my effort to not overthink... I think.”

Aaron stops loading and sets the magazine on the table. “You’re sure? Maxen didn’t say anything to upset you?”

I almost laugh. “Upset me? Really? What kind of a Marine would I be if words could derail me?”

In a move that shocks the hell out of me, Aaron stills my hand that’s angrily shoving rounds into the magazine. “A human one?”

The three other men... Aaron? There’s no way. After eleven years, I’d know. Right?

Shaking off the insane thoughts and Aaron’s hand, I finish reloading, awkwardly responding, “Um. Did you not go through the same basic training I did? If getting my feelings hurt was going to paralyze me, I wouldn’t have survived the bus ride to Parris Island. Besides, we’re not human anymore, remember? We’re Marines. We’re machines.”

“Right,” he says quietly, pulling his hand back. “Well, are we machines still going out for pre-mission beers with Brock tonight?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t we?”

He tilts his head and studies me, trying to ferret out what I’m hiding. “No reason. Just

wondering.”

“Fine. See you there.”

Taking my dismissal for what it was, Aaron walks out with no further questions. I prop my hands on the cold metal tabletop, drop my head, and blow out a long breath. It’s not like me to lie or hold back my thoughts from Aaron. I’m just not ready for him to learn what I don’t yet understand myself.

Feeling extra jazzed up by the confrontations with Maxen and Aaron, I shove in my ear protection and start the training program. I need to shoot some shit.

I haven’t seen Brock since this morning when I lost the sparring match to him, Aaron, since our talk at the range, or Maxen since he kissed me. The reason why is simple. I haven’t seen anyone because I disappeared from the compound midway through the day.

If anyone asks, my excuse is that I had things to handle before our deployment. The real reason was that I was tired of second-guessing interactions between me and the men I work with. Well, all except Knot and maybe Spatch. And also, perhaps because I was trying to avoid Maxen.

By twelve hundred, I’d packed all my work gear, checked in with Birdie, and snuck out like a cowa... like someone who would rather avoid the further testing of their inept emotions.

Lunch is a chicken gyro, picked up from my favorite Greek place and eaten in the company of my judgmental beta fish. “I hope you’ve gotten over your little spat with Marshall.”

Gunny turns around in his tank as though saying, “You wouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry. Since we don’t have any extra teams available to rotate in, this will be another open-ended deployment. Your automatic feeder might not be enough this time. It’ll be better if you stay with Bonnie.”

Bonnie is my fifty-six-year-old neighbor. She’s divorced and lives alone with her golden retriever, Marshall, who has developed an unhealthy fascination with my fish. Until Bonnie gets home from work, I’ll spend time packing clothes and clearing my fridge of anything I don’t want to mutate while I’m gone.

Those tasks are completed quickly with a lot of time left between now and when I expect Bonnie. My headspace isn’t exactly a good place to hang out right now, so I change into running gear and bolt from my quiet apartment.

I Uber to the start of the trail at Cloncurry Road and Hampton Boulevard and run the six-and-a-half miles back to my loft on Front Street. This route is my favorite, but I mix in others to keep things varied for safety’s sake.

By the time I make it back home, I’m in a much better state of mind and decide to kill some time by calling my dad after a quick shower. With my hair tied up in a towel, I flop down on the sofa and pull out my phone.

The call connects after the first ring, but my father doesn’t answer right away. Instead, I hear, “This will have to wait, son. This could be a customer.”

“Dad, I can clearly see Sadie’s name on your screen.”

“Well, you’re going to have to wait anyway.”

A door closes on my brother’s protest, and I’m already smiling. “Hey there, Sport.”

“Hey, dad. Is Blake trying to make you learn email again?”

“Damned kid. I’m beginning to wish he’d joined the military with the rest of you.”

That damned kid he’s talking about is thirty-three years old. “I thought you always wanted at least one of us to follow in your footsteps.”

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“Well, sure, but I’d hoped it would be in his own damned shoes instead of taking mine from me. The day you kids decided I was too old to stack stone, that boy took over the company and crammed me into a little office. I’m not cut out for this technology shit. At least, let me go out on job sites.”

“He tried that, remember? You took over and laid the job yourself when you didn’t like how the younger guys were doing it.”

“Hmph. Clearly, I’m not going to get any sympathy from you.”

“Sorry, Not Sorry, Dad. Sympathy seems to be a familial trait that skipped the last few generations of Phelps kids.”

My father harumphs again. “Made you tough, though, didn’t it?”

I pull the towel off my head and finger through the damp strands. “It did, which is why I’ll always be your number one ass-kicker.”

“Damn right. The trickiest too. Your brothers never saw you coming. Speaking of, when’re you coming around here next? I’ve just about forgotten what you look like.”

It has been a while. I miss the Gatlinburg mountains, my dad’s overalls, and the comfort of his East Tennessee drawl. “A few weeks. My team is headed out of the country in the morning. I plan on coming home as soon as I get back. I’ve been jonesing for a Fannie Farkle dog.”

“Damned tourist attraction.”



I can only laugh at his old complaint. Hypocritical, considering he's the one that lives in a tourist town. And that he loves them as much as I do. "Everybody ok out there?"

"Mostly, though Blake might be suffering a smartphone up his ass in the near future."

Now, I'm rolling. God, I really need to go home for a while.

"Sadie, you be careful, you hear? This old man ain't got it in him to bury one of his kids."

"I'll make it back, Dad. I always do. You get back to work and don't give Blake too much trouble. At least he's not making you work with the architects."

"Know-it-all dumbasses," he grumbles. "I ain't promising nothing."

My sixty-seven-year-old father pauses, and I know I'm about to get his version of I love you. "Give 'em hell. Sadie Kate."

"Love you too, dad."

The clock on my wall reads five pm on the nose, so I have about fifteen minutes before Bonnie makes it home. Spinning my hair in a quick bun, I secure it with a tie and hop up off my seat. I take down Gunny's boarding bowl, a more traditional fishbowl I use when he stays with Bonnie. Water and plants from his everyday tank are used to fill it, and I scoop Gunny over as soon as the bowl is ready.

Carrying the bowl in one hand and his heater and food under my arm, I step out my door and walk across to Bonnie's place. Marshall barks at my knock, and Bonnie answers the door a few seconds later. "Come in, Sadie."

I follow her inside and commence setting Gunny up in his usual spot. "It looks like

you've been home a while already," Bonnie observes.

"I wanted to handle a few things before shipping out tomorrow."

The friendly woman's raised brow and wry smile is the only warning I get. "So, we're not calling it sex anymore?"

"Bonnie!" I yelp and escape from the apartment with her laughter ringing in my ears. Back at my place, I grab my bag and run right back out the door.

The office parking lot is mostly empty when I pull in. Most everyone has gone except for the people here for their support shift and security. I walk through the building to my equipment locker and stow my bag containing underwear, uniforms, and toiletries with the rest of my gear.

After beers with Aaron and Brock, I'll return and stay in the staff dorms to be on hand for any last-minute changes or security updates. For about the next hour or so, I'll reverify mission details and confirm that our personnel have been cleared.

With all my tasks completed and no other stall tactics available, it's time for dinner and team beers. Or what I'm more expecting to call the inquisition.

Mel's Place is packed when I pull into the parking lot at eight. I traded out my bun for my usual braid during a lull in activity at the compound, and I'm dressed in jeans, a cropped Braves raglan shirt, and runners. I hadn't bothered with makeup. These guys are used to seeing me without it.

I walk in and find Aaron and Brock waiting for me at our usual table. A draft beer sits in front of each of them, but neither one is smiling or laughing like usual. "What is this, a funeral or something?" I ask, pulling out a chair.

“Or something,” Brock mumbles under his breath.

I wave to one of our usual waitresses for a Cherokee Red Ale and flop down into my seat. Neither of my friends speaks or looks directly at me, which is way out of character for the two.

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To get someone to say something, I zero in on Aaron first. “What happened in your match with Maxen this morning? I just realized that I never heard.”

“A draw,” Aaron says. “Spatch called it after ten minutes.”

“Spatch didn’t have a reason to yell at them,” Brock reports. “In fact, they were so fully engaged that it almost looked like they wanted to kill each other. If Spatch had let them go any longer, they both would have had to be replaced for tomorrow.”

“I guess that’s why he didn’t have time to yell at me for being a one-thump chump.”

“Yeah, what was up with that?” Brock had asked the question casually, but his tight eyes betrayed him.

“She won’t tell you,” Aaron hisses. “Oh, she might feed you some bullshit about working out some new fight strategy, but it’s just that, bullshit. Maxen said something to piss her off, but she won’t say what. I know it had to be bad to get into Sadie “Fate” Phelps’s head.”

Brock doesn’t go all protective like I’ve seen him do before when I was slighted. He gets abnormally quiet. First Aaron, now Brock. What the hell is going on here?

“What did he say, Sadie?”

“Nothing!” I slam my glass down onto the tabletop, not liking the lie on my tongue. Recanting, I say, “It’s none of your business. Anything going on between Maxen and me is none of anyone’s business.”

“Unless it gets someone killed,” Aaron challenges. He takes things a step further by asking, “So, is there something going on between you and Maxen?”

I meet his disapproving glare and return it with one of my own. “No. And there never has been. Can we now drop this? Please?”

Aaron sags in his seat, recovers quickly, and shrugs. “Sure. Just let us know if we need to kill him.”

Brock lifts his glass in agreement. “Yeah, I could do with another promotion.”

“You guys are impossible.”

An hour and just the one round later, the three of us split off, Aaron to his townhouse in Chic’s beach and Brock to his apartment in Broad Creek. I end up on a bench at Plum Point Park, staring out over the Elizabeth River.

I came out here for peace and quiet but will have no such luck, apparently. In an all-out assault on my sanity, bits and pieces of the last two days punch out at me from nowhere. More than Maxen’s words wreaking havoc in my head, my newfound paranoia has me overanalyzing the odd exchanges with Aaron and Brock this evening. Or were they strange because you’re now looking for ghosts?

Whether I’m paranoid or not, the day’s events have worn on me. “None of your business,” “Unless it gets someone killed.” Hot breath against my neck. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t take back the words. I meant them.”

That damned kiss.

Maxen’s kiss garnered more of a response from my body than the last man I went to bed with. So, it’s just been a while. If you need to get laid to re-center your focus, do

it. Get it out of your system so you'll have a clear head for the mission. It's nothing you haven't done before.

Then why does the thought of picking up some random guy make my skin crawl? Because you want Maxen. "But why?" I ask out loud. "Why am I attracted to a guy whose sole purpose in life seems to be to piss me off?"

A drunk on the next bench over answers my rhetorical question, "It's because you're a woman."

Oh my god. Now I'm getting lectured by some drunk rando. This has got to be a new low for me. Groaning into the night, I push off the bench to find somewhere else to torture myself.

"If it bothers you that much, you could always start messing with him," the drunk yells to my back as I walk away.

At my Camaro, I drop into the driver's seat and sigh. I start the engine on autopilot but don't engage the reverse. As if the day hasn't been ridiculous enough, I'm now considering the drunk's stupid advice.

With the Camaro's powerful engine idling, I ask myself why Maxen. I've already established that he's built no different than the other male operatives at Knot Corp. Topping out at six feet, he's not even among the tallest. Sure, his eyes are pretty fantastic, but I can find gorgeous eyes and hot bodies all up and down the coast. But Maxen sees you. To him, you're not a woman who's earned her place at the table. You're an equal that happens to be a woman, a woman he doesn't want to be buddies with but a woman he wants to fuck.

My breath hitches, and a shiver working through me leaves goosebumps in its wake. "You're gonna do it, aren't you, Sadie? You're going to do something stupid."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm driving toward Portsmouth to an address from my brain's catalog of personnel files.

All the way from the park to Maxen's apartment, I mutter curses over my decision but never instruct my feet to turn around and leave. "What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?" I chant as I walk into the lobby.

A minute later, I'm standing in front of the door to unit 505. "Oh shit, Sadie. Last chance to walk away."

My finger jabs the doorbell before I even finish the self-warning. He could still just be playing you, rattles through my head. I'm about to walk away, but then I hear the lock disengage, and I suck in a quick breath. Too late now.

Maxen's broad shoulders nearly span the door frame, and a grin fills his face upon seeing me outside his apartment. He's shirtless and wearing light blue track pants with, apparently, nothing on underneath. Those striking eyes bore into mine as I struggle to say anything. My mouth opens, but my mind is blank, and nothing comes out.

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Spellbinding eyes sparkle in laughter at my shy silence, very much the opposite of the confidence I project on the job. Well, until yesterday. Evidently, Maxen isn't going to help me out and steer the conversation, despite being the one to set me in a tailspin

I roll my eyes and start to walk away, cursing him under my breath, "Asshole."

The instant my back is turned, a large hand reaches out to grab my arm and spin me around. Another clamps down on my back, lithe fingers reaching under the cropped hem of my shirt and locking me against a hard body.

"Leaving so soon?" he whispers against my lips.

"I'm tired of this game, Maxen."

"Thank fuck."

Thirsty lips meet mine, unleashing a torrent of heat in my middle that shoots straight to my core. On their own, my hands lift to Maxen's smooth chest. I catch myself, thinking I should move them but decide my hands must know better than I do, so I leave them there.

It's taken about two seconds flat, but I'm already hypnotized by Maxen's kiss. And I don't want to snap out of this trance. His tongue teases my lips, inviting mine to play. I open up to him, and BAM, instant addiction.

Despite our current location, out in the middle of an exposed hallway, I can't focus on anything except the heat consuming my body and the tempting, hard length



pressing against my middle.

The fingers encircling my right wrist loosen to curl around my braid, then sharply tug to the side for Maxen to reach my neck.

I have to be hallucinating. I'm still sitting in my car, dreaming all this up in my sexually frustrated state. I plant my feet, which are barely holding up my weak knees, and attempt to stand up properly.

"Where do you think you're going?" Maxen growls against my ear.

My hazy brain finally admits I wasn't imagining shit. Then Maxen walks backward into his apartment, carrying me with him.

The door is kicked shut once we're clear, I'm set on a kitchen counter just a few feet away, and Maxen rips his mouth away from my throat. A moment passes between us where I stare into his entrancing blue eyes and him back into mine. This is it. If someone's backing out, it'll be now.

"Well, you got what you wanted. I'm here," I breathe.

Maxen's salacious grin returns, and he gives the slightest shake of his head. "Only half of what I want. You came to me, but I won't be satisfied until you've come all over me."

My body gives an involuntary shudder at his wicked vow. Damn, this guy wields words like a sword, and I've just had my legs cut out from under me.

Hungry fingers sear my skin, brushing up against my bare midriff just before Maxen rips off my shirt. My bra goes next, and I'm shoved onto the cold, stone countertop just as a hot mouth closes over a nipple.

Torn between wanting to get off the icy granite surface and needing his mouth to stay where it is, I attempt to at least push up onto my elbows. Maxen pauses his efforts to pull my shoes off and roughly shoves me back down.

Nimble fingers move from my sternum to the other breast, kneading the soft mound and flicking over the tightening peak. Maxen's touch hijacks my senses, overriding the cold, and I abandon my struggle to get up.

Maxen shifts his head from one breast to the other, leaving his left hand to massage the wetness left by his hot mouth all over my excited skin. During the extremely brief reprieve, I focus enough to finish what he started by kicking my shoes off. Then my hands go to his hair, fisting and holding him in place.

"Like that, do you?" he chuckles against my nipple.

"Shut up," is my breathy reply.

I get to the point where the nipple-sucking is good, but I'm ready to move on. I let go of Maxen's hair to push him away, but he's already shifting upward again. He wraps a hand around the back of my neck, pulls me up, and then presses in between my legs. His mouth goes to mine again, his tongue delving deep.

Deft hands remove the tie holding my braid together and gently work upward until the strands hang in soft waves. Maxen's fingers eventually reach the top and gently massage my scalp. Meanwhile, my hands slip around Maxen's waist, grabbing his ass and grinding his hard cock against my denim-clad pussy.

I'm officially about to go crazy, and if Maxen doesn't do something soon, I'm damned well going to take him with me. Withdrawing my hands from around him, I grasp at the waistband of his track pants.

I never get the chance to shove them down. Maxen grabs both of my hands and forces them behind my back, and I decide I've had enough of this teasing shit. Pushing off the countertop, I launch at him, shoving him against the entry wall.

“Oh no, you don't. You may be the boss in Norfolk, but this is my house. Here, we do things my way.”

Maxen spins me around and then pins my hands to the wall above my head. He shifts to lock both my wrists in one hand so his other can trail down my body to the top of my jeans.

His head dips to drag his lips across my jaw and back to my mouth as he flicks open the button of my jeans. Maxen slowly pulls down my zipper, and then two of his big digits slip inside my panties to my drenched slit.

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The first touch to my throbbing clit has me lifting on my toes and arching my back off the wall. “So responsive,” he murmurs in my ear.

Since I’m long past my teenage years, I have no interest in being fingered when there’s a perfectly hard cock nearby. However, Maxen doesn’t appear to be in any kind of hurry. And the harder I pull at my hands, the tighter he holds them.

Maxen stops everything and levels a warning glare at me that I answer in defiance, renewing my effort to break his hold. He only lifts my hands higher, forcing me to my toes. Damn, he’s strong. Fingers slickened with my arousal continue their slow torture between my legs, speeding up occasionally only to stop when my thighs clench and my breathing comes in pants.

He edges me close to orgasm, stopping once more, and I buck off the wall. “Maxen, I swear to god, if you don’t–”

Out of the blue, he drops his shoulder, ramming it into my middle and throwing me over his shoulder. I’m trapped somewhere between turned on and pissed off at being denied climax several times but figure, why waste a good opportunity?

I glide my hands down his tanned back and dip my fingers inside his track pants, finding a tight ass. Not bad. Just as I’ve filled both hands and given his cheeks a good squeeze, I’m ripped backward and thrown onto a bed.

While I’m fighting to clear my long hair from my face, my jeans are yanked down my legs, followed by socks and panties. I scramble to my knees so Maxen will give it to me the way I like, but my legs are snatched out from under me. My upper body

crashes into the soft bedding, and I'm roughly flipped over and yanked toward the footboard. "Uh uh. My bed. My rules. You wanna top, we do it at your place."

Maxen shoves my thighs open and puts his mouth on me, and I yell out a string of dirty curses. Thanks to all the teasing he did in the kitchen, I'm instantaneously thrown into a violent orgasm that makes my heart skip a beat or twelve.

While my mind fights to recover from the bolt of lightning that just struck me, Maxen rises slowly, dragging a finger through my slit as he stands upright. The light touch causes my whole body to seize up as though hit by a cattle prod. For a moment after, I'm sort of paralyzed and can only watch as he shoves down the elastic band of his pants.

Maxen strolls toward a nightstand and pulls out a condom. He doesn't seem to be cursed with the same sense of urgency that I'm feeling, the fucker. The only reason I'm not yelling at him to hurry up is that I'm sure he would only go even slower in response.

When his dick is covered, Maxen climbs onto the bed and settles between my open thighs. The only problem is that all he does is settle. "Maxen."

He closes his eyes and appears to savor the sound of his name rolling off my tongue.

"Maxen, please."

The pleading sound of my voice feels foreign to me, but I don't care. Apparently, Maxen does. "You'll never have to beg me, Sadie."

The head of his cock finds my entrance, and Maxen slowly presses inside. All the air rushes out of my lungs, and I have to fight to pull a breath back in. Fully seated, Maxen lowers himself to his elbows, and his mouth finds my ear. He sounds like he's

barely in control of his voice when he says. “If I’d known you’d feel this fucking good, I wouldn’t have been so patient.”

I can’t even reply.

Maxen starts moving, but I’m useless. Since he’s the one that made me into this sated, boneless heap, I figure he can use my body to handle his own release. He settles into a rhythm and leans down to capture my lips again.

I recover somewhat and begin helping him reach climax, meeting his thrusts halfway. His kisses are light but somehow still demanding. In a move that shocks me, my hands go to his back and pull his body down onto mine.

Equally shocking is that I feel pleasure building in my core again. I’ve never climaxed during sex, always before or after using manual means. Damn. This fucker’s got skills.

Another orgasm zings through me, and I throw my head back and let out a hoarse cry. Maxen’s thrusts become labored and jerky, his own groaning voice sounding strained and harsh.

With one final push, Maxen’s body goes ramrod straight and convulses once or twice before his upper body crumples to the bed on my left. He lies face down, breaths sawing in and out of his lungs. I understand the feeling.

Several seconds pass before Maxen climbs off the bed and stumbles to the attached bathroom. The condom is gone when he comes back and turns off the light.

This is usually the part where I begin working on my exit strategy, but I’m so washed out that I can’t think that far ahead. Maxen reaches for the blanket and sheet he’d ripped off when I was on his shoulder and pulls them over us as he collapses next to

me.

He has enough energy left to pull me back against him, and I have absolutely not enough to keep my distance. Despite the effort my brain puts into keeping me awake and on plan, my eyes close, and I sink into the warmth of Maxen's arms. Blackness follows close behind.

No clock is visible when I wake up in the same position sometime later. As sated and used as my body still feels, it could have been only thirty seconds since I passed out for all I know. Ultimately, the time doesn't matter to me. Leaving does. I never stay the night after sex, unwilling to let myself be vulnerable with a stranger.

But this isn't a stranger. This is Maxen.

That doesn't matter. Does it? Should it? Shaking off the confusing and conflicting thoughts, I remind myself that I have a job to do. And that job expects me to be on hand and ready for the upcoming mission. My original plan was to spend the night at the compound like I always do before an early morning deployment. This time will be no different.

I won't sneak out of here, but I won't intentionally rouse Maxen, either. If he wakes, I'll explain. If not, I'll see him at work tomorrow. And you're full of shit.

As gently as I can, I roll out from under Maxen's arm, shocked to hell and back that the former Delta doesn't wake up. Using the small amount of moonlight coming in through the windows, I find my jeans and socks but not my panties. I hold the clothes to my chest like a shield and step lightly out of the bedroom.

I slip into the jeans and search for my discarded bra and shirt. My hair tie went the way of my panties, but I have plenty of spares in my locker at work.

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Dressing as quickly and quietly as possible, I hold my breath when checking the door. So much for not sneaking out. “Shut up, you harpy,” I whisper to my inner self.

The deadbolt isn’t engaged, and the one-way lock will re-engage as soon as the door closes behind me. Thankfully, the door doesn’t squeak when I open it. I cringe when the light from the hallway spills inside Maxen’s apartment and rush through the opening, closing the door quietly.

Now, I’m home free and head toward the stairs and my car waiting outside. A quick check of my phone reveals the time to be nearly three am. Me showing up that late to the Knot Corp compound won’t alarm our security people. They’re used to seeing us come and go at all hours because of the nature of our work.

The drive to work takes a little longer from here than from my place on the river, but the extra minutes give me more time to wipe the just-fucked look off my face.

Arriving at Knot Corp, I head straight for the locker room, tie up my hair, and take a quick shower to wash the smell of sweat and sex off my skin.

The staff dorms are my next stop. I sit on my usual bed and set an alarm for ninety minutes. I’ll get a little more sleep and be up early enough to check in with our pilots and Colonel Heathman before takeoff.

Lying in bed, staring up at the darkness, the last thought to cross my mind is, what the hell have I done?

Two fresh cups of coffee are set on the table next to my empty one from earlier. Soon



after, my boss lowers his big frame into the seat next to mine.

I've been sitting in this chair for over an hour, staring at this screen without seeing it. I'd long ago checked everything that needed to be checked and reached out to everyone that needed to be contacted. Since then, all I can think about is what I did last night.

I had sex with Maxen. That wasn't the goal when I drove to his apartment. At least, I think it wasn't. Talk or argue, probably. Ruefully admit that he was right about my attraction to him, sure. Say less than twenty words and get fucked to oblivion; not exactly on the agenda.

But here I am, without having spared one damned thought about the aftermath. He's going to show up this morning and either be pissed that I snuck out or amused that I ran. Pissed, I can deal with as long as he keeps his mouth shut around the rest of the team.

Suppose Maxen isn't angry, and his wicked sexy grin makes an appearance. I have three other possible scenarios to contend with. Maxen could be handsy, staking a public claim, continue our private game of cat and mouse, or prove that I was right in thinking he was only playing me.

He's not the PDA type, so I don't think I have to worry about the handsy shit. Beyond that, I don't know what to expect or what I even want. Do I want to be one and done with Maxen? Would I want to date him? If he was jerking me around, where do I hide his body?

The corner of my mouth turns up in a smile, and Knot clears his throat. "Any changes?"

I shake my head and blink a few times. "Uh, none."

I yawn and reach for the new coffee he so generously prepared. “Thanks. I was due for a refill.”

He sort of grunts in response. Dillan Knot will never be accused of talking too much. And while it’s not unusual for him to check in with me or whoever is lead over an op before deployment, this little pow-wow is.

I don’t ask what he wants. When Knot has something on his mind, you’ll know when, and only when, he’s ready to tell you. Waiting him out, I look up to see him scanning the ops planning room. Several desks with inlaid screens radiate around a digital command board in a half-circle. Only two out of the twelve ceiling lights, security lights, are on. I didn’t see the need to illuminate the entire room.

My screen is in its elevated position, allowing me to interact with it like the touch screen of a laptop.

My boss clears his throat and leans his elbows on the table beside mine. And, apparently, pow-wow time is now. “Is everything all right, Sadie? You seem to have had a couple of off days.”

It’s on my mind to feed Knot the same bullshit I’ve been feeding others, but I know that won’t work. Other than Aaron or my brothers, no one knows me better than Dillan Knot. “Sir, I’m told that I suffer from blindness.”

At Knot’s panicked reaction, I backpedal and decide to try that again. “Not in the literal sense, but in virtually every other way. Maxen asserts that I don’t know some of my teammates as well as I think I do.”

“That seems like an unimportant observation unless he wanted to cast suspicion about something.”

I shrug and say, “That’s what I thought at first. Then I wondered if he was just trying to psych me out, distract me.”

Knot seems to consider my theory, the clench of his jaw communicating how he feels about someone messing with his team. “If he was looking to best you during that match two days ago, the mental element would make you easier to defeat.”

“Yeah, only, he and I didn’t talk until after we’d fought.”

“And you did score the win.” He lowers his head and cuts his eyes up at me. “Albeit a poor showing.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” I reply with a shoulder roll.

Knot takes a long draw off his coffee and stares at the map on my screen. “Sadie, what did Gates say to you that wrecked two days of training?”

I hesitate to answer his question, especially after what happened last night. “Sir, it was of a... personal nature.”

“And you don’t want to tell me.”

“I’d rather not.”

He nods his assent, having always been one to honor personal boundaries. “I’ll respect that. Just tell me one thing. Do we have a personnel problem?”

In this, I’m confident. “No, sir. And I’ll make sure it stays that way.”

“Good enough.”

Knot stands and drops his empty cup in a nearby trash can. “While I don’t like what I’ve seen the last two days, you have my confidence to handle your team. Do what needs to be done and get your asses back home safe.”

With a tip of my chin, I turn back to the map in front of me. Knot walks from the room, and seconds later, his deep timber growls, “Gates.”

“Sir.”

My head springs up from the glowing screen, totally unprepared for this first post-coital confrontation. Wow, you really didn’t think this through, did you?

Silence reigns briefly before Knot’s footsteps resume their trek down the hallway. I pull in a breath and hold it, knowing Maxen can approach without even a whisper of sound and wanting to be prepared.

Seconds pass without him advancing into the room or turning on the lights. He's watching, waiting to see what I'll do. Funny, I'm doing the same thing. I wonder which one of us will cave.

"We still green to deploy?" he finally says.

I turn my face in his direction, releasing the breath I'd been holding, more than a little surprised that he broke first. What's more surprising is that I'm not hearing any teasing or smugness in his voice.

Maxen blocks the doorway, feet shoulder-width apart and with his impressive arms crossed over his equally impressive chest. The light from the hallway glows around his silhouette, but there's still enough light inside the room to see his face. He looks every bit of business-as-usual.

"Um... We're... Yes, we're clear."

Maxen nods and loosens his arms. With a double tap of his knuckles on the doorframe, he walks away, leaving me staring at his back with my mouth hanging open.

What the fuck?! He didn't acknowledge last night at all. I guess he's over me. Turning back to the desk's integrated screen, I tap out of the satellite view of Shindand Air Base and slam the monitor to its lowered position. After fuming for a moment, I'm tempted to pull the screen back up so I can search Norfolk for a good place to hide Maxen's body.

Instead, I rest my elbows on the surface and drop my head into my hands. What did you expect, Sadie? At least things aren't messy.

"You forgot these."

Not having heard anyone approach, the unexpected whisper in my ear has me swinging my elbow backward. Maxen catches my arm and chuckles, amused with himself for sneaking up on me.

He pries open my still-fisted hand and lays my missing pair of panties in my palm. Now, I get his smile that speaks of wicked nighttime things. Before I can respond, he winks and walks out of the room a second time. His steps leaving the room aren't silent, suggesting that he was baiting me, and I fell for it, hook, line, and sinker.

The notion leaves me a little pissed off but, at the same time, oddly relieved. Wearing a satisfied smile of my own, I shove the panties in my pocket. It's four-thirty now, and time to gear up and get out of here.

On the way to the garage, I stop to collect my bags and weapons from my equipment locker, feeling the familiar buzz I always get before a new mission. At the motor pool, I retrieve keys to the closest two of Knot Corp's many black, armored SUVs that we'll use to transport to the airport. Chelsea arrives then and sets her gear down on the curb near the elevator.

The cargo hatches open with the press of two buttons, and I stow my gear in the first vehicle. A bag lands in the back beside mine, and I turn my head to see Aaron standing next to me. I look up to find his eyes focused squarely on me. "What?"

"Nothing. Just wondering if something is going on with you."

Caught like a deer in headlights, I barely keep from squeaking. "Why would you think something is going on with me?"

Aaron lifts a brow and makes a show of looking down. Curious about where he's going with this, I follow his gaze to where a baby blue thong sits on the concrete. The same thong that had been in my pocket a moment ago. "Oh, for fuck's sake!"

With reddening cheeks, I snatch the panties off the ground, stomp to a nearby trash can, and toss them in. I pass Maxen on the way back to the vehicle, and he whispers as I walk by. “I guess they were safer with me.”

I roll my eyes at him and keep walking until I’ve planted myself in the front passenger seat of the leading SUV. Over the next few minutes, Bastien and Brock arrive and join the others waiting to load. Brock adds his stuff to the pile and climbs in behind me. Aaron slips behind the wheel, leaving one empty spot.

Zach, the only member of my team joining us, jogs through the motor pool door and continues in our direction. I glance down at my phone, looking for any last-minute updates as he tosses his bag in and takes the seat beside Brock.

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“So good of you to join us,” I say without looking up.

“Why, thank you,” a voice that is very much not Zach’s snickers.

I pivot in my seat to see Maxen in the back, grinning from ear to ear. Refusing to acknowledge him further, I turn to Aaron and ask, “Are the rest loaded and ready?”

He sticks his hand out the window and gestures to the rear car. Whoever is driving must reply in the affirmative as Aaron cranks the engine and pulls out into the dark morning.

Shindand Air Base, Afghanistan

Hot, ugly, and home sweet home for the next few weeks. The daytime temperature soars above the hundred mark, and at nighttime, it hovers right around the same.

The flight from Virginia was direct, thanks to the range of the jet. Direct, but still long. Well over fourteen hours. Figure in the nine-hour time difference, and we land just after three am.

Not a bad way to travel. Honestly, the private jets are one of the best parts of working for Dillan Knot. We don’t use them for luxury but out of necessity. We’re considered civilians, so riding with the army is out. Since we’re sometimes called into life-and-death situations, waiting around for international flights isn’t exactly reliable.

As much as I enjoy the ease and comfort afforded by Knot’s fleet of planes, this particular flight has not been the best. I’m way past ready to get out of this enclosed



space after the strangest flight I've made as a Knot contractor.

Out on the tarmac, I stretch under the hangar lights and head for the cargo hold. "What the hell was that all about?" Chelsea asks, leaning over to reach for her own bag.

"Huh?" I ask, playing dumb.

"Don't huh me. I'm talking about that fifteen-hour funeral procession I just lived through. Does this have anything to do with that sparring match between you and Smoke?"

I look up to the darkened sky and groan. "Oh please, not that again."

"Well, something is going on. Thanks to the rest of you acting like cadavers, I was forced to irritate Bastien the entire flight."

"I bet he loved that."

"Yeah. I'm sure if I hadn't kept an eye on my water that last four hours, he would have poisoned me."

Chelsea's grumbling and accurate depiction of Bash draws a welcome laugh from me. Bastien isn't the most talkative guy. He mostly communicates in a series of gestures and grunts, but he's a brilliant strategist and solid as they come. Chelsea is the exact opposite. Though no less deadly than her counterpart, she comes across as a bubbling socialite. And despite her joking about being poisoned, the two team leaders get along famously.

Personalities aside, the different team members have to get along or at least share a mutual respect in order to work together. Without that kind of loyalty, people get

killed when face to face with the shit we're up against.

Mine and Aaron's kinship is well documented. We've both saved each other's asses more than a time or two over the years.

The new pairing in this particular group, Maxen and Brock, are doing well so far. They've been teamed up for the shortest amount of time compared to the rest of us, about four months. While I hated losing Brock from my team, he's proven to be a great leader and is doing well in the position.

I retrieve my first bag and set it by my feet as Bastien steps beside me to grab his own gear. Feeling impish, I can't resist taking a shot at the big man. "Have a nice flight, Bash?"

Bastien freezes mid-reach and grumbles. "Shut up, Fate."

Laughing, I pick up my two bags and step out of the way.

Oddly enough, my exchanges with Chelsea and Bash seemed to have shaken something loose in my head. These people here are the same ones I've been working with and fighting with side by side, some for many years. The only thing that's changed here is me. I'm creating the awkwardness.

Sure, Maxen made a move and called me out, but not once since I chose to sleep with him has he made me regret it. Ok, so it was only twenty-four hours ago, but he's had plenty of opportunity to lord it over me or blank me out.

After the thong episode in the situation room, which was done while we were completely alone, Maxen has maintained a professional front. If there's any problem at all here, it's me.

Ok, so at first, I blamed Maxen for getting in my head when all he did was force my eyes open. And since when do uncomfortable truths stop me from completing my mission? Right. Never.

I'm the senior operative here, and it's my job to make sure everyone does theirs and gets back home safely. It's time I got my head out of my ass and got to work. Well, maybe after a couple hours of sleep since my stupid ass didn't sleep at all during the flight.

While the rest of my team unloads their gear, two Sentinel assault trucks roll to a stop next to the jet. Sambi, one of our international suppliers, steps down from the first rig and approaches wearing a big smile. "Your boss has good taste."

Knowing Sambi, that means expensive. "You know Knot. He has this crazy notion that his people should be well-equipped and shit. Something about wanting our asses to make it back in one piece."

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The Indian man laughs. “That is very true. You would be too difficult to replace, Miss Phelps.”

An older Toyota sedan pulls in behind the Sentinels and stops, leaving the engine idling. No doubt, this is Sambi’s ride.

Aaron joins us at the armored truck and greets the reliable outfitter and his associate. “Sambi.”

“Grim, good to see you, my friend.”

With a genuine smile for our longtime field supplier, Aaron bends down and man-hugs Sambi, following the friendly gesture by offering his hand to Sambi’s assistant.

“The trucks are just like the last ones you used. I understand your deployment could be an extensive one. I’ll be in Kabul for the next two weeks. Should you need anything, please call me.”

Two MPs step up to admire the Sentinels, and Sambi shakes his head. “You probably should give me plenty of notice before you depart. I fear that if I am not here to see you home, one of these bastards might appropriate them into the service.”

It wouldn’t be the first time, I think with a smile. The Indian man bows and turns to leave with his crew in the old Toyota while my people load our gear into the Sentinels. It’s still dark, but Shindand will be up and moving in about an hour. I’d hate to be late for our first day.

The powerful Sentinels are on the move less than four minutes after we land. No one needs directions, as we're often stationed here with the teams we're contracted to support.

For this particular mission, we don't have far to go to reach Colonel Heathman, just to a small group of buildings inside the main gate. Arriving at the building the Army is using as headquarters, there's no missing the commotion taking place just outside.

I have Aaron stop the truck for me to hop out and locate the colonel. I find him inside HQ's entrance, shelling out orders to his men. He notices me and motions me over. "Phelps, you're just in time. We have info on our first target and are moving out in an hour. Corporal Jennings, see that Knot's people know where to go. Phelps, I'll get you briefed, and then you can coordinate your team."

The young corporal jogs out of the building, and I follow the colonel and a captain into a conference room. Five minutes later, I have enough information to get moving and follow the corporal's directions to a pair of rooms in the barracks. Chelsea, my only roommate for this mission, is already finished stowing her gear when I walk in. My gear has been brought in and sits on one of the beds. "Chels, we've got orders. Go get the others, and we'll meet in here."

"On it," she says as she jogs out the door.

Pulling open my bag, I curse my stupid self for not sleeping on the plane. Since I'm not the type to send someone in my place just so I can get some rest, I pull out the gear I'll need and rush to strap on my body armor and belt.

I've just begun loading up with my various weapons and tools as the remaining members of our blended team file into the room.

"The first raid team pulls out in forty-five minutes for a target about fifty clicks from

here. Aaron and I will take this first run. Zach, you're to liaise from field to base command, which means you're to be available twenty-four-seven. Also, since no one knows what to expect, we all should be on an alternating rest/alert schedule so that there's always a team ready. Who wants to be next in line?"

"We'll be next," Chelsea volunteers, and Bash nods his assent.

"I'll keep you updated through Zach and request relief if necessary."

Shoving my knife into its holster, the last of my gear, I turn my attention to Aaron, dismissing the rest of the group "Gear up. I'll meet you outside."

Aaron rushes back out to get ready, and as the others turn to leave, my gaze meets Maxen's briefly. I hadn't planned to engage, still feeling like a damned coward even after the thong episode in the situation room.

I still can't figure out how to act around him. It's not like with my brothers, where awkwardness or arguments can be settled with a well-placed shoulder nudge or headlock. If Mrs. Bea were here, she'd lecture me on how a girl should act, as she did before my first date. Too bad her lessons never stuck.

So, I'll walk my cowardly ass out of here and get to work and deal with this Maxen business later.

I brush past him to leave the room and take about five steps around the next corner before he calls my name. Dammit. All I needed was another forty feet to be safely outside.

"Hey, Sadie, wait."

Ok, Sadie. Marine Raider. Put on your big bitch panties and deal with this.

Straightening my spine, I stop and wait for Maxen's hurried steps to catch up. "We haven't had a chance to talk."

I hold up my hand to stop the embarrassing don't tell anyone about us. It was just a thing speech. "There's nothing to talk about. We're adults. We were both curious. That itch has been scratched, and you won't have to worry about me following you around like a lost puppy."

Maxen's eyes light up, and he grins like a Cheshire cat. He looks away from my face to the various rooms along the hall before grabbing my hand and pulling me into the one marked Maintenance.

In the next breath, his hand is wrapped around my throat, and I'm shoved against the door. "You're so full of shit, Fate."

I don't get the chance to argue because Maxen attacks, shoving his body against mine as his tongue plunders my mouth. His hand slides down my front to cup me through the fabric of my pants. My body's response is instant, becoming slick with arousal and pressing into his hand.

Maxen's lips leave mine to nip and suck along my jaw. Out from under his expert lipnosis, I try bucking him off me, though all my parts beg me not to. "Dammit, Maxen."

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My body doesn't understand why I'm protesting, so my brain takes over. Oh yeah. You're about to police a raid on a hostile group and then scare any possible opportunists away from a shit load of cash. Being sexually frustrated isn't going to help your impartiality.

I relay my concerns to the beast before me, but he just grins again. "We can't have that, can we?"

Oh shit.

Maxen yanks my shirt free from my pants and shoves his hand inside, his skillful fingers sliding into my drenched slit. "I didn't mean—"

"Shh," he orders before claiming my mouth again. Maxen's fingers work their way lower until he sinks two thick digits inside me, leaving his thumb with the job of teasing my clit.

The intensity of his touch has me trying to lift onto my toes, but my restrictive boots keep my feet on the floor, forcing me to absorb every sensation.

Voices sound in the hall nearby, and I lift my hands to push against Maxen's chest. Laughter rumbles the solid muscles under my fingertips, but I gain enough space to put myself back together.

As I'm tucking my shirt back in, I glower at Maxen. I can't exactly blame what almost happened solely on him. I could have stopped him at any time, but dammit, he started it. And dammit, I'm worse off now than I was sixty seconds ago. "Fucking



great,” I mumble.

“I’ll make it up to you. Just consider it as something to keep your mind occupied when you’re bored out there.”

I finish with my shirt and grab his crotch, rubbing suggestively. “So you’ll have something to jerk off to in the shower.”

His response is a booming laugh. “Oh, Fate, I’ve been jerking off to fantasies of you for months.”

Cheeks flaming red and maybe doing a little happy dance inside, I turn for the door and rush out of the room. Thankfully, I still manage to reach the Sentinel before Aaron. He slides into the driver seat and inspects my face using the truck’s interior lights. “Why is your face so red?”

Still off-kilter by Maxen’s surprise attack, I fire back absentmindedly, “Why are your lips moving?”

My face reddens further, realizing I answered as I would have done with one of my brothers. I’m saved from what would likely have been a brutal comeback by the rear passenger door of the Sentinel being opened. Colonel Heathman’s next in command, Captain Morrison, jumps in the back, apparently planning to ride with us.

The captain doesn’t say much during the hour-long ride to our staging point. I don’t know if it’s because he’s shy or if he’s the type that doesn’t much care for paramilitary types. Whichever it is, I’m glad for it. He’s preventing Aaron from tormenting me over my flustered state.

The convoy comes to a halt at an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of a tiny village. Despite its small size, the town boasts several multi-story buildings. Yet, our

headlights reveal that many are heavily damaged by past conflicts.

The sky is still dark, the sun almost two hours away from rising. That should mean civilian contact will be minimal, if not completely nonexistent. I hope. Truth is, because we arrived mere minutes before go time, my knowledge of this first raid is virtually non-existent, a situation that puts me on edge.

The plan, as it was laid out to me, is that Aaron and I will breach with the raid team but on the back end. All the action is supposed to be taken care of by Heathman's team before we even reach the target. Aaron and I are to be on hand to pose as lookouts and then guard the stockpiles of cash alongside two army grunts.

Aaron and I exit the Sentinel, joining up at the back where our MK-18 rifles are secured. Our weapons are retrieved and checked before we follow Morrison to meet with the colonel.

"You two," he says as we approach. "Your people will be better read in next time. For now, I've got you going in with Sergeant Avara. He'll be your sole connection to me until the site is secured. After this, we'll get your team's radios patched into ours."

He dismisses us to give last orders to the raid team, and Aaron turns to me, shaking his head. "Can't say that I like this," he whispers.

"Can't say I blame you."

This will be the first time in my career that I've gone on a mission with zero radio communication. Aaron and I don't even know where we're going except that it's somewhere within the borders of this so-called town. And for this first raid, at least, no one has any plans to clue us in.

Colonel Heathman gives the word for the raid team to go, with Aaron and I tagging along in the back. Making our uncomfortable situation worse is that no rules for engagement have been established for my team. Not that we're supposed to actively participate, but we're in hostile territory, about to rush into a hornet's nest.

My hope is that these army guys are thorough. Surprises among players with no clear boundaries sometimes end with someone being hurt by friendly fire and almost always end with multiple someones being supremely pissed off.

A quick glance at Aaron tells me he's thinking the same thing. His gaze meets mine, and he tips his chin toward me. His gesture reminds me that the two of us are the best-trained people going in and that we have each other's backs, just like always. My helmet goes on my head, and I set my feet to follow the grunts into the dark.

Sergeant Avara holds us back thirty feet from the crew scratching their way from one structure to another. We've gone about five hundred yards from where we started when Avara stops next to a makeshift water tower.

With the help of my night vision goggles, I watch the raid team leapfrog the final fifty feet to a squatty block building. I scan upward and find one guard circling the top of the structure who's currently on the opposite side, not paying attention. Since he's on his feet, the guy has to be awake. It wouldn't take much to catch his attention. At least these grunts are quiet.

All of the GIs situate themselves at the building's openings, and then two of them hoist a man up high enough to clear the short parapet at the top. Muzzle flare from a suppressed M17 loaded with subsonic rounds flashes green in my NV. The sentry on top falls over the wall barely a second later.

A ground crew catches the man, and the raid team simultaneously breaches from all sides. The staccato of gunfire is loud, and I fight to keep my comments about strategy

to myself. What I can't help is looking around to see if the disturbance draws out men from the surrounding structures.

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I sincerely hope these guys had the benefit of satellite intel pinpointing the location of warm bodies in this area. Aaron leans close to me and whispers, “I’ll watch the left. You take the right.”

He’d been thinking the same thing as me. “I just hope they’re leaving some of them alive.”

Avara turns sharply toward me, his long look skeptical and assessing. Too bad for him, these goggles cover enough of my face that he may as well be looking at a brick wall. “Our orders were to secure the room.”

“Don’t get your panties in a wad, Sergeant. I’m just considering the feds who will have to mop this up.”

“Keep your considerations to yourself, Rent-a-cop.”

His venom actually makes me smile. I’ve long since gotten used to military personnel making assumptions about what my team does. Fortunately, guys like the sergeant are a dying breed. Most military have not only worked beside PMCs but have often been protected by them, as well.

Most people don’t know it, but in 2006, one of every four US bodies in Iraq was private military. While I wasn’t even in the service back then, I’ve since learned that PMCs saved a lot of asses, and plenty contractors died right alongside the servicemen and women sent to fight. That was a long time ago, however, and I don’t imagine this guy would be interested in a history lesson.

Aaron and I don't bother responding to Avara, instead keeping silent watch as we wait for the signal to go. Secretly, I wonder if the sergeant would feel differently if he knew he was talking down to a couple of Marine Raiders.

The gunfire slows and eventually silences, and Avara gestures for us to follow as he stands out of his crouch. We quickly cover the distance to the target, with Aaron and I scanning the surrounding area for hidden players.

We make it to the mud brick building safely and watch the army guys pull out bodies. The fifteen-by-fifteen room is empty, save for a few shot-up tables and chairs. While those are moved away, I inspect the floor, looking for a hatch as the lights are set up.

Not seeing anything obvious, I wonder if the entire floor structure was constructed to hide the hiding place. I also hope that the intel on this location was good and that we haven't just wasted a whole morning... and half a dozen lives. I flip up my NV goggles just before the lights are turned on, and I have to squint for a moment as my eyes adjust.

Coming to the same conclusion I did, the raid squad deconstructs the elevated portion of the floor until exposing a dug-out section of the earth below.

The opening is about ten feet in diameter and six feet deep below the structure's foundation. Wooden posts have been driven into the ground in the crude basement to serve as a support system for the retrofitted floor.

Inside the hole sit several boxes of guns and ammo, but the biggest attention-getter is the pile of cash—US currency.

With my rifle up, I peer around the boxes to the whole of the basement, checking for hazards. Next to me, Avara mockingly says, "Time to earn your pay, Rent-a-cop," before clapping me hard on the back.

The move catches me off-guard, and since I'm already leaned over, the hit sends me plunging into the hole. There's no time or room to roll into the landing or even execute a break fall. My feet hit first, planting awkwardly against one of the stacks of boxes and pitching me forward.

My upper body slams into one of the wood crates, the corner hitting just below my chest plate and gouging upward. I roll off the box to the ground, still maintaining control of my weapon. Fighting to breathe through the pain, I remain sprawled on my back in the dirt for a long while.

Above me, Aaron roars just before slamming Avara against the wall with enough force to shake the entire building. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Aaron shoves off Avara, jumps into the hole, and takes the rifle from my hands. Then he grasps my arms to lift me off the ground. Aaron begins swiping at the dirt on my back, but I shrug him off. "I got it," I tell him.

Aaron places his hand on my shoulder, but I avert my eyes, embarrassed that the stupid asshole grunt got the drop on me. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lie.

"Then let's get out of this hole."

"Give me a minute."

Sensing more going on than meets the eye, Aaron opts for a closer inspection of my condition, pausing at my middle. He notices that I'm standing slightly hunched over, and his whole body goes bow tight. "That son of a bitch."

Aaron's eyes are full of violence when he finally looks back at my face. "Leave it,

Grim,” I whisper. “It won’t do any good.”

It’s a good thing that my uniform and armor are solid black. Otherwise, he’d see the blood I feel trickling down my belly, and there’d be no stopping him.

Aaron turns from me to glare at the asshole that pushed me down, but Avara isn’t even looking at us. His attention is on the opposite side of the room, where Colonel Heathman’s voice can be heard before he can be seen.

The mission’s commanding officer walks in and approaches the hole in the floor, whistling at the contents of the underground room.

“FinCEN has been notified. They’ll have a team here in six hours. I’ll have two men in here with you at all times, and the rest of my men will patrol the area outside.”

The colonel walks away then, leaving Aaron and me staring up at his men from the bottom of the hole. All but two of them follow Heathman out of the building, Avara and a man we haven’t met yet.



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The unknown of the pair jumps into the crude basement. “What are you doing, Masters?” Avara demands from the rim.

“My job. As the only medic here, I’m checking to see how much damage you caused.” Under his breath, he adds, “Asshole.”

Avara walks away from the hole's edge while Corporal Masters straps his rifle to his back, removes his gloves, and takes a knee in front of me. Looking up, Masters lifts a brow in question, asking permission to touch me. I nod my consent, and he reaches out to unstrap my armored vest and then probes my ribs over my black shirt. His bare fingers come away bloody, and the medic shakes his head.

“Sorry about the sarge,” he murmurs softly. “He was in Iraq when those Blackwater guys shot up all those civilians. He’s been salty toward mercs ever since. Not to make excuses for him or anything. He’s still a bastard.”

“I am not a fucking merc.”

Masters throws up his hands defensively. “Sorry. Sorry. Bad generalization. I merely meant to point out that Avara doesn’t acknowledge the distinction.”

Noticing Masters’ wide, apologetic eyes, I relax my stiff posture, and Masters resumes his work. The truth is, no one knows what really happened that day in Nisour Square. Some say the incident was a planned ambush by insurgents that infiltrated the local police force. For what purpose? Bad political press to see if America would bow?

And bow they did. The administration put these people through three trials until receiving what the foreign government viewed as a favorable outcome. All guilty, except for the guy that testified against his teammates to save his own ass. Since then, another administration viewed all facets of the case, and the PMCs were pardoned after serving years in prison.

I guess Avara bought the original party line like so many others, not concerned about learning the truth. “Doesn’t he know that every profession has its share of assholes?” I ask.

Masters smiles. “He should. He’s one of them.”

As Masters spoke, he lifted my shirt and then looked to be at a loss with how to manage the situation. I take over and tuck the fabric under my bra to give him a clear area to work. Masters presses some gauze to the gash to clean away some of the blood so that he can decide on the proper treatment.

Aaron leans over to see the damage at the same time as I do and swears under his breath at the extent of it. No wonder it hurt like a motherfucker. The rough corner of the crate dug into my skin with the force of my landing, tearing a little as I slid.

The medic’s assessment of the injury is calm, quite the opposite of Aaron’s demeanor. “Avara is lucky nothing broke. I think your partner would have killed him otherwise. The wound looks worse than it is, but it could do with some stitches. I can close it, but I’m shit with needlework and would leave a wicked scar. It’d be better if someone with a gentler hand did it. You’ll be all right for now if I just put on some butterfly strips.”

“Thanks.”

Masters applies the closing strips, with me trying not to hiss through the pain at the

pressure needed to place them securely. Afterward, the whole area is covered with a bandage, and the medic scans the rest of my uniform for other bloody spots that would indicate further injury. During his perusal, he asks, “Your landing was pretty rough. Can you walk on that leg?”

“I’m good,” I tell him.

“Ah. The strong, silent type. What branch did you serve in?”

“Marines.”

“Impressive. What was your MOS?”

So, the grunt wants to know my military operational specialty. Normally, I wouldn’t say anything, but maybe word will get around to Avara, and he’ll get off my ass. “MARSOC. I was a Raider.”

The corporal’s eyes go wide. “No shit. So, you’re her, the only female Raider. That’s badass.”

Aaron scoffs, and I look up just in time to see him roll his eyes. “Why don’t you pass along a pressure wrap just in case she needs it? I wouldn’t want Avara giving you shit for being away from your post for too long.”

“Right. Yeah,” he says before handing me a rolled-up wrap bandage.

Masters steps up onto a box and climbs out of the hole. Aaron follows and lowers a hand to me. My own efforts to leave the basement hurt like hell, but I’ll be damned if I let that asshole sergeant know.

Aaron and I have been guarding this hole for six hours now, waiting on the feds to

show up. The army guys have been rotating out every two hours, so we've at least been able to get away from Avara. And so far, the other guys we've stood guard with seem cool with us.

Three FinCEN agents finally waltz in at the seven-hour mark. They're escorted by Sergeant Avara, with Heathman and Morrison having returned to base after patrols were established.

No introductions are made by the sergeant, who's moved on and is currently reassigning his men. Aaron and I, however, have a job to do, and being a good sheep isn't part of it. I approach the dick swinger giving the agents a report of the raid. "Excuse me," I say to the agent standing in front of the others. "I'm sure you understand, but I'd like to verify your identity."

"Stay in your lane, Phelps," Avara warns.

"Hey, you got a problem with us doing our job, fuckface?" Aaron demands. "Take it up with Heathman."

Now having the full attention of the three agents, I introduce myself and Aaron.

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“I’ve heard of you,” the first says as he pulls out his ID.

Gesturing to Aaron, I deadpan, “Whatever you heard, I’m sure it’s his fault.”

I pass the three IDs to Aaron, who walks away to call them in. “You two were in Estonia,” the female agent says. “You rescued that captured group of Navy SEALs.”

Shaking my head, I say, “We merely assisted their own commander in getting them out.”

Wanting to change the subject, I address the senior agent again. “I didn’t hear any birds landing.”

Aaron returns at that moment, nodding to me and passing the agents’ IDs back to them. “I hope you’re not planning on driving this stuff out of here,” he says.

“We’re not moving anything until we’ve investigated the site and inventoried everything here. We’ll use the sergeant and his men to pack up and provide security for the trip back to base.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to explain the risk he and his people are taking. I chance a look over at Aaron and receive a slight, negative shake of his head.

“Right. Where do you need us?”

“You two are dismissed. You may return to base.”

I hold the agent's gaze for a moment, shocked that he's discharging his most capable security force. Aaron tugs at my shirt to keep me from saying so, and I turn around and follow him out. Clear from earshot of the others, Aaron says, "I get military limitations, but it seems like they're taking a big gamble here. There's no way the terrorist supply chain is in the dark. They know that we've taken this cache by now. To still be here seven hours later is stupid."

"And they're not leaving any time soon. These guys are inviting an attack, and when it comes, they'll have only a handful of soldiers to fight. Those Treasury badges won't do them any good."

Despite our concerns, we're in no position to argue. Insubordination can result in our contract being canceled, which would reflect poorly on Knot's company. So, we give the agents what they want and make the long walk back to the Sentinel.

The rest of the convoy has relocated closer to the smuggler's hideout, leaving our transportation unguarded. Assholes. Unsupervised vehicles in the field can be as dangerous as an abandoned backpack at a train station. I draw my pistol and clear the area as Aaron drops to the ground to check underneath the carriage and inside the wheel wells.

Aaron announces that the truck is clear right as I finish my circuit around the body. A second pass has me inspecting places on the body where small amounts of explosives could be hidden, but I also fail to find anything out of place. "Let's get the hell out of here."

During the drive back, I knock back a dose of ibuprofen since my last one wore off. The cut on my ribs hurts like a bitch. The area around the wound has swelled some, and the damned thing still needs to be stitched closed. That's gonna be fun.

Aaron must have read my mind as he pulls out his phone and calls base. "Zach, we're

about half an hour out. Make sure Lawson is around to stitch up a cut.”

“Copy. What happened?”

“Some asshole pushed Sadie into a hole,” he growls.

“We’ll be ready.”

I stare at Aaron’s profile for a moment, shocked that he would tattle like that. Even more surprising was the violence still present in his voice. Sure, I’m pissed at Avara, but the fact that I was hurt in the Sergeant’s little hissy fit was only due to the awkward way I landed. He didn’t intend to hurt me. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t gladly return the favor, but it is what it is. I’ve dealt with a lot worse.

This schoolyard bully shit from Avara is not worth the energy or the ire Aaron’s expending. It’s certainly not worth riling up the others over.

By the time we make it back to base and climb down from the truck, I’m favoring my side even more. It hasn’t loosened up by the time we reach our block of rooms either. I tap Aaron on the arm to get his attention. “I think I need to walk and stretch a little before the others—”

I’m cut off when the door to mine and Chelsea’s room opens, and most of our team spills out into the hallway. Damn. Intending not to make this a big deal, I shoulder past Aaron to go inside my room and take a seat. The others follow, and Brock is the first to pull a chair over to inspect the damage. All Knot operatives can stitch a wound, but I’m glad Aaron didn’t volunteer, considering how worked up he is.

I pull my shirt up, tucking the edge under my bra like before. Brock’s jaw clenches when the bandage comes off, but he keeps his thoughts to himself as he pulls supplies out of a first aid kit. Aaron hovers close as Brock cleans, numbs, and stitches up the

wound. As Aaron should have, Chelsea, Bash, and Zach have already moved on to discussing other things.

Brock ties off the last stitch just before Maxen storms through the door. He takes one look at my middle and slowly lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Who did it, Sadie?”

Everyone in the room stares wide-eyed at the rabid creature standing in the doorway. To cut the tension, I joke, “A mean bastard of a wooden crate. But don’t worry, I got my licks in too.”

Maxen is roaring now. “Don’t give me that shit! I want to know who put his hands on you!”

I need to de-escalate this before... before... hell, I don’t even know. I just have to shut this down. “Knock it off, Maxen. It’s no big deal.”

Maxen ignores me and glowers at Aaron. “Who touched her?”



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I'm on my feet in an instant getting in Maxen's face. "Hey! I said knock it off. There's no need for you to get involved."

"No need?"

Maxen cinches an arm around my waist and draws me close. "What the hell kind of man would I be if I let some asshole rough you up without answering?"

My heart thunders in my chest just before falling to the floor. Not at the show of chivalry, but because Maxen has done this with an audience.

A door slams behind me, and Chelsea says, "I... um... it looks like you two have some things to discuss. We'll go... um... find some coffee."

Brock, Bash, and Chelsea exit the room, and I shove out of Maxen's arms. I begin pacing, well, limping back and forth in front of the beds. "Dammit, Maxen! Everybody knows now."

"Knows about what?" he demands.

"About us! Or at least, they suspect."

"Sorry? I don't understand. We're not breaking any rules. There shouldn't be a problem unless you plan to keep me your dirty little secret."

The accusation hits hard, and I immediately deflate. Dropping onto my bed, I'm thankful for the local anesthetic Brock used as I blow out a long breath. "That's not

what I meant.”

Maxen crosses his arms. “Then what’s really going on here? Are you trying to protect someone? Did Grim hurt you?”

“No. God, no. Nothing like that.”

How the hell can I explain this to him if I don’t fully understand it myself? Forcing my eyes to his, I say, “I’m only just wrapping my head around it. You, me. I don’t intend to hide this from the team, but I wouldn’t have wanted them to find out this way.”

Maxen takes a seat next to me on the bed. “I’m sorry. When Zach told us you’d been attacked, I took a walk so I wouldn’t be breathing fire when you got back. I lost it when I saw Brock stitching you up.”

“I wasn’t attacked, just caught off guard. But that’s another thing I’m worried about. You know I can take care of myself. Just because we’re... whatever we are, doesn’t mean I need you to step in and fight for me.”

“I know you don’t, Sadie, but you’re not being fair. You would have felt the same way if it was Chelsea or any of us guys that came back in that condition.”

I lift a hand to the back of my neck and squeeze the muscles there. “Dammit. You’re right.”

Maxen places a hand on my thigh, sending tingles up my spine. “You want me to wrap your knee? Brock kind of split before he got the chance.”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle that myself. I could use a shower first, anyway.”

“Now that sounds like a great idea.”

I lean forward, trying my best to act seductively, and whisper when my lips nearly touch his. “I don’t need any help.”

“That’s too bad,” he breathes.

His tongue swipes out to wet his lips, making me hot in all the right places. My breaths come faster, and I decide to take the leap. “Though I’m sure I could use some help later.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I finally close the gap, touch my lips to his, and quickly find myself on my back. Maxen invades my mouth and my senses until I’m breathless underneath him. I’ve just about decided he can help me with my shower after all when he sits up, leaving me grossly unfulfilled.

“All you’ve got to do is say the word, and I’m all yours.”

Maxen gets up and walks out of my room, leaving me wet and frustrated for the second time today.

After a cold shower and reapplying the bandage Brock left for me, my thoughts have sobered enough to spend some time thinking about Aaron and the reason he stormed out. I can guess what it is.

Not even two hours before I was banging Maxen, I told my best friend that nothing was going on between us. My words had been true at the time, but Aaron probably

now thinks I was lying to him. Aaron hates liars.

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As soon as I finish braiding my hair, I'm on my feet to find Aaron. He's not in the dining facility, where the rest of my team pretends not to look from me to Maxen and vice versa. I systematically check the areas around our assigned section, but he doesn't turn up. Eventually, I find him leaning against a building at the airfield, watching planes take off and land.

Aaron doesn't say anything when I take the spot next to him. A long, tense minute passes as we watch a big C-130 lumbering toward the far end of the tarmac to get set for takeoff. I've always been amazed that these humongous beasts ever manage to get airborne. Engines scream as the giant machine shoots down the runway and smooth out as she lifts her big ass off the ground.

"I'm sorry."

"About what?" he asks tersely.

"I didn't tell you."

Aaron crosses his arms over his chest, subconsciously shutting me out. "No, you lied to me. There's a difference."

"I didn't lie, ok? It was true when I said there was nothing between Maxen and me."

He scoffs. "We were on a plane nine hours after you said that, Sadie."

"I know."

Aaron finally turns to face me, leaning his shoulder against the block wall. “So, what? You guys decided to go steady during the plane ride over.”

“Don’t be an ass, Aaron. When I left Mel’s, I drove around for a while and ended up at Maxen’s place.”

Aaron shoves off the wall and walks away. I follow, not understanding his anger. “I swear I didn’t lie to you. That was the first time we’d hooked up.”

Aaron rounds on me, his features darkened by a look that I can’t interpret. “I didn’t ask, Sadie! So, you’re fucking Maxen. Spare me the details.”

He seems surprised by the vehemence in his voice and takes off again. This time, I let him go.

Aaron’s anger stung. That he raised his voice to me has left me dumbfounded. That’s a first in our long friendship. Plenty of times, he’s called me out over stupid decisions, but he’s never been angry at me.

Turning away from his retreating form, I walk back to our assigned area to find Brock. I owe him an apology too.

Brock is the only one on my team left in the dining hall when I push through the doors. I take the empty spot beside him, pull the cup of coffee from his hand, and take a long drink. He doesn’t speak, and I wonder if he shares Aaron’s outlook on the situation.

“It happened after I left you and Aaron at Mel’s.”

Brock suddenly finds his hands interesting, refusing to look up. “Hey, you don’t owe me anything. Your private life is your own.”

“Yeah, well, you and Aaron are two of my closest friends, and I couldn’t stand for you guys to think I’d lied to you. I tried explaining things to Aaron, but he wasn’t interested.”

Brock’s smile is strained when he finally looks up and reaches out to squeeze my shoulder, “Give him some time. He’ll come around.”

Unconvinced, I hand back his coffee and stand. “Sure.”

On my way to the dorm room I share with Chelsea, I’m stopped by Captain Morrison. “Phelps, we’ve already got word on another shipment. The colonel wants you to meet with his staff at sixteen hundred. I know you guys have a rotation, so whoever you’re sending with the raid team should come with you.”

I make it back to the dorm without any further interruptions and collapse onto the bed, determined to get a couple of hours of rack time before meeting with the colonel. Before closing my eyes, I pull out my phone and take a minute to message Chelsea and Bash about the meeting. They both respond quickly, and I let out a long sigh at how this day has turned out.

My door eases open a few minutes later, and I recognize Chelsea’s steps as she walks into the room to lie down on her own bed. Sensing her eyes on me, I ask, “What?”

“I was just wondering how Grim took the news.”

I roll to my side, wincing because of my bruised middle, and crack one eye open. “He’s mad that I didn’t tell him.”

“Oh,” she replies in a deceptively casual way.

“Oh, what?”

“Nothing.”



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Squinting my eyes at her, I say, “Good, then put your nothing in your pocket and let me sleep.”

My alarm wakes me in time to splash some cold water on my face and grab something to drink before walking with Chelsea and Bash to Colonel Heathman’s office.

Heathman and Morrison are joined by their two squad leaders, including Sergeant Avara. I avoid looking his way, instead focusing all my attention on the two senior officers in the group. “Intelligence has identified the location of another shipment of cash and guns. This site is close to the Afghani border. We have to intercept before these guys cross, so the Pentagon wants us to move on the location tonight. Our target is two hours west of here.”

The next hour is spent studying every bit of information we have on the new stash. Once everyone is clear on the plan of attack, Colonel Heathman dismisses the group. “We deploy at zero three hundred. Have your teams ready.”

While the distance to this target is significantly farther than the last, at least my team will be tied into the raid team’s communications. They’ll also be better prepared in case FinCEN takes seven hours to show up like last time.

Bash and Chelsea take an early dinner and crash to get as much sleep as possible before pulling out. I spend some time checking in with Knot and Birdie before heading out in search of dinner.

Maxen, Brock, and Zach walk in just after I’ve sat down and join me once they grab

trays of food. I play around with my dinner, watching the door every few minutes.

Aaron eventually shows up, his gaze locking on me as soon as he walks in. I get up from the table at his signal and follow him outside. "I'll be right back. Don't spit in my food."

"Yes, Bwana," Brock teases.

For that, he gets the finger, and then I rush out the door to meet up with Aaron. I spot him pacing the hallway, and he turns abruptly when I step out of the noisy chow hall. "I'm sorry, Sadie. I should have never jumped on you like I did."

I feign indifference with a shoulder shrug. "I get it. I've always told you everything, and now... I didn't want to say anything because I was still trying to figure things out myself. Besides, you know how dysfunctional I am when it comes to relationships. I'm sure he'll come to regret me and be gone in no time."

"If he does, then he's an idiot," he says somberly.

Aaron shoves his way into the dining room, leaving me in the empty hallway with my mouth hanging open. That's when I decide I've had enough of living in the twilight zone that is today and cut my losses. I'm crawling into bed ten minutes later.

It's around zero-two-thirty, and Chelsea has just left our room to join the raid team. The ambient noise of activity soon fades, but then I hear a sound outside my door.

Given that I'm alone in a building full of unfamiliar, I unsheathe the knife that's currently resting under my pillow. My door creaks open, and a sexy voice sighs my name.

The knife is shoved back into its sheath just as Maxen reaches my bed. I'm up on my

knees in a second, fisting his shirt in my hands at the same time he grabs for me. Mouths collide, tongues dueling for dominance as his warm fingers reach under the hem of my Tennessee Titan's t-shirt.

The fabric is lifted over my head and tossed to the floor, and my hands go straight to his bare chest, sliding down to his open fly. Shoving the fabric of his boxers out of my way, I grasp his erect cock in both hands.

Maxen groans and grasps my thighs, just behind my knees. He yanks forward, sending me sprawling to my back, then slides my panties down my legs. By the time the pain in my chest registers, he's already between my legs, licking right up my slit. At that point, stitches and soreness are quickly forgotten.

Like lightning, pleasure crackles up my torso, bringing up an uncomfortable point. The walls are thin in these dorms, and I'm incapable of remaining quiet. So that I don't broadcast our current endeavor to the entire building, I grab my pillow and cover my face.

Maxen is no longer worried about me giving us away and forces my legs open wider, sucking my clit into his mouth. While he flicks it with his tongue, he presses a hand against my lower stomach. What he does with that tongue of his is so good that I'm soon thrashing around, unable to withstand the delicious torture.

My climax surges through me unexpectedly fast, and I fight to get out from under Maxen's mouth before I implode. He doesn't let go, and he doesn't let up, so I toss my pillow aside and grab the bars at the head of the bed. Ignoring the ache, I pull myself out of his grasp, but that doesn't stop him for long.

As I struggle to catch my breath, Maxen sheds his pants and boxers. I take a moment to gawk at his body, shrouded in moonlight and lift to my knees before he can reach me.

I point to the mattress, and he shakes his head at me. “I don’t think so.”

“I seem to recall that you said if I wanted to top, that I’d have to do it at my place.” I gesture around me and add, “I’m pretty sure this is my room. Not yours.”

Flashing me with a playful grin, Maxen lies back, placing his hands behind his head. “Then, by all means, have your wicked way with me.”

I glance down at the monster between his legs, currently pointed to the ceiling. “Raincoat?”

One of his hands reaches out and drops a foil packet onto his stomach before rejoining the other behind his head. I make quick work of rolling on the rubber, and then I’m sinking onto Maxen’s cock.

The pace I set is frantic, bobbing up and down to bring us both to a satisfying end. The moonlight that highlighted Maxen’s physique is now spilling onto my chest, drawing Maxen’s eyes to my dancing tits and the bandaged stitches below.

His hands reach up to palm my breasts, but since I’m a bouncer and not a scooter, he can’t keep his grip on them. No worries. Maxen slides his hands down to my hips, holding them tightly and aiding with my movements. And I’m glad for it. I didn’t consider my pissed-off knee when thinking this thing through.

His strength, added to the mix, results in more speed and deeper penetration. On top of that, he’s begun to thrust upward from beneath me. This new ferocity is amazing until one of his hands creeps around my hip to slip a thumb into my folds. Instead of strumming me, he presses my clit against his dick. My rhythm suffers and then becomes all kinds of erratic when that same thumb adds a circular motion to the equation.

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The beautiful agony persists until I'm tipping over the edge, and Maxen suddenly sits up. His hand goes to my mouth, even as the thrusting continues. I call out into his hand through the lightning shooting through me. With my clit pressed against his body still, the continued motion has me whimpering through the aftershocks.

Maxen's hand on my mouth muffles all of it.

When he senses I'm no longer in danger of waking the whole building, he sits up and places his feet on the floor. Maxen then grips my ass and stands, spinning me around and laying me on my back. He takes over, and I'm treated to a fine display of rippling chest and ab muscles as he powers into me.

I reach down to my clit, but with my stifling pillow out of reach, I think better of it and touch my fingers to where we connect.

"Sadie, look at me."

The desperation in his voice gets my attention, and I slowly drag my eyes to his face. "I want you to see what you do to me, Sadie."

Maxen lifts my legs to his shoulders and leans forward. "Eyes on me," he orders as he begins thrusting again.

Within seconds, his rhythm becomes jerky, and he grunts out my name. One more thrust has Maxen seizing up altogether before he drops a hand to the mattress to hold himself off my sore chest.

The quiet room is filled with the sound of his heavy breathing. Maxen's half-lidded eyes and tipsy grin are in stark contrast to the powerhouse he always presents. Likewise, his kiss is sensual and soft when he lowers his lips to mine, the complete opposite of the fiery fucking from just a moment ago. So much more intimate, which scares the hell out of me.

I shove against his shoulder, breaking the kiss. "Seeing how this room is u-rated, you'll have to scamper back off to your own bed."

"U-rated?"

"Only for persons with a uterus."

"I see."

Though I expect Maxen to be angry or maybe hurt by my dismissal, that damned grin of his is back. "You don't have to protect yourself, Sadie. This isn't just about sex for me, but I'm not looking to shackle you."

Maxen stands back up, pulling off the used condom. I cringe, wondering how and where Maxen will dispose of the contraceptive so that it's not seen by others. I'm not about to ask, though. Maxen slips out the door with a wink, and I flop back onto the bed, still feeling the vibrations of the powerful orgasms.

Reveille sounds at five, and I hop out of bed feeling a little less stiff than yesterday. I dress quickly as my team plans to join the grunts for their morning physical conditioning. The workout is embarrassingly short and nowhere near as strenuous as what my team does on a daily basis back at home.

I don't judge too much, considering they probably do more when stateside. Afterward, my crew shares a quick breakfast before breaking off to the showers. With

nothing else to do for the time being, I sit down on my bed and peck out an email to Knot reporting on yesterday's raid. Then, just for the hell of it, I email my dad. He's going to hate that. But maybe that'll motivate him to let Blake teach him how to use email.

I keep to my room for the rest of the day so that I'm immediately available should Chelsea and Bastien call in. It's certainly not because I feel the need to avoid Aaron or Maxen for any reason.

The rare free time is spent reading and catching up on the news. Around seventeen hundred, Zach knocks on my door. "Yeet and Bash are on their way back."

Lifting a single eyebrow, I tease the former green beret. "I'm gonna tell her you called her that."

Zach laughs, not worried at all about my empty threat. "No, you won't. If you do, you'll only be reminding her that you're the one that gave her that name."

I chuckle as Zach crosses his arms in defiance, knowing he's got me.

A couple of years back, a few of the Knotheads I work with came to Gatlinburg to check out my hometown. Chelsea, Birdie, and Brock came, and of course, Aaron was there. Being the adrenaline junkies they are, the group wanted to try their hand at whitewater rafting.

Halfway down our run on the Ocoee River, a small green snake dropped into our raft from the tree canopy above. Now, everybody knows that green snakes are harmless. Everyone but Chelsea, I guess. As soon as she spotted the tiny green danger noodle, she yeeted herself right out of the raft and took the next set of rapids, ass in the water and toes in the air. I've called her Yeet ever since... sparingly.

When the pair have had almost enough time to make the drive back to base, I head out into the heat to join my team to get some food and be on hand to hear Yeet and Bash's report. Given their early start and long day, I'm sure they'll be ready to crash right after.

Their dirt-covered Sentinel pulls up to the dorm building, and two ragged operatives spill out. "That bad, huh?" I ask.

Bastien removes his hat and slaps it against his leg. The fabric releases a cloud of dust, a fitting match to the thunderstorm in his eyes. "Intel had the location on the map right but not the spot of the weapons. Caves. A big network of caves. And compared to the amount your guys found, this was the motherload. Heathman and Morrison even stuck around to have more available bodies. We offered to stay. Heathman accepted, but the feds overruled him."

"Idiots," I mumble. "All right. You two—"

Yelling coming from HQ has all of our heads spinning in that direction. Sergeant Avara storms out of the building as other men scatter, yelling as they go. Something's happened.

Spotting my group, Avara sprints over as the rest of my guys fall in, attracted by the commotion. "First platoon came under attack. They're pinned down in the caves. We wouldn't even know except that Masters was outside stitching up a bullet wound in his own leg and called it in."



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Shit, this is bad. Though I know what I would do, I'm not in charge here. And Avara isn't exactly fond of my profession. I half expect him to order us to stay out of his way, but he shocks me instead. "I've got eight men, but none of them are trained for cave theater. Masters has been telling everybody you guys are former Raiders. Is that bullshit?"

"Aaron and I were Raiders," I report. "Zach was a green beret, and Maxen can't confirm the existence of his unit in the Army."

Avara nods, understanding the Delta insinuation. "We... I'm going to need some help if there's a chance at all to get our men out."

Avara goes stock-still, waiting for my evaluation. Or for me to tell him to fuck off. A cave system, an unknown number of combatants, and a rescue team of fourteen people. Shit.

Pointing to the helipad, I take a deep breath and say, "Find some pilots for those Black Hawks. We lift off in ten."

At the order, my crew rushes off to gear up, and Avara leaves to gather what's left of his platoon.

I turn to follow my team, calling for Bastien and Chelsea when they reach the door. "You two stand down. You're not going. You need rest, and I need you to be ready to coordinate some help if this rescue mission goes pear-shaped."

Bash doesn't look happy with the command, but he doesn't argue.

At the nine-minute mark, Avara's platoon is loaded into one of the helos, and Avara jumps in the other with my team. "There hasn't been any more contact from Masters," he yells over the helo's engines.

"He's probably turned off the radio to shield his location." Or it's more likely that he's dead.

Just over thirty minutes after takeoff, we're landing a safe distance from the reported entrance to the cave. Night blankets the area in total darkness, and none of us has any idea of the infrastructure inside the caves.

Everyone in our group sets up with NV goggles and do a coms check, even though our radios won't work inside the mountain. Once everyone is ready to move, I nod to Sergeant Avara. Like it or not, he's in charge here. Since he asked for our help, I'm fairly confident that he won't be an ass about assigning my team.

He looks at his men and stiffens his spine. "I have no idea what we're walking into. All I know for sure is that the nine of us are in over our heads. Fortunately, we have four experienced special forces operatives here. You'll take your orders from them."

He turns to me and nods humbly. "Phelps."

Holy shit! Masking my surprise, I tip my chin in acknowledgment and dive right in. "Ok. I know intel was wrong and didn't know about the caves, but you all should still be familiar with the layout of the buildings. I need two scouts on the roof of the building closest to the cave. These have to be your stealthiest guys."

"Stanley, Banks, that's you," Avara calls out.

"I want two more looking for Masters. He's the only link we have to the inside. Hopefully, he'll be able to give us some useful information. Do any of your men have

infrared scopes?” I direct to the sergeant.

“No. NV only.”

I fish mine out of my bag and reach over to Brock for his, passing them along to Avara’s men. “I want the rest of you to split into two teams. One in each team is to be on IR at all times. We’re setting up to have four teams fanned out and advancing toward the mouth of the cave.”

No one objects, which is promising, and, I’d add, surprising. “You scouts get moving. We’re going to need you to guide us in. Zach, go with them. You’ll break off to rejoin us as soon as we reach your location. As much as I hate to say it, we’ll have to play it by ear for a while. Hopefully, we’ll find that our assholes packed up and left, leaving our guys tied up in the cave.”

“What if they didn’t pack up and leave?” one of the men asks.

“Well, then we’ll let you know because my team will be the first to go inside.”

The army guys are visibly shocked that we’re not planning to sacrifice them while watching from a safe distance. I don’t say it, but sending them into a situation like this, for which they have not been trained, would not only endanger them but would more than likely get their teammates killed. If they’re even still alive.

Five minutes after the scout team sets out, Zach radios in. “The trucks are gone. There’s a body on the ground about fifty feet outside the cave.”

Dammit.

One of the guys with us asks, “What if the colonel is already on his way back to base?”

Avara turns and glares at the young private. “Without radioing in?”

Another voice reports through the radio. “It’s Masters. They must have found him when they took our trucks.”

Avara’s eyes meet mine, desperate and utterly void of malice. He’s just figured out what my team already knew. The rest of his platoon and the colonel are dead. Holding his gaze, I ask for a status report from the scout team. “Scout team, are we clear?”

“Affirmative. There’s nothing out here but crickets.”

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“Keep your eyes sharp anyway,” I order the men. “Move out.”

The four remaining groups approach the collection of buildings a little faster than I would generally encourage. I don’t hold them back because, deep down, I know there’s no point. We won’t be saving anybody tonight.

Reaching the tallest building, I clock Zach climbing down the side wall. He jogs over, shaking his head. The other teams show discipline enough to remain where they are, so I gesture for Zach to report over the radio for all to hear.

“We spotted bodies. Fourteen. All arranged Army style. These would be the insurgents Heathman’s men took down. Beyond that, there’s no movement. Lights are visible in the cave.”

“I don’t hear a generator. They must have buried wiring from one of these buildings,” Maxen says.

“What does that matter?” Avara asks.

Aaron answers, “These guys wouldn’t run off and leave a working generator. Besides, a running generator confirms someone’s inside. Wired power could mean anything.”

“None of that matters at this point,” I explain. “We’re going in, regardless. Sergeant, I want a group keeping watch outside the cave entrance. The rest of you can advance behind us at a spacing of thirty feet or so to maintain radio contact as long as possible. None of us know how deep this thing runs, and I don’t want anyone getting

lost, so no branching off.”

That last part was directed toward my team. “Maxen, the five of us will stick together unless the cave splits off before we find anything.”

Maxen stares into the cave, his gaze analyzing, “Keep your NV ready and shoot out the lights if you run into trouble. Even if there’s not enough light bleed for the scopes to work, you’re better off blind than dead.”

As one, we approach the opening roughly shaped like an upside-down teardrop leaning to one side. Avara’s men break off into their assigned positions as my team leads the way inside.

The initial hollow reaches a height of only about nine feet. I’d estimate the width to be about twenty feet, and I can’t see the end. Several rocky projections along the length conceal the back wall or what could be access to additional tunnels.

This cave is nothing like the ones in the mountains near my home. In Tennessee, our caves are wet, full of water-smoothed rocks, bulbous stalagmites, and sometimes, waterfalls. This cavern is dry, dusty, and full of jagged rock formations.

Brock steps toward one of the larger formations with his rifle up. I take three steps to the left and see what caught his attention. Army-issue boots. Brock advances a few more steps, and his shoulders tense. He turns toward me and reports, “It’s Heathman.”

And just like that, it’s confirmed that this is no longer a rescue but a recovery mission. I don’t expect to find a single man alive. “Keep moving. Avara’s got eight more men to account for, plus the two treasury agents.”

Following Maxen’s lead, we advance deeper into the cavern, finding that the most

prominent outcropping of rocks hid a passage. We pass through the access single-file due to its size, leaving the Army guys in place as planned. They're still our radio relay but now have the added job of securing the colonel's body.

The hidden passage is only three feet wide and low enough that we all have to duck to keep from dragging our heads against the top. Halfway through, the path curves slightly to the right. Upon making the turn, I glance past Maxen into another cavern smaller than the first.

The grizzly scene at the end of the tunnel is an overwhelming sight. Grabbing onto Maxen's shoulder, I drop to a knee with my head bowed. "Zach," I begin, voice almost a whisper. "Go get Avara."

Maxen lays a hand on my back, and the four of us hold still until Zach has exited the tunnel. "All right, guys. Let's get this over with."

The four of us cross the final ten feet of the small passage and stand up to survey the carnage. The floor is littered with bodies, all of them American. By my count, we're still missing four. That means we press on. Two more openings branch off from this room, so the four of us will split up and take them simultaneously.

"Hold on," Brock commands sharply.

All eyes focus his way to see him turning in a circle to study the scene. I don't know what he sees, but the man was a cop, so I'll respect his intuition. "What is it?"

"Something's not right."

He points out some of the bodies toward the front of the room. "The position of these bodies. These guys were guarding the entrance but had no cover to hide behind."

Brock turns around, pointing next to the ones in the rear of the room. “These are a mirror image of the others. These guys were turned around to face an attack from deeper inside the cave.”

“How? These men weren’t trained to operate in caves, but Bastien and Chelsea were. Even if the army had failed to clear the storage area, our people had to guard it for several hours before FinCEN showed up,” Aaron points out.

Brock runs his gloved fingers through his hair and studies the cavern's walls. “Could there be a secondary entrance?”

“There’s no way,” Aaron answers. “The cliff face is too tall, and the base of this rock is at least a mile wide.”

“That has to mean that either the raid team missed something big or that some of them were dirty,” Brock surmises. “The only way to find out which is to account for the missing bodies.”

Zach’s voice sounds in the tunnel again, and I rush over to intercept him and Avara. The sergeant stands upright and looks around, totally speechless. Avara’s face reddens to the point that I’m afraid he’s about to lose his shit. “Avara,” I say softly to get his attention.



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His eyes don't stop moving, jumping from one victim to another. We're about to lose him. Keeping my voice calm and my movements slow, I step in front of the sergeant. "Avara, listen to me. I swear we will get these men home, but I need you to stay focused on the living for right now. We still have four people missing. Tell me who I'm looking for."

The rattled sergeant stammers through a list of names, then shuts down completely. I motion Zach to step in close, and he leans a shoulder against Avara for support. "Zach, I want you to stay here and help Avara and his team. We've got to press on and find the others."

"Sure, Sadie," he responds with a nod.

Zach steers Avara back through the tunnel, and the rest of us proceed toward two additional openings in the rear of this room. The lights strung along the ceiling go through the access on the right, which likely means anything to be found will be located through there. Still, I won't take anything for granted. I want to find out what else this cave has been hiding. "Maxen, you and Brock go right. I want to see what's hidden to the left."

The two set off, and I activate the light on my helmet since I'll have to crawl on all fours to make it through the child-sized opening. Confident with Aaron guarding my six, I drop to my knees and get moving.

The squatty tunnel is about seven feet long and, at the end, opens into a bedroom-sized area. I sweep my light over the small cavern but have a little trouble processing what I see.

Aaron grips my calf from behind when I stop. “What is it?”

“It’s guns.”

I crawl the rest of the way into the cavern and stand, joined shortly by Aaron. “This doesn’t make any sense,” he says.

At the first raid location, the guns were packaged securely in wooden crates. Though clean and appearing to be in good working condition, these are scattered all over the ground. It looks like someone dumped them out and took the crates.

Aaron picks up a rifle and inspects it as well as he can in the limited light. “I can’t find anything wrong with it.”

He tosses the M-16 back onto the pile and walks around the space, thinking out loud. “They took the crates but left the guns.”

“A quick getaway,” I muse. “They had something more valuable than the rifles. The crates would make moving whatever it was easier.”

“The cash?”

I shrug my shoulders and kick a discarded gun. “Has to be.”

Aaron drops down and begins crawling back the way we came. I follow close behind and emerge, finding a somber group of soldiers tending to the dead in the middle cavern. As I get to my feet, Brock jogs out of the path he and Maxen took.

“We found the other four. There’s no rear entrance.”

Avara approaches, anger painting harsh lines on his forehead. “What the hell

happened? From where I stand, it looks like my team was set up by dirty treasury agents who were killed when our guys fought back.”

Brock is adamant. “None of us can explain what went down, but I know for sure that didn’t happen. The two civilians in the next room were... executed.” He means tortured.

Needing to refocus everyone, I ask, “What else have you found?”

Brock answers, “The cash is gone. No guns were found, but the next room is huge. We haven’t checked everything yet.”

“We found the guns abandoned in the other path. Have you noticed any place where someone or several someones could hide well enough to keep Bash from finding them?”

“Not yet, but we haven’t made it all the way to the back.”

I nod absently, deep in thought over how these bastards avoided detection by Chelsea and Bastien. They wouldn’t have just accepted that the Army did a thorough job securing the cave. “There has to be something. Get back to Maxen and keep looking.”

To Avara, I say, “I need you to move fast to get your men out. Those bastards will come back for their guns, and I don’t want to be here when they do. Have one of the choppers take as many bodies as possible and tell Shindand to launch a replacement.”

I glance at Aaron and gesture toward the second, larger tunnel entrance. The two of us will help Maxen and Brock check every inch of that last cave so our group can get the hell out of here.

Aaron and I have just reached the mouth of the tunnel when Maxen’s panicked voice

echoes through the passage, “Brock! Get down!”

A fraction of a second later, a single gunshot rings out. The sound reverberates off the walls and shakes me to my core. Please, God. No. Aaron and I take off running, led by Maxen’s enraged screams. Several more shots are fired, this time from a familiar gun, and then all noise ceases.

Fifty or so feet inside the cavernous room, I spot Brock lying on the ground, bleeding from a wound in his neck. Abandoning all else, I rush to his side, falling to my knees, and press my hand against the wound. “Hold on, Brock! Aaron, go find a medic!”

“I got the shooter,” Maxen yells as he runs over. “How is he?”

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Brock's gaze swivels toward Maxen, then back to me. His eyes, wide and dilated, are desperate and scared, same as mine, I'm sure. "Hold on, Brock. We'll get out of here, and the next round at Mel's is on me."

Though I tried to keep my voice even, the fear in Brock's eyes worsens. His body begins to shake, and the blood from his neck begins seeping through my fingers even faster.

To buy him some time, I press harder on the wound, and his eyes close in pain. Brock opens his mouth to speak, but no sound comes out. "Don't try to talk. Aaron went to get help. I need you to hold on for a few more minutes."

Brock does something then that crushes my heart. He opens his eyes again, reaches a shaking hand to cup my cheek, and smiles.

And then he breathes his last.

"Brock."

I pull my fingers away from his wound to shake him awake. "Brock!"

Reaching for the clear part of his neck, I check for a pulse, finding none. "No, dammit!"

I rise to my knees and begin CPR compressions, ignoring the Voices in My Head telling me it's too late. A hand reaches in to try and halt my efforts to revive Brock, and Maxen's pained voice soothes, "Sadie, stop. He's gone."

I shove his hands away and yell, “No, he’s not! Either help or leave me the fuck alone!”

“Sadie—”

“Shut up, Maxen!”

I bend down to breathe for Brock, but the air comes through his neck, spattering my face with his blood. “Hold pressure on his wound!” I beg.

Maxen shakes his head sadly but clasps his hand over Brock’s neck. I force another breath into his lungs, but then strong arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me away. “Let me go!”

I fight with everything I have, sending us crashing backward onto the rocky ground, but the hold never loosens, keeping me locked on top of a hard chest.

“He’s gone, Sadie. Let him go. I’ve got you, Mein Engel.”

The words murmured in my ears go unnoticed in the torment of losing such a treasured friend. I go limp in Aaron’s arms, staring blankly at Brock’s still form, but I do not cry. I haven’t cried since my mother died.

By the time Aaron loosens his hold on me, Avara and several others have filtered into this part of the cave. Everyone gathered gives me a wide berth when I reach my feet and march over to the other dead man.

The shooter lies halfway between a refrigerator-sized rock and a stack of empty pallets. His gun has been kicked away from his hand, though any idiot can see that he’s no longer a threat. I count four exit wounds in his back from where Maxen shot him.

I'd love nothing more than to go back in time to deliver the death blow myself, but if I had that ability, I wouldn't waste it on this sack of shit. I'd spare Brock's life. Since such thoughts won't help, I turn from the dead Arab and scan the area.

I'm beginning to get a picture of how Heathman was ambushed from within. Something's here. I just can't see it yet. "Where did he come from?"

No one answers me right away, so I turn turbulent eyes back to the men watching me cautiously. "Where?!"

With blood all over my face and arms and fire in my eyes, I probably look like a walking, talking nightmare. I also don't care how I appear to any of these men.

Maxen points to the stack of pallets. Why the hell would these be here? Drawing my Glock, I step closer, finding a clever hiding place. The short stack of empty pallets isn't what it seems. The wooden supports are fastened to one another, and all but the top and bottom ones are cut down the middle and attached at one corner with hinges.

The faux door is swung open enough to reveal a space big enough for a grown man to hunch down. I'll be damned. The bastards were here the whole time. Nobody would have known he was here without doing a thermal scan of the room. These assholes just sat here and waited for their backup to show.

Turning back to the group, I issue a barking order, "I want IR scans of everything in this room not made of rock. There might be more of them, and I don't want to lose anyone else."

Since I gave up my infrared scope, I leave the task to someone else and follow the two guys that carry Brock's body from the room. The two soldiers are regretful as they're forced to drag him on the ground through the first exit tunnel. From then on, he's carried with the utmost care past the others.

Brock's body is placed on the ground outside next to Colonel Heathman. Standing over him with blood all over me, I lift my face to the night sky, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. Several moments pass before I pull out my phone. My boss answers on the first ring. "Knot."

"Sir, Brock is dead."

Knot must pull the phone away as his furious string of curses is muted. The next sound I hear is the creaking of his leather chair. A door closes soon after, and the leather creaks again a second later. And so does my boss's voice. "I know about the cave and the raid team attack. What happened?"



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“Dead when we arrived. Every last one of them. False stacks of pallets hid a group of insurgents that attacked from within as forces boxed the team in from the outside. By the time we arrived, the assholes had packed up the cash and left. One of them was apparently tasked with remaining behind. He got the drop on Brock, and then Maxen killed him. Sir, something very wrong happened here. Before the raid, I mean. The intel for this location was received only hours after returning from the first raid. That intel was right about the geographic location but only that. I don’t like how they came up with this place so quickly but with such bad information.”

Knot grunts. “I’m more interested in why these guys would hide people in boxes if they don’t expect to be found.”

That particular thought hadn’t crossed my mind.

“I do agree with you, though. Get our people together. I’m pulling all of you until someone sorts this shit out. With the loss of their commanding officer and half of their forces, the Army guys will most likely be recalled anyway.”

Knot goes quiet again. I listen as he draws in a deep breath and then speaks in a much softer voice. “I’m sorry, Sadie. Brock meant a lot to all of us, you and Hosfeld especially.”

I drop my head to his still face. “Yeah, he did.”

“Do what needs to be done, and then get some rest. I’ll contact Sambi.”

“Yes, sir.”

An hour later, the remaining bodies have been collected, and the first helo returned. Base control also dispatched a Chinook to carry the fallen.

It's a dejected bunch of current and former servicemembers that unload on base. Several base personnel, along with Bastien and Chelsea, are on the helipads to meet us. Chelsea wipes away a tear as Brock is placed on a gurney and covered. She likely blames herself for missing the sleeper crew, even though it was the Army's job to secure the cave before she and Bash ever stepped foot inside.

Sorrow is a tangible thing among this group. I've never lost someone so close to me as Brock. I feel hollow, Faded Out.

All of us remain in place, standing silently until the last person is taken away, and then Avara turns to our group. "I was an ass to you, and I'm sorry. You guys are the real thing and risked your lives, losing one of your own, to protect ours. I hate we couldn't do the same for Lawson."

I accept his outstretched hand. "We all lost too much tonight."

Not knowing what else to say, Avara changes the subject. "We've got clearance to transport your man with ours if you'd like. That would save you some red tape."

The man clearly doesn't know Dillan Knot, but I keep my thoughts to myself. "Thank you, Sergeant."

Minutes later, I'm lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling. Chelsea breathes deeply and evenly after crying herself to sleep. She valued this team like family as much as the rest of us. Probably even more so. Brock's death hit her hard.

Sleep doesn't come easy for me despite knowing we'll be flying out at zero-nine hundred. The longer I lie here, angry at all the mistakes that got Brock killed, the less

likely I am to finally close my eyes.

Eventually, I give up trying and walk outside to sit under the dark sky near the airfield. Of all the places I could have gone, I thought to come here because Brock loved to fly. He was a hell of a pilot.

I sit on the sidewalk at flight control and lean against the brick wall facing the runway. Not long after, a dark figure approaches and takes the spot on the ground to my left. Only one person knows me well enough to look for me here.

“I’m not much of a machine right now, am I?”

Aaron’s face is drawn, his eyes are bloodshot, and his voice is heavy with emotion. “If you didn’t feel anything, I’d be worried.”

“Losing him is like losing one of my brothers.”

“I know, Sadie.”

For a long time, Aaron and I just sit, shoulder to shoulder, in silence.

The sun's first light is beginning to render the area a brilliant gold when a nudge to my arm wakes me. I lift my head from where it had fallen to rest on Aaron’s shoulder during the night. “Come on, Sadie. Let’s get back. We take off in just over three hours.”

I push up off the concrete and stretch. “Sorry,” I say guiltily. “I didn’t mean to keep you out here all night.”

Aaron offers me a sad smile. “I think we both needed it.”

Back in the dorm building, we run into Maxen, standing in the doorway to the men's sleeping quarters. "I'm going to get packed and check in with Avara before we leave. Aaron, you contact Sambi to make sure he's all set."

I don't address Maxen at all. Not for the suspicious glare toward Aaron and me after being MIA all night nor for my irrational anger that he failed to detect the presence of the man that killed Brock.

Stop it, Sadie. No one saw him coming. Not Brock, not Maxen, Chelsea, Bastien, and certainly not the whole fucking team of soldiers that were ambushed by those bastards.

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I shove into the room I share with Chelsea and head straight for the showers. Less than half an hour passes before I'm dressed and packed, and all my gear is loaded into one of the Sentinels. Next, I visit the dining hall, hoping to find Sergeant Avara.

He's inside with all that remains of his platoon, but no one is talking or joking around like usual. Avara and the rest of his men stand at my approach.

"We're set to fly out soon. Are you guys being relieved as well?" I ask.

"A plane is en route. We'll probably be on our way stateside by noon. Your boss has already set up a team to meet us in Dover."

Feeling the least awkward I've felt with this team since arriving, I grab a cup of coffee and sit with them until Zach retrieves me for the trip home.

A somber crew of PMCs boards the jet to make the long flight back to Norfolk. After this trip, I hope to never step foot in Iran again.

I spend a lot of time during the flight wording a letter to Brock's parents. I know that Knot would have contacted them by now, but I feel I owe it to Brock to reach out personally. Once I've finished, I fight off the temptation to sleep. I want to be so tired by the time I get home that I won't have the energy for anything except to pass out when I'm alone in my apartment.

Hours in, Chelsea barks out a watery laugh, drawing all of our eyes her way. "Remember when Brock showed up to an emergency call-out wearing a dress?"

I smile at her story and each one told after that. I don't join in, though. Or laugh with them. Something inside me feels broken.

Knot waits with a fleet of SUVs when our plane taxis to the hangar in Norfolk. We grab our gear from the cargo hold, Knot collecting Brock's bags himself. "Sadie, you're with me," he says.

Maxen and Aaron step forward to join us, but Knot raises an eyebrow at them. "The rest of you knock off for a few days. I'll see you on Monday."

I follow my boss to the lead SUV and shove my gear into the back. Knot adds Brock's things, and soon, we're both seated and rolling out of the airport.

Knot waits a few minutes before speaking. Perhaps it's to give me time to go first. Maybe it's just to have a moment to decompress. "I've spoken to Lawson's parents."

I don't say anything. What is there to say? Thanks?

"Some of our guys will be meeting the plan in Dover. They'll take one of the jets and escort his body home for burial."

I nod without answering. The funeral is probably already paid for. Knot doesn't like losing people, but when it happens, he ensures that the operative's family does not bear the burden of final arrangements.

"By Bastien's report, it was rough out there. What's your take?"

Though I don't feel much like talking, I answer his question. "Shaky. The men that were sent were unprepared for anything besides urban theater. They weren't trained for or equipped for a raid on caves. By the time they found out the intel was wrong, it was too late to back out."

“What about our people?”

“I don’t know that we could have prevented all of this, but maybe, they could have saved some of them. In the case of both raids, we weren’t allowed to advance until the sites had been taken. And then, we were dismissed when FinCEN showed up. Our mistake was not checking out the cave thoroughly once it was secured.”

“I understand that the place was well-lit, and only an infrared scan would have shown anything. IR scanning a lit room would have never made anyone’s to-do list.”

“It will now,” I say through clenched teeth.

Though I appreciate his efforts to convey that he doesn’t think us negligent, it won’t bring my friend back.

“Anything else happen that I need to know about?”

I reach up to rub the area of my ribs where my shirt covers the stitches. “No, sir.”

“How was working with Gates the first time?”

My breath quickens as flashes of his mouth on my body cross my mind. “No problems, but this wasn’t our first time working together. Just the first time we deployed on the same mission.”

Knot continues asking me questions during the entire drive back to the compound. I’m not facing an inquisition. It’s just that Knot knows my head is not a good place for me to be stuck after something goes wrong. He’s doing me a favor by keeping me focused on the job.

I’ve no doubt that I’ll be a hell of a mess later, but I’ll be able to keep it together for

the time being.

The other five operatives have already left the compound by the time Knot and I arrive from his meandering drive from the airport. I store my gear, place the weaponry in my secure storage locker, and throw the rest of my stuff in the trunk of my car.



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The glove fit of my Camaro's smooth leather doesn't deliver its usual gratification when I drop into the seat. I don't grin at the sexy rumble of the V8 engine like I usually do after a mission.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel. When that doesn't help, I do it again three more times. My chest aches, my hand is throbbing, and my heart is still splintering, but still, there are no tears.

My head rests against the cool leather while I sit slumped in the seat, listening to the engine idle. I don't want to go home. I don't want to be alone with my thoughts and the memory of Brock's sad smile and gentle touch before he died. But as much as I'm not ready to go home, I also don't want my boss to walk out and see me having a mental breakdown in the parking lot. I slam the car in gear and drive to Mel's. Probably not a good idea.

I'm four beers in, studying scratches in the ancient tabletop when the chair across from mine is pulled out. Aaron calls out to the waitress. "Our usual but no beer for me, Wanda. And two waters, please."

Aaron doesn't comment on me drinking in uniform despite my continued insistence on adhering to the unwritten code of the Marines. He silently drops into his chair, freshly showered, in faded blue jeans and a worn-out Avenged Sevenfold shirt stretched over his muscled arms and chest. Both are his favorites when comfort is in order.

Glassy eyes study my friend, noting the tightness around his mouth and the tension in his shoulders. Instead of warmth in his eyes and a smile on his handsome face, Aaron

wears the same masked look my brothers did when mom died. They hovered around me, putting on a brave front for their little sister instead of dealing with their own grief.

Aaron's doing the same thing. He should be safely tucked away in the arms of a loved one to process Brock's death instead of watching over me. The problem is that, like me, his family is nowhere near here. Aaron's family lives in Vegas. And his bratty little wife divorced him not long after basic training. She'd decided the idea of being married to a marine was cooler than actually being married to one.

And just like that, I think I've had enough to drink. I'm sufficiently tipsy to be philosophical but not enough to be sloppy. I push the rest of my beer away and reach for one of the glasses of water that Wanda sets on the table.

"You should get married again."

Aaron's sudden dark laugh and sneer tell me he disagrees. "Yeah, like that worked out so well the first time."

"Oh, come on. You were little more than a kid, and that was a hundred years ago. You should find someone, so I won't have to worry about you being alone all the time."

"Find someone," he echoes in a strange tone, like he's testing the words. "Like you found Maxen?"

I let my head fall back and watch the ceiling spin. "God, I hope not. That was a complete mind fuck."

"Things not working out? I don't see him here."

Having had enough of the ceiling's theatrics, I focus again on Aaron's face. His chiseled jaw is clenched, his gaze, concerned. "I came straight from work. I haven't spoken to anyone except Knot since we got off the plane. That means this is a chance meeting, right?"

Aaron shakes his head and leans forward on his elbows, highlighting the veins in his arms. "I know you better than you know yourself. There was never any doubt that I'd find you here."

"Where's Blondie?" our waitress asks when she delivers our food.

Wanda takes in our faces, and seeing me in my Knot Corp uniform for the first time, her smile fades. Given that everybody in the state of Virginia knows what Knot Corp does, I think she's just figured things out by herself.

"We lost him, Wanda," I say to confirm what she suspects.

"I'm sorry to hear that. He seemed like such a good kid."

Wanda walks away, and I mutter to her back, "He wasn't a kid. Why does everyone keep saying that?"

Aaron ignores my question and squeezes ketchup onto his plate, but he doesn't start eating. He doesn't say anything, either. I guess neither one of us feel much like talking at this point. We merely pick at our food until I shove the plate away and lean back in my chair.

"Give me your keys," Aaron demands with an outstretched hand.

While holding out his hand expectantly, he tosses his napkin on the table and stands. He didn't have to ask. I wouldn't have driven in this shape. Instead of arguing this

point, I pull my keys from my pocket and drop them into his open palm.

Aaron catches Wanda's attention, who makes a show of pulling out and ripping up our ticket before giving us a shooing gesture. We leave money on the worn top anyway and weave through the maze of tables toward the exit. Steady enough on my feet, I follow Aaron without assistance to his truck and climb inside.

I don't ask where he's taking me, and he doesn't volunteer the information. I lean against the window with my eyes shut so I'm not watching either. I still don't want to go home, but I'm afraid Aaron would refuse if I asked to be taken back to work. So, for the duration of the ride, my mouth remains shut, and Aaron obliges my lack of conversation.

It isn't until Aaron pulls the truck to a stop that he breaks the silence. I open my eyes, disappointed to see my apartment building, but I keep that part to myself.

"Does he make you happy, Sadie?" he asks quietly.

Still in a bit of a haze, I bark out a laugh that he's talking about Maxen. The laughter quickly fades at the look on Aaron's face. "It's been like five minutes, Aaron. I can't possibly know that yet."

I open the door and slip out, not giving him a chance to respond. Just as I shut the door, Aaron calls my name. I reluctantly turn his way to see that he's holding my keys in his open palm. Reaching through the open window, I grab for them, But Aaron closes his fist. "Be careful with him," he warns. "Smoke is trained to be a ghost. It's possible none of us truly know the man."

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Not trusting my voice, I whisper a simple thanks. Aaron opens his fist, and I pluck the ring from his hand, turning toward the one place I don't want to be. Alone.

It's just before twenty-one hundred, and all is quiet when I enter the lobby. My wobbly first few steps make me think the stairs are a bad idea. Elevator, it is.

On the way up, I consider collecting Gunny tonight, but one look at me, and Bonnie will have dozens of questions. Isn't that odd? She doesn't want to be alone, but she doesn't want to talk. Giving my inner bitch voice the finger, I decide to put off facing Bonnie and her anticipated questions tomorrow.

The slow elevator finally stops on my floor, and the doors slide open. As I step into the hall, I zero in on a tall someone waiting outside my apartment.

Maxen is still in his Knot uniform and leans a shoulder against my door. I freeze at the sight as he slowly lifts his attention from his phone screen. The phone goes into his pocket, and he pushes himself upright, all without breaking eye contact with me.

I snap out of my momentary paralysis and start moving again. Maxen steps aside when I reach the door, watching intently as I jam the key into the cylinder.

Without any sort of greeting or welcome, I shove my way inside, leaving the door open for my unexpected guest. I've stripped off everything above the waist and am halfway to my bathroom when I hear the front door close and lock.

I could have issued Maxen an invitation to join me for a shower, but I don't feel like talking to him any more than I felt like talking to Bonnie, or Aaron, for that matter.

Maxen's a big boy. He'll either figure it out or he won't.

I'm sitting on my bed, untying my boots, when Maxen darkens my bedroom doorway. He watches as I stand, kick off my shoes, and strip off the rest of my clothes.

With me totally naked, Maxen steps forward but keeps his eyes on mine.

"Sadie."

I cut him off with a raised hand and step into the bathroom, leaving him staring after me. I can't handle words right now.

A loud thunk sounds outside the bathroom as I turn on the shower faucet. Not curious in the least about the noise, I close my eyes and lean my hands against the counter, waiting for the water to heat.

Minutes pass with me still in the same position, though the bathroom has long since filled with steam. I should either get in the shower or turn off the water, but I can't find it in me to move.

At some point, Maxen must figure out that I wasn't rejecting him, just any and all conversation. Deft fingers inch around my waist once he steps into the bathroom. I don't respond, and he slides his hands up to my shoulders to dig into tense muscles.

Maxen attempts to loosen the kinks, and my head lolls forward as a breathy groan spills from my lips. The massage feels heavenly, but that feeling is cut short when Maxen's touch leaves my skin.

I lift my head to look in the mirror and watch him reach into the shower to turn off the water. Maxen's shirt is gone, as are his boots, but he's still in his tactical pants

and belt.

My eyes lock onto his in the mirror, and his hands go right back to work on my tense shoulders.

Instead of the expert massage I'm getting, I focus on his face. I wish so much I could read him, know what he's thinking. That I can't frustrates the hell out of me. Especially now that Aaron and Maxen both indicated that I harbor no mysteries.

I inwardly curse this blind spot that I have and push off the counter, suddenly needing to be in control of something I do understand.

Turning around, I claw at Maxen's pants, frantic and intending to undo the belt at his waist. He grabs my wrists, stopping me entirely and, honestly, pissing me off a little. Maxen forces my hands behind my back and holds them hostage in one of his.

Still without speaking, Maxen lifts his free hand, caressing the backs of his fingers down my cheek. He then cups that cheek and traces his thumb over my bottom lip. I'm helpless, trapped by his hands and hypnotized by his eyes.

I hate that he can see my pain and weakness and pull against his hold on me. Maxen doesn't allow me to budge until releasing me completely, only to pick me up and carry me from the bathroom. Back out in the bedroom, Maxen swings by to turn off the lights and walks us to the bed, still holding me in his arms.

His hand at my back moves just long enough to pull back the covers, and then I'm gently laid on the bed. Maxen finally sheds the rest of his clothes and climbs in beside me, but his next moves are simply pulling the sheet up over us and gathering me to his chest. Surprisingly I let him do it.

I fall asleep to the slight touch of his fingertips trailing up and down my spine and his

lips at my temple.

Morning brings with it a warm body at my back and a hand draped across my hip. This is a first for me. I've never stayed over or let a man stay over after sex. I've certainly never just slept with a man before. I think, maybe, I don't mind it.

I stretch my legs out, brushing my ass against Maxen's morning wood. He doesn't stir with the movement, so I lie a while longer, analyzing my feelings over this new experience.

The sun's angle outside my bedroom window tells me it's after zero eight hundred. I must have slept like the dead.

Dammit. Dead. Brock.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:34 am*

The reminder of my friend shatters the peaceful morning. Knowing it's not healthy, I shut down any thoughts of him, forcing my mind on something else. Anything else. Ever since losing my mom, it's how I've dealt with death over the years. I don't deal with it at all. Maybe that makes me callused. Maybe one day, all the grieving will stack up to the point that it hits all at once and turns me into a worthless pile of goo.

I'll just have to take that chance.

A wet, open-mouth kiss is planted on my shoulder, drawing me from my thoughts. I hum in appreciation, grateful for the distraction.

Maxen's exploration continues up my neck and behind my ear before stopping suddenly. I'm about to ask why when I hear the familiar sound of a foil packet being torn open.

Maxen grabs my left leg, lifting it slightly and pulling it back to rest it on his thigh. I arch my back so he can enter me, but he doesn't. His hard length rests between my lips just a moment before he begins rocking back and forth.

The motion rocks the ridges of his cock against my clit over and over again. I lean forward slightly, already on my side, to intensify the contact but otherwise lie still. Maxen is running this show, and for once, I'm happy to let him.

My eyes drift closed, shutting out everything except the heat of his body and what it's doing to mine. It isn't long after that the slow burn of a building climax takes center stage in my awareness. I bear down, trying to hold off the orgasm as long as possible, wanting that explosion to be super intense.

At my shift, Maxen pulls my shoulder toward him, forces me to my back, and rises, positioning himself so he can slam into me. That first hard strike to my clit sets off my orgasm, sending it shocking through my whole system. I grab his ass to hold him still, as the slightest movement is now too much for the sensitive area.

Knowing exactly what I'm doing, he fights off my hold and pulls back to thrust forward just as savagely. I almost can't stand it. I thrash around beneath him until the jolts gradually give over to the sensation of another orgasm building.

That second one hits just as hard, leaving me too washed out to fight for a brief reprieve. Maxen keeps going until one final thrust sends him over the edge. He collapses onto his elbows, pulling out of me as he does.

His cheek rests against mine as he holds his position, breathing heavily at my ear. Once he's caught his breath, he rolls to the side and begins tracing the scar on my left shoulder.

Maxen doesn't ask how I got it, and I don't offer. Like him and other PMCs, we all have scars and stories to go along with them. Most of us would prefer to leave them both in the past.

I roll to my side, facing him and voice what I couldn't say last night. "I'm glad you're here. I know I wasn't the best company last night."

Maxen reaches up to push a lock of hair behind my ear. "We've all been there."

I half expect him to say something about Brock, but once again, Maxen seems to be reading me pretty well.

"Your neighbor, Bonnie, is pretty cool," he rumbles in his sleep-roughened voice.

Ugh. I hadn't thought of Maxen possibly running into her.

"I was in the hall when she got home. I'm sure she planned to chase me out until she noticed the logo on my shirt."

"Hmm. I can imagine. Bonnie and I are close. She looks after Gunny and me sometimes. She's good people."

"Who's Gunny?"

"My bastard of a pet fish. So...How much information did Bonnie squeeze you for?"

Maxen reaches out his hand to tweak a nipple. "Come on, Sadie. I'm trained to withstand torture and still keep our country's secrets."

"Um-hmm. So how much information did Bonnie squeeze you for?"

He laughs and then sighs, turning serious. "She knows why I was in the hall waiting for you, why I was worried. She took the news pretty hard. It seems she was fond of Brock."

"He reminded her of her son. Those two could play-fight like champs."

"It sounds like the two of you were very close."

I nod sadly. "Brock was like a fun kid brother instead of the four overbearing brutes I grew up with."

Maxen releases my breast and rolls onto his back to stare at the ceiling.

"What's wrong?"

“Sadie, I don’t know if I should tell you this.”

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Maxen doesn't continue, so I press. "Tell me what?"

"Brock... Sadie, he was in love with you."

My heart leaps up into my throat, and my mind spirals. "What? No."

I roll away from Maxen and sit up, refusing to believe what he's telling me. "How do... why would...?"

So many questions run through my head, but I can't form a coherent thought. In my head, Brock smiles up at me, softly touching my cheek before his eyes close for the last time. Oh, god. Is this true?

Standing up from the bed, I walk to the closet, ignoring Maxen's calls for me to come back. I pull on some running gear and grab my shoes, hearing Maxen's worried voice behind me. "Fuck. Sadie, I'm sorry."

He's standing at my closet door wearing just his undone TDU pants. I shove past him, but he reaches for my hand. "Sadie, I just thought..."

I jerk my hand back and look anywhere but at his face. "I... I can't think right now."

Grabbing my keys off the dresser, I rush out of my apartment, still holding my shoes in my hands. I feel like I'm suffocating as I race down the stairs. Outside in the parking lot, I drop onto the landscape wall lining the shrubbery and pull on my shoes.

I don't want to believe Maxen. I don't want to be the person that's so self-absorbed

that she doesn't know the people closest to her. I don't want to believe that Brock pined for someone who could never reciprocate because she has the emotional depth of a cave troll.

I don't want to believe I could hurt a friend like that.

But what possible reason would Maxen have to lie? And dammit, why would he tell me at all? It's selfish of me, but why couldn't he just let Brock take his secret to his grave? Because Maxen knows you. He knows you always want the truth, no matter how ugly or painful.

"Not this time." Fighting a renewed agony over losing Brock, I tear out of the apartment complex, desperate to outrun the demons chasing me.

I lose track of how long I pound the pavement. Anger, regret, and guilt weigh me down every step, but I can't stop.

Thirteen miles have come and gone, and finally, lungs burning and head pounding, I give up. I can't go any further. With my hands braced on my knees, I suck wind until my lungs no longer feel like they're going to collapse.

My head is still pounding when I look around to see where I've ended up. I almost laugh when I realize I'm standing under the sign for Mel's. How many times have Aaron, Brock, and I spent evenings here? How many signs did I miss? How long had he felt that way?

What the hell does it matter now? Brock was family, and now he's gone.

My car is parked near the entrance to the bar, right where I left it last night. Thankful to have grabbed my keys on the way out, I open the door, crumple into the driver seat, and start the engine.

Muscle memory carries me to Knot Corporation, where I drag my ass inside to the training room. The place is quiet for a Thursday morning, but I don't care to ask why. No one says anything to me as I blow through and head straight for the bags hanging in the back. Not even bothering to tape up, I attack one of the bags, releasing all the turmoil inside on the heavy target.

An hour in, I'm winded again, but I keep going. I don't even stop when blood appears on the bag's white logo from my unprotected hands. I only stop when iron-like arms wrap around me, pulling me away and ending my punishment.

A tormented scream fills the now-empty room as Spatch drags me toward his office. He sets me on my feet in front of the sofa and shoves me down to the cushions. Without a word, he retrieves a first aid kit, applying an ointment to my bloody knuckles before wrapping them.

"I know you're angry, Sadie, but I can't let you hurt yourself. Brock's death is not your fault."

Spatch grossly misreads the guilt, and my response to him is a maniacal laugh. If he only knew. I push off the sofa and walk out, and wisely, Spatch lets me. My next steps lead to the dorms, where I collapse onto the bed I usually sleep in before deployments.

I wake in the dark hours later, still in my workout clothes and runners. My headache has not eased and now has two throbbing fists to keep it company. I gather some clothes and stuff from my locker and walk to the showers, where I remove the bandages Spatch placed on my hands. The skin around my knuckles is a mess, red, swollen, and bloody.

The hot water stings the new wounds, but I remain holed up in the stall for a long time to let the pounding of the spray ease the pounding in my head. Eventually, I give

in to the fact that the shower isn't going to fix anything and shut off the water.

I dry and dress, taking the time to blow out my hair instead of putting it away in a wet braid. The whole time, I avoid meeting the eyes of the woman in the mirror. I kind of hate her right now.

Leaving the wrecked bed for housekeeping to deal with, I walk to my car and head home, only hesitating a moment at Bonnie's door before shoving inside my own apartment.

Maxen's long gone, which is probably for the best. I wouldn't have known what to say to him anyway. Though I feel like shit, I've decided I'm not angry at him for telling me something I failed to figure out on my own. Discussing one man's feelings with the man you're sleeping with is just an awkward conversation.

Who I will talk to is Aaron. I don't know what good it'll do, but I want to ask him if he knew and why he didn't say anything. Ultimately, it doesn't matter, but it does, even if I don't know what to do with the knowledge.

I locate my phone and see a missed call and a text from Maxen. I'm sorry, his simple message reads. Shaking my head, I decide to deal with him later. I call Aaron and don't wait for him to speak when he answers.



“You knew about Brock, didn’t you?”

Aaron doesn’t say anything. That he’s not even asking what he’s supposed to have known proves that Maxen was telling the truth. “Shit, Aaron. Why the hell didn’t anyone say something?”

“Would it have mattered?” he demands. “Brock didn’t think so, and that’s why he kept his mouth shut. Gates should have done the same.”

I don’t ask why he assumes Maxen told me as I slump to my sofa, stunned. I had been expecting, hoping for Aaron to deny the words. I wasn’t prepared for them to be confirmed. “All this time. The teasing. I would have been more careful if I’d known.”

“That’s why he didn’t say anything, dammit! He didn’t want you to feel weird or change who you were around him. Look, I’ve got to go, Sadie. I’ll see you Monday.”

Aaron hangs up, and I pull my phone away and stare at the screen. I feel like I’m caught in some alternate universe. Everything I know has been called into question as if I’ve been sleepwalking around these people I thought I cared so much about.

What else am I forcing people to hide?

When I wake in the morning, I don’t want to get out of bed. Knot isn’t expecting any of us to show up today, but the thought of being stuck in this apartment with only my thoughts is enough to chase me from the covers.

I’m dressed and headed to work in half an hour. In the gym, I walk past a somber

Chelsea and Bastien to reach the weight benches. Apparently, I'm not the only one that can't handle solitude.

The rest of my squad, minus Zach, are also in the busy gym. A gym that sees no one joking or laughing today. Spotting them grouped together, I detour in their direction. I haven't seen or spoken to any of them since the day we left for Afghanistan.

It's clear by the slump of their shoulders and dark circles under their eyes that they all know about Brock and are hurting. He had, until recently, been one of them. "What happened over there, Fate?" Beckett asks.

"What always happens when money's involved? Politicians put a rush on things, and troops are sent without enough equipment or intel."

Dani, who spent time in the White House as secret service, stiffens and walks away, swearing under her breath. She's all too familiar with asshole politicians and doesn't even like discussing them. That's why she joined our outfit in the first place.

"Did somebody fuck up? Is that why Brock got killed?"

I zero in on Nick after his growled question but not in anger. "Nobody fucked up."

I don't tell him that a simple thermal scan could have prevented Brock's death. Nick, Beckett, and Cade walk away then, Cade being the only one that hasn't spoken. Shoving thoughts of the mission and Brock back into the deep recesses of my mind, I step up onto a treadmill and start a long run.

Maxen walks in later while I'm changing machines, but he keeps his distance, sticking to the floor mats on the other side. Shortly after he gets started, an angry shout from the door pulls everyone's eyes upward.

Aaron stumbles in, bleary-eyed and unsteady on his feet. I've never seen him like this. He storms up to Maxen, yelling as he approaches. "You just had to run your fucking mouth, didn't you?"

I'm on my feet instantly, crossing to their side of the room. Before I can reach him, Aaron takes a shot at Maxen. The blow is powerful but is off-target in its delivery. To his credit, Maxen doesn't return fire.

Aaron sets to swing again, but I grab his arm. Without looking back, he shakes me off, and I end up tripping over his foot. I fall into a weight rack, sending a loaded barbell crashing onto me. That's when Maxen goes on the attack.

He rushes Aaron, taking them both to the floor, all while I'm scrambling to untangle myself from the felled weights. I get up finally and look around for something to break them up. There isn't room to wade in and grab them, not without the risk of becoming a victim of their collective rage.

Across the room, I spot a fire extinguisher and make a mad dash for it, pulling the pin during my sprint back. Maxen has just gained the upper hand against Aaron and is now straddling his middle, poised to throw a punch. Aaron gets his fingers wrapped around a five-pound dumbbell, and I press the lever before either of them can strike.

Icy cold carbon dioxide frosts the two hot heads and quickly puts an end to the fight. Now that it's safe, I fist my hand in Maxen's shirt and pull while Nick and Cade rush in, grabbing a belligerent Aaron and dragging him out from underneath.

I let go of Maxen and throw the fire extinguisher on the floor. Only then does Aaron stop resisting the two Mack trucks holding him back and notice me standing there. His glassy eyes take in my busted knuckles from yesterday, and then his eyes freeze in their inspection.

Aaron's anger is replaced with remorse, and he goes limp in our team members' grip. "Sadie?"

I glance down to see what's caught his attention. Blood runs down the length of my arm, likely a cut from colliding with the equipment. Realizing Aaron's no longer out of control, Cade and Nick let him go, and Aaron takes a step toward me. His face is drawn and full of shame. "Sadie, I'm sorry."

"It's nothing," I tell him.

Maxen steps in front of me when Aaron gets close. He's practically vibrating when he growls, "Get your drunk ass out of here before you do any more damage."

With a last sorrowful glance at me, Aaron spins for the door, and Cade turns to follow. "I'll make sure he gets home," he says.

Maxen turns and takes my hand, leading me to the first aid station on the wall. Those left in the room do not miss the contact. I guess everyone knows now. "I'm fine, Maxen. It was barely a scratch. I'm more worried about Aaron."

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Maxen doesn't say anything, but his grinding teeth speak loud and clear. He doesn't share my concern for Aaron's well-being right now. Maxen bandages my arm in silence, though I doubt it really needs more than a Bandaid. Afterward, he inspects the damage to my hands without commenting.

"I think I'm going to hide out for the weekend. Coming here today wasn't the brightest move for any of us. It's too soon."

Maxen's shoulders stiffen, and the tightness in his eyes gives way to resignation. After a beat, he finally says, "If you need me for anything, you call, Sadie. Day or night."

With a nod and a whispered thanks, I pull away and rush past the curious stares to the rear door and fresh air.

I collect Gunny when I get home and spend the next two days in hiding with my phone turned off. During my self-imposed isolation, I can only hope that Aaron cooled off and is no longer on a war path.

Monday morning rolls around, and I finally turn my phone back on to find that I have no missed calls or messages. My family doesn't know I'm back in the States, and thankfully, everyone else left me alone. Some people, Knot and Birdie, for instance, would have had no trouble ferreting me out if they'd really wanted to.

Aaron's truck is no longer in the lot when I arrive at Knot Corp. I expect to see him here today, but not this early. No one should be here this early outside of security and mission support. The only reason I'm here at the ass-crack of dawn is to clean out

Brock's locker, and I want to do it without an audience.

This isn't high school or a barracks where I'd find condoms, pinups, and dirty letters, but it is or was Brock's private space.

Inside his three-by-five equipment locker, I find a bag containing a spare change of clothes and add to it the contents of the storage cabinet's upper shelf: soap, razor, the usual toiletries. My hands shake when I find an open box of pictures on the bottom shelf. I cross my legs on the floor and flip through the stack.

All of these were taken since Brock came to work for Knot. Some capture scenes from overseas deployments, and a couple are from our trip to Gatlinburg. Most of the pictures are of Aaron, Brock, and me in various combinations.

Still, a number of them feature only one person. Me.

Taking one featuring Aaron, Brock, and me, I place the rest back into the box, which goes in the duffle bag.

The only object left is a matchbox-size diecast of a McLaren 570 in blue. That goes with me. Brock, Aaron, and I spent some time discussing dream cars during a lull in action on deployment a couple of years ago. Brock favored the McLaren. When I saw the toy car at a hobby shop later, I couldn't pass it up. I bought it and gave it to Brock for his birthday.

I didn't know he'd given it a place of honor in his locker. Now, it will have a special place in mine.

Two hours later, all operatives not deployed arrive at the training room, set to be put through our paces by Spatch. Everyone except Aaron. I send him a text telling him to pop two Advil and get his ass to work. I don't get a reply.

Spatch has just walked from his office when the training room doors burst open, and Knot's booming voice fills the gym. "I want everybody that just got back from Afghanistan in my office. Now!"

Knot's bellowed command was so out of character that no one dares mention Spatch's strict training schedule. Not even Spatch.

The imposing CEO storms off, not even bothering to make sure his order is being obeyed. The crew, minus Aaron, scrambles after the boss while sharing a few worried glances.

"Where's Grim," Zach whispers.

"I haven't seen him since Friday," I answer as the five of us follow Knot's long strides up the stairs to his office on the top floor. Passing his assistant's desk, Knot roars, "I'm going dark."

The efficient woman picks up her phone, immediately understanding her orders. When the last of us walk in, Knot slams the door and storms to his desk, activating a system that locks the room down. A slew of counter-surveillance systems come online, ranging from electric privacy glass to signal jammers and sound dampeners in the walls, floors, and ventilation shafts. Not a good sign.

"I want to know what the fuck happened over there from the time your asses walked off my plane until you walked back on."

He glares at Maxen and adds, "And that includes whatever shit started before and the fight you and Hosfeld had on Friday."

Since he was the one pointed out, Maxen is the first to speak up. "What started before, sir, was that Sadie and I began seeing one another. I believe the revelation

was met with disapproval.”

Knot stares back and forth between Maxen and me, and I feel like the walls are closing in. “I’m waiting, Phelps.”

Shit.

Despite the audience, he gets it all. Except for the sex. Knot already knew about the raids, assignments, and other key points. What he hadn’t heard about was Avara shoving me into the hole, causing me to need stitches, Aaron disappearing for several hours to god knows where, or Maxen giving away Brock’s secret, which led to Friday’s fight.

The two-hour-long debrief wraps up with Bastien detailing his and Chelsea’s part in the fated raid, and then Knot slides back into his chair and stares at the blotter. He doesn’t comment on anything he hears. That in itself is the most worrying part.

“All right. Everybody out. Sadie, you stay.”

The room clears, and the successful CEO drops his everything-under-control façade. Stepping up to his desk, I ask, “What’s going on?”



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Worried eyes meet mine, and then Dillan Knot rocks my world. “A warrant has been issued for Hosfeld’s arrest.”

My legs go weak, dropping me into one of the guest chairs across from the executive. “What for?”

“Aaron’s being charged with treason.”

“Treason?! Is this some kind of a joke? On what grounds?”

“I wish it were. Aaron’s being accused of working with Iranian nationals for the attack on the raid team and treasury agents.”

“That... that’s impossible. It’s not only impossible, it’s insane!”

I push back upright again and begin pacing. “What possible reason, possible evidence could they have pointing to Aaron?”

“I don’t know, but it must be convincing... Sadie.”

I freeze mid-step and turn my head, locking eyes with my boss and friend. “It doesn’t look good that he didn’t show up today.”

Knot’s simple statement shakes me to my core. “You don’t actually believe that Aaron could have anything to do with this, do you?”

“I don’t want to believe it, but treason is nearly impossible to prosecute. Someone

with a big enough ax to swing must think they have a solid case, or they wouldn't be coming after him. I need to know where he went for those few hours in Shindand and where the hell he is now."

"I plan on finding out both."

I turn for the door and hear, "Stop."

Knot's elbow is resting on his desk, and his fingers are at his temple when I face him again. "I know what you're about to rush out that door to do. I've been where you are enough to know that I won't be able to stop you. All I'll ask is that you don't shut me out. I have to protect the people in this company first and foremost, but every one of my resources is at your disposal."

"Thank you."

I turn to leave again, but Knot stops me one more time. "Sadie."

Dillan Knot is hesitant, which worries me more than anything else I've seen or heard so far today. I take a seat again and wait for him to lay out what's bothering him. "This fight with Gates... Hosfeld doesn't lose control like that."

Knot's got something eating him, but he doesn't want to spit it out. We're well past that point, and furthermore, we don't have time for that shit. "What are you getting at?"

"Hosfeld is acting way out of character lately. If there's any chance at all he's done this, you searching him out could be dangerous."

I'm on my feet, leaning over my boss's desk in the next millisecond. "Aaron did not do this. I'd stake my life on it."

Knot nods solemnly. “I hope it doesn’t come to that. I’m placing you on special assignment because you’ll quit if I don’t. But dammit, Sadie, my terms are non-negotiable. You follow them, or it’ll be your ass out that door. I won’t let you risk your life for this. Are we clear so far?”

“Crystal.”

He nods, only slightly less skeptical than a minute ago. “When you’re not here or at home sleeping, I want you checking in every three hours. And Sadie, be careful. Whether this is Aaron or someone setting him up, you could be walking into a buzz saw.”

“You have my word. Every three hours.”

He finally releases me, and I walk from the executive offices to find the Afghanistan crew hanging around the executive floor lobby.

Chelsea is the first to spot me and rushes over ahead of the others, “Sadie, what the hell?”

As I close the door, I motion for the group to follow me into a secure conference room and take a deep breath. Everyone around the table is focused on me, but I hesitate to tell them what I’ve learned. Somehow, repeating the words out loud makes them real. “The attack on Heathman and his men is being pinned on Aaron.”

The news is met with angry, disbelieving shouts. Chelsea leaps up from her chair, knocking it over. “Who the hell came up with that bullshit?!”

Everyone starts up again, which isn’t getting us anywhere. “Hey! Knock it off and listen. I get it. We all know Aaron could never do anything like this. Y’all also know that what we think doesn’t matter.”

“What does Aaron say about all this?” Zach asks.

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“Well, as you’ve seen today, Aaron isn’t around to ask. He’s also not answering calls or texts.”

The room gets quiet. Like Knot, this group knows that’s a bad look. “Regardless of how this looks, whatever you’re thinking, just stop. Talk me through what the investigators are thinking.”

“Aaron disappeared shortly after you got back from the first raid,” Zach points out.

Chelsea gives him an evil look at the insinuation, and Zach throws up his hands. “Hey, this is the kind of shit people will be looking at.”

Maxen leans forward and lays his hands flat on the table. “Zach’s right. We can’t ignore something because it’s uncomfortable. We’ll have to find and plug any holes, and the only way to do that is by playing devil’s advocate. Zach raises a good point. Fortunately, this is one hole we can plug pretty quickly. We’re talking about a coordinated attack on a target guarded by US Army soldiers. A target that Aaron didn’t learn about until after he’d returned from his disappearing act. Wherever he disappeared to, we know it wasn’t with the knowledge of the raid location.”

“Not necessarily,” Zach presses. “Whoever had the connections to pull this off would have had to be working with inside information and knew about the cave before even Heathman did.”

“Again, we’re talking about organizing a force of enemy combatants in a matter of hours,” Maxen presses. “And we know he couldn’t have left the base without gate security logging it. Hosfeld could have phoned it in, but that would make him an idiot

because anybody could access his phone records.”

“Come on, Smoke. It wouldn’t have had to be his phone. Any phone would have worked,” Zach says.

“What the fuck, Zach? Are you trying to fry the man yourself?” Maxen yells.

“No, but like you said, these are the questions someone’s already been asking. While we’re on the subject, why are you coming so strongly to Grim’s defense? You’re probably the only person in this room that has a problem with him.”

Maxen gets in Zach’s face and snarls, “And what do you think would happen to this company, to PMCs stationed around the globe, if it looks like we’re responsible for the deaths of Heathman and his men?”

“That’s enough! Both of you shut it. We’re going about this all wrong. Instead of focusing on Aaron, we should be looking for the real culprit.”

“How do you know there is one?”

At the angry flash of my eyes, Zach backpedals, “I don’t mean Aaron, but couldn’t it just as easily be retaliation by the terrorists? I mean, after the cave was captured, wouldn’t someone on the outside notice a sudden loss of contact with the guys on the inside?”

Bastien speaks up for the first time, “I might float that idea, except that the feds are convinced Aaron is involved. They must have a reason.”

Maxen shakes his head again. “That would imply there’s evidence of some sort, but only a tip-off would have anyone looking at Aaron, to begin with. Otherwise, it would make more sense to point to you or Chelsea. You two were there and left

before the attack.”

Bash taps the table a couple of times. “We could be looking at an inside job.”

“You mean inside with FinCen bird-dogging every move?” asks Chelsea.

“It could be someone in treasury,” Zach suggests.

He gets some sour looks for his thoughts and elaborates, “Ok, whether it’s FinCEN or not, hear me out. Fate and Grim being dismissed after that first raid made sense. Sending Chelsea and Bash away from the cave was stupid.”

“Yeah, and everyone there died because of it,” I remind him. “Which leaves ten other possibilities. The eight surviving grunts and two feds from the first raid.”

“And us,” Maxen says.

The air in the room chills, and everyone is silent. I get that Maxen doesn’t know these people as well as I do and that blind spots can be dangerous, but the last thing any of us needs right now is to have doubts about our team. “Y’all shut up and listen. This is getting us nowhere. Arguing for or against Aaron is not our job. What I am going to ask of you won’t be easy. Once we walk out this door, none of you are to talk about Aaron to anyone. If anyone inside or outside Knot Corp asks you about this, your answer better be that you don’t know anything and then refer them to our lawyers. If someone with a badge asks, you request to have our lawyers present since all Knot Corp employees sign an NDA upon hiring.”

The faces in the room are tight, not feeling any better about the situation than when they came in. “You guys get out of here. I’m sure Spatch is waiting..”

I step away from the table, heading for the door, and Chelsea calls out, “Fate, where

are you going?”

Still facing the door, I answer, “I have work to do.”

I’ve made it about fifteen feet from the conference room when Maxen calls out to me, “Sadie, wait.”

His hand on my shoulder stops me and spins me around to face him. “Where are you going?”

“I have to find him, Maxen.”

He lowers his voice to barely a whisper. “Sadie, he’s being hunted for treason. What do you think will happen to you if the feds find you trying to help him? At the absolute least, your career will be over. I can’t let... you shouldn’t risk yourself like that.”



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“What happens to me doesn’t matter. Aaron risked his life for me more than once. He’s my best friend, and I will not leave him to the wolves.”

Maxen brushes the back of his hand down my arm and takes my hand. Bringing our joined fingers to his chest, he says. “What happens to you does matter. To a hell of a lot of people.”

He lifts his other hand to trail his knuckles down my cheek. “I was wrong about you, Fate. Your true blindness is your inability to see how much you could mean to someone. I don’t want to see you put yourself at risk, but I can’t stop you. What I can do is help you.”

I take a step back and study my lover’s face. “I get what you said about protecting the industry, but you know as well as I do that Knot and his lawyers would be able to weather whatever happened. So why are you really offering to help Aaron? I thought the two of you couldn’t stand one another.”

“I think he’s a dick, yes, but that dick didn’t sell out his country.” Maxen steps closer and reaches up to cup my cheek. “But I’m not doing this for him. I’m doing it for you.”

Voice whisper soft, I yield, “Ok.”

A corner of Maxen’s mouth lifts, and he asks, “Ok, you’ll let me help and watch your back, ok? Or ok, you’re just humoring me?”

“Ok, fine. You can help. But only you. I don’t want anyone else involved. It’ll be

hard enough for the two of us to stay under the radar.”

“Done. So, what now? I think we should find out what evidence the Feds have. That should tell us where to start looking.”

“You do that. I’m going to try to find Aaron.”

I start to walk away, but Maxen grabs my hand to stop me. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

Looking back over my shoulder, I give him the raw truth. “I’m not sure of anything. That’s why I need to find Aaron.”

I’m in my car two minutes later, though I have no idea where to start. Aaron not showing up today means he’s already gotten wind of the allegations against him. I guess that’s what surprises me most. The Aaron I know would face these charges head-on to refute them. Especially considering he knows he’d have the entire staff at Knot Corp in his corner.

Since he wouldn’t show up to the compound, I’m sure he’s also not at home. Those would be the first two places the feds would look. He still hasn’t returned my message, so I’m guessing he’s ditched his phone.

He knows the code to your door, Sadie. That’s a good enough place to start.

The lobby and hallway are quiet in my apartment building, with most people being at work and school. I punch in the code and thumb the latch, and my door swings inward with a squeak—I need to get that oiled—and I step inside and look for Aaron.

Finding no trace of him, I drop down onto one of the bar seats near Gunny’s bowl. Where the hell is he? “You haven’t seen him, have...”

Something in Gunny's bowl catches my attention, a decoration I didn't put there. "Where did that come from?"

In place of the oyster bubbler is a pirate's chest that's too big for the bowl. Each time the bubbler lifts the lid, the treasure inside is exposed, the treasure and a small glass cylinder.

I reach inside the bowl, lift the lid to the chest, and remove a tube containing a piece of paper. I'll be damned. Aaron was here.

Drying off the tube with my shirt, I twist off the lid with fumbling fingers and remove the note inside.

Sadie,

I did not do this, but someone must have gone through a lot of trouble to make it look like I did. I'm going to find out who. Tell Knot he won't find me and not to waste his time looking. By doing this on my own, I'm protecting Knot and everyone that works under him.

I'm going to a quiet place that no one can find without a hand-drawn map.

Grim

The note falls to my lap, and I drop my head into my hands as relief floods my system. I know where Aaron is.

I don't yet know how to help him, but I know my next step. Aaron told me where he was going, and since that cabin has no phone or cell signal, the only way I'll talk to him is face to face. Translation: Aaron is expecting me, and I won't disappoint.

I'm quickly on my feet again and rushing into my room to pack. Once that's finished, I pull out my secure work phone, step into the bathroom, and turn on the shower. My boss answers on the first ring. "Knot here."

"I need a couple days off."

"You found him." Not a question.

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“Didn’t have to. He left a message with the sarge.”

“Sadie, I don’t think this is such a great idea. With the two of you having such a long-term association, the feds might see your sudden disappearance as suspect.”

They wouldn’t because I have the perfect cover. “If someone wants to follow me, they’ll be sorely disappointed. I’m going to visit my father. He has a quiet place where I like to go think.”

Knot silently digests what I didn’t say and drops the subject. “I still want you to check in. I don’t like any of this.”

“I don’t like it either, which is why I have to go.”

“Fine, but you’ll take the jet. I want you to drag his ass back here, and that’s the safest way. Be careful, Sadie.”

The call ends, and I reconsider Aaron’s note. It doesn’t appear that he knows what evidence prosecutors have, and I’d be shocked if Maxen has been able to find out this quickly. If I haven’t heard from him by then, I’ll check in with him before heading for Aaron’s hideout.

My next call is to my father. “Hey, Sport. I didn’t expect you to get back so soon.” At the sound of his voice, I’m suddenly overcome with emotion. My throat constricts, and the only sound to come out is a pitiful sob.

My dad’s voice becomes harried. “Sadie? Are you there?”

The trembling in my body is heard in my words. “Daddy, I need to come home for a few days.”

“I’ll come get you.” His response is instant and resolute.

“No. I’m already on my way. Can you pick me up at the Pigeon Forge Airport?”

“Just say when.”

“I’ll land in about two hours.”

“I’ll be there. You just hang tough, Darlin’.”

Two hours and ten minutes later, I step down from Knot’s sleek jet to the sight of the smoky mountains wearing a crown of mist and three Phelps men waiting on the tarmac. Tossing my bag over my shoulder, I take the steps slowly, and my father shocks all four of us by walking over and wrapping his arms around me.

Wes takes the bag from my hand, and the Phelps men whisk me away from the airport. They’re all in full-on protective mode, telling me I must look pretty shaken. Strange. Until now, I’d been running on adrenaline too much to notice.

Mike drives us to Dad’s house, where Brandon and Blake are waiting, holding bags from our favorite BBQ joint. I’m ushered inside, plonked in a chair, and given a beer while the boys set out dinner. These guys haven’t babied me like this since the day I started my period. And the next day, they were all running scared.

Everyone is soon seated, but no one touches the food. The only move anyone makes is for my father to lean his arms on the table. “Sadie, what’s happened?”

The words burn like acid coming up from my chest, ripping the wound open again.

“Brock’s dead.”

Having met Brock the weekend my team came down to raft the Ocoee, my dad and brothers recognize the name. However, because of their shared interests, Mike is the one that got to know Brock. Mike had been a Helo mechanic in the Air Force and now does it for the private sector. Brock had been a Helo pilot.

“I’m sorry, Sport.”

Every man at the table looks wary, given they’ve never seen me like this despite having lost men before.

“What happened?” Mike asks.

“We were on a rescue mission where all eleven targets were lost. One of the combatants hid out in the cave where the ambush happened and surprised Brock. I couldn’t do anything but hold him while he died.”

I keep the rest of the story to myself, and thankfully, my family doesn’t ask any more questions. I know that not a one of them would believe Aaron guilty, but I don’t want anyone to know my real reason for being here. I can’t bring them into this mess.

Shortly after dinner, I excuse myself to shower, accepting rare hugs from my brothers.

Clean and dressed with my damp hair braided, I pad down the hallway to my old bedroom, which still looks like it did when I lived here. My mother’s quilt is draped over the queen bed, and soft green walls are filled with pictures of her and my brothers. Rounding out the room is a small dresser and desk displaying a Navy ship calendar from two years ago.

After dropping my bag on the dresser and tossing my boots in the closet, I flop down on the bed. I haven't heard from Maxen, so I decide to check in.

"Gates," he answers on the first ring.



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“Maxen, it’s Sadie. Have you figured out what the feds have on Aaron?”

“Not yet. I’m supposed to be meeting someone tomorrow. Hopefully, I’ll get answers then.”

Maxen’s voice drops to a soothing timbre, warm as a fuzzy blanket. “I’d like to come over if it’s all right.”

“I’d say yes, but I’m not at home. I’m out working a lead.”

“Then let me help you. I know you’re more than capable, but no one should work without backup.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not even in Virginia.”

Maxen is quiet, meaning he probably isn’t happy. He sighs and says, “I won’t ask where you are, but tell me that at least Knot knows.”

“He does, but he doesn’t.”

“Dammit, Sadie. Don’t you know how dangerous this sit... You found him, didn’t you?”

“No, I haven’t, but I think I know where he is.”

Maxen goes quiet again.

“I’m not cutting you out, ok.”

Maxen sighs. “I get it. You’re used to doing things one way, and it’s not as if Hosfeld and I get along. I’ve got a job to do here anyway. Just promise me that you’ll watch your ass.”

“It’s. Not. Aaron.”

“I know that, but it just might be that you and the feds aren’t the only ones looking for Grim.”

I glance at the tracking watch on my wrist. I’ll be removing it before going after Aaron. “I’ll be untraceable, but I’ll check in with Knot before I do anything.”

“Good enough. Be careful, Fate. I haven’t had my fill of you yet.”

His words set off a firestorm of tingles in my middle, and I fight to keep my voice even to say, “You won’t be able to reach me tomorrow, so report whatever you find to Knot.”

Come on, Sadie. Don’t be a wuss. “And, Maxen. I haven’t had my fill of you either.”

I hadn’t meant to sound as lusty as I did and hang up on Maxen’s answering chuckle.

Six am comes quickly after a restless night. Forcing my tired ass from the bed, I pull on jeans, thick socks, a tank, and a heavy sweater and step into my old Ariat boots that I found in the closet. Before walking out the door, I grab my old hunting jacket as well. I’ll need it for the long, cold ride.

My father is already in the kitchen when I walk downstairs. He’s sitting at the table drinking coffee and reading a newspaper, one of the few people still getting their

news from print.

Noticing me walking in, Dad gets up and retrieves a tray from the oven warming drawer. It's loaded with biscuits, gravy, bacon, eggs, and breakfast potatoes.

"Somebody's been busy."

He only winks and sets the tray on a kitchen towel spread out on the table. Coffee in hand, I join him, and I'm not shy about loading my plate.

A lock of hair falls loose from my braid, and my dad reaches over and tugs on it before tucking it behind my ear. "You've grown up to look so much like your mother. She'd be so proud of you."

"I think she'd be even more proud of you. You raised me, all of us by yourself, and we all turned out alright."

"It's probably more that you turned out alright in spite of me."

I pat his hand, and we get back to our breakfast in comfortable silence. Once I've shoved the last possible bite into my mouth, I lean back in the worn Windsor chair. "Dad, I'd like to go out to the hunting cabin today."

My father lifts a bushy eyebrow at me and crosses his arms. "You know the way. Before you go, I'd like for you to tell me what's really going on. I know you've lost people before, but what I saw yesterday, I haven't seen since your mother died. Were you in love with this man?"

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Sadie, he was in love with you. I shake off Maxen's confession and answer my father, "No, but he was one of the best friends I ever had."

"What then? I know there's more to this story. Does his death have anything to do with why your mission was cut short?"

After taking a deep breath, I sigh long and low. And I tell my dad everything. By the end, he's leaned forward with his elbows resting on the table. "Sadie, I don't know Hosfeld as well as you, but there's no way he did this. What I don't understand is what this has to do with that cabin."

"I think he's there. I came here to find him."

I tell him about Aaron's note, and my father stands. "Let's go then."

"Dad."

"Don't dad me. You may be a badass Marine, but you'll always be my little girl. I'm taking no chances with your safety. We either go together, or I'm calling the Wrecking Crew."

Shit. The last thing I want my father to do is involve my brothers. I now realize telling him about this mess had been a mistake. Especially since his set jaw says he'll be checking the cabin with or without me.

"Ok, Dad."

The two of us clear the table, gear up, and set off on a couple of four-wheelers. We arrive at the small clearing just under an hour later to see smoke rising from the stack. Dad dismounts his ATV and grabs his shotgun. “I’ll check around the outside. You check the cabin.”

I don’t bother telling him that neither of us will find anything. Aaron would have gone into the woods at the first sound of our engines. He’s out there somewhere watching, waiting. We won’t see him until he comes to us.

Not long after I step inside, I hear the unmistakable sound of a shotgun racking a shell. Apparently, he didn’t wait long.

I run back out in time to see Aaron walking slowly from the tree line twenty feet away with his hands in the air. My father lifts the nose of the shotgun and says, “You’re in a lot of trouble, son.”

Humbly but boldly, Aaron closes the last few feet with his hands still up. He tips his chin in greeting. “Sadie. Mr. Phelps.”

Though we’re in a huge mess, I’m immensely relieved to see my friend. I don’t know where he’s been the last couple of days, but his tired eyes and beard scruff tell me he’s not been on vacation. He certainly doesn’t need to be staring down the barrel of a gun after our friend was just shot.

Carefully approaching from the side, I step into my father’s line of sight. “Dad, put that gun down.”

He doesn’t look my way, opting to keep his eyes on Aaron. “I’m good like I am, thank you.”

Arguing with him won’t work, so I decide to ignore him and turn to Aaron. “What the

hell are you doing, running away like this?"

Aaron doesn't answer fast enough for my non-existent patience. "Dammit, talk to me."

"I was... informed of the charges against me. I don't know why, but someone is content to let me take the fall for that fuck-up of a mission. I didn't kill those men, but the prosecutors think I did and aren't interested in looking for other suspects. I figured someone needed to investigate, and it may as well be me, given it's my life at stake here."

I don't argue with Aaron because he's not wrong, but he is wasting time. "I don't know what you think you can do from here except hide out and look guilty."

"I'm not hiding out. I'm regrouping."

"Then let's regroup." I gesture toward the cabin, noticing that my dad has lowered the shotgun.

Unsurprisingly, Dad follows us inside, and the three of us fill up the small, one-room cabin. I'm not thrilled about him hearing the details we'll discuss, but I know I have zero chance of him leaving me alone with Aaron.

"First off, I need you to tell me where you went after our argument at the airfield."

"Argument?" my dad pipes up.

"Not now, Dad. Aaron?"

"I left to find Avara and kick his ass for what he did to you."

Oh shit. Here we go. “Sadie, what’s he talking about? What happened to you?”

“Dad, we’ll talk about this later.”

“Damn right, we will,” he grumbles.

I glare at Aaron in warning and make a rolling motion with my hand, encouraging him to continue. “You were saying.”

“I found him alone behind the D-fac. I told him he was a stupid-ass motherfucker to put his hands on you. Then I took a swing at him. He didn’t even try to block the shot, which knocked him on his ass. He didn’t fight back, either. He just stayed there on the ground. What he did do was pull a flask from his shirt pocket.

“I wanted another shot at him, but the guy looked like shit, even without the bloody lip. Since I felt like shit, I sat down in the dirt beside him and drank half his bourbon. “We sat in the dirt for hours. Sometimes talking, sometimes not. Eventually, we hauled our asses up, and that’s when I came to find you.”

Right away, I’m on my feet, pacing the small room, talking to myself. “This is perfect. From the time we landed, you were with the team or me. After we... after... you were with Avara until leaving to find me. We spoke and then—”

“Sadie.”

Aaron has moved into my path, and his sharp call has my eyes lifting. His eyes are guarded as though he suspected I thought him guilty. “Are you... checking my alibi?”

“No, but sooner or later, someone’s going to ask. We should be ready.”

“We? No way, Sadie. I told you where I was because I trusted you and didn’t want



you to worry. But there's no way in hell I'm letting you anywhere near this. You've checked in, you know my alibi, and now you need to leave."

"Young man, I believe you've forgotten whose cabin you're standing in," my father chides.

"No, I haven't. I just have no interest in risking Sadie being charged as an accomplice to treason to save my own ass."

"Fair enough. Sadie, let's go."

"What?! No!"

Shooting daggers at my friend, I order, "Aaron, get your shit. We're leaving. Knot wants you back in Virginia. Whatever you think you can do here, he can do fifty times faster with all his resources."

"No. Too many lives depend on Knot to let him risk his reputation. I have to do this myself. And I have resources of my own."

Aaron turns back to my father again. "Sir, you need to get her out of here. Make Sadie return home before someone decides she needs to be looked into."

Making one last ditch effort to reach him, I say, "We're a team, Aaron."

Aaron reacts physically to my words, almost like he's been punched in the gut. "I know. I'll find a way to keep you updated, but that'll be the extent of your involvement. Now, please leave. For me."

To my father, he says, "I'll be gone by sundown. Then no one will be able to find me."

Aaron walks out the door without another word or so much as a glance in my direction.

Like a glitch in the matrix, I stand frozen in the middle of the tiny cabin, not believing Aaron would just walk away like that. I came here to help, dammit.

Finally waking from my stupor, I rush toward the door, but my father reaches out and grabs my hand, halting my progress.

“Sadie, let the man go.”

“But he needs my help.”

“He either doesn’t want it... or he’s trying to protect you.”

The worry in my father’s eyes keeps me from pressing the issue.

Still watching the door, I resign myself to going back to Norfolk alone. “All right. Let’s go.”

Leaden feet carry me back to our four-wheelers. I climb on and scan the tree line, but Aaron’s not there. I’m sure he’s watching, though.

An hour later, the four-wheelers are pulling into the barn. My father doesn’t speak as we put our equipment away, but his clenching jaw tells me he’s got something to say. Just as my words wouldn’t have done any good at the cabin, his won’t work now. Heading off his argument, I plead, “Dad, I need to get back to Virginia. I know I haven’t been here long, but what happens to Aaron doesn’t just affect him.”

My father sags as though a heavy weight has settled on his shoulders, but he nods anyway. I run upstairs to gather my things and call the pilots. An hour later, I’m

hugging my dad goodbye on the tarmac near one of Knot's jets.

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While holding me tight, my dad finally speaks the words he's been holding back since returning from the cabin. His voice is laden with emotion as he says, "You've lived a lot of good stories to tell, Sadie Kate. Please don't let this be your last one."

"I promise I'll be careful."

The one-hour flight back to Norfolk is spent analyzing and planning. Aaron has an alibi for his missing time. Shindand's security logs will prove that Aaron never left base except during our mission.

What Zach said about him having access to a phone is, unfortunately, plausible, making all this moot. I won't know what to hit next until we find out what the prosecutors have.

If Aaron wasn't such a stubborn ass and would come back to Norfolk with me, he could get a lawyer and find out. As it is, all I can do is wait and see if Maxen or Knot's lawyers come through.

At Knot's hangar in Norfolk, I scan the area for my car but find Knot's imposing form leaning against his Escalade instead. "I had your car relocated to the compound," he says by way of explanation.

His eyes focus behind me on the plane's entrance. "You came back alone?"

My chin dips in defeat. "The target would not accept our help... for your sake and mine."

“Stubborn bastard,” he fumes. After a moment, he shakes his head. “All right. Let’s get out of here. We’ve got work to do.”

Once we’re moving, I tell Knot about the note in Gunny’s tank and finding Aaron at the hunting cabin. I’m about to bring up Avara when my ringing phone stops me. It’s Maxen.

I swipe to answer the call and hear Maxen’s voice as soon as the connection is made. “Sadie, I’ve got news and thought I’d fill you in before calling Knot.”

The bite in his voice tells me the news is not good. “You can fill us both in at the same time. My plane just landed, and Knot was waiting to give me a ride.”

I switch the call to speaker and hear, “My contact came through. The man who shot Brock had a phone on him. The phone’s call logs showed activity for one number on the day of the attack. They pinged the phone and traced it to Norfolk. Sadie, the phone was found in Aaron's truck.”

Knot jerks the wheel, squealing the tires and turns onto a side street. “We need those logs, Sadie. You drive. I’ve got to make a call.”

“Thank you, Maxen. I’ll check in with you later.”

The call ends, and I shove my phone into my pocket. Knot and I switch places, and the man barks orders into his phone before I even put the car in gear. Knot’s growling and yelling end soon after but not before my boss slams his hand on the dash. “Son of a bitch!”

I wholeheartedly agree.

Inside the PMC compound, Knot directs me to pull up to the front entrance, where

Maxen and one of our security guys are waiting. Knot takes the keys from my hand when we reach the sidewalk, tosses them to the security guy, and motions for Maxen and me to follow.

People in the building part like the Red Sea as Knot bulldozes his way through the halls. Outside his office door, his assistant takes one look at him, reads his face, and instantly seems to know what to do.

Her authoritative voice is heard rescheduling a meeting with someone as Knot shoves his door closed behind us. Then, he picks up his phone before the security measures are fully in place. “You know why I’m calling.”

Knot listens intently to the person on the line, offering a single grunt of agreement before replacing the phone’s handset.

Cracking his knuckles, Knot leans forward and rests his elbows on his desk. “I have a sensitive job for you. The job is perfectly legal but would be a bad look. That was a federal judge friend of mine. He’s agreed to provide our lawyers copies of the call logs but will only do so in person. To avoid the appearance of favor, I’d rather it be someone other than me to meet him. Sadie, you will provide the perfect cover.”

Knot glances at his watch before zeroing back in on me. “The two of you are to go to dinner at Byrd and Baldwin in about two hours. The judge will notice you and take the opportunity to thank you in person.”

At my confused expression, he adds, “It’s Judge Fairhope. You and Aaron saved his daughter’s life when she was kidnapped on her way to work at the US embassy in Myanmar. His handshake will be the handoff. Afterward, he’ll return to his table, and the two of you will finish your dinner before coming back here. I don’t want anyone to have a reason to think your meeting was anything other than a chance encounter.”

Wanting to tell them both about Avara being Aaron's alibi, I speak up, "Sir—"

Knot waves me off. "Whatever it is, it'll have to wait. You two need to get changed and make that meetup. Fairhope made a reservation in your name, Sadie."

Knot ends the security lockdown and stands, Maxen right along with him. While Knot needs to know about Aaron's alibi, I don't guess a few hours will make much difference. I get up and follow Maxen to the door and out of the executive offices.

Halfway through the building, I glance over at Maxen in time to catch him chuckling to himself. "What could you possibly be grinning about?"

"We're about to go on our first date."

I bring my hands to my hips. "This is not a date."

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“Oh, it’s a date.”

“It’s not because this is an arranged work meeting. It’s only a date if you ask, and you’re the one planning it.”

“I’m good at planning things.”

His eyebrow waggle has me rolling my eyes, but it’s nice to have a reason to laugh.

The two of us reach the lobby, and Maxen grabs my hand and stops in the middle of the Knot emblem on the floor. “Sadie, will you have dinner with me?”

Shocked gasps and snickers are heard from the various security and support staff in the cavernous room. My cheeks flame in embarrassment at having an audience for this little stunt. That is until I realize the mess Maxen just made for himself. He’s stuck with going tonight, no matter what I say.

Offering him my best evil smile, I lean forward and answer, “No,” loud enough for the whole room to hear. All the air is sucked from the lobby as I turn toward the door, swinging my hips as I walk.

Maxen’s reflection is visible in the glass doors, and just before I push through them, I notice him grinning like a fool.

At home, I drop my bags on the living room floor and walk back out to retrieve Gunny from Bonnie and Marshall. “Hey, stranger,” she says when she opens her door.



“Hey, Bonnie. I’m sorry to be leaving Gunny with you so much lately.”

“Well, I don’t mean to scare you, but some divorce papers were delivered just yesterday.”

“Ha,” I snort as I make my way over to Gunny’s bowl. “Come on, Gunny. What about till death do us part?”

Bonnie joins me in the kitchen and lays a hand on my shoulder. “How are you doing, Sadie? And how’s Aaron? I know how much Brock meant to the two of you.”

After a heavy sigh, I lean my head against Gunny’s bowl. “Like shit. Something’s happened that I can’t discuss, but it’s put Aaron in a bad position.”

“Bad? How bad?”

“Possible death sentence bad.”

Her mouth opens and closes a few times like she wants to protest, but her mind isn’t fully comprehending what it’s just heard. “Trust me. I feel the same way.”

“You’re helping him, though. Right. And your boss is helping too?” she asks, sounding hopeful.

“Everyone is doing everything they can. We just don’t have a lot of information yet.”

“Hmph. With as much security as your boss insists on having, I’d think it near impossible for one of your people to get into trouble. Or for trouble to get into them.”

Trouble getting into them... “Bonnie, you’re a genius!”

I grab Gunny's bowl and race out of her apartment, splashing out half of the water while trying to get my door open. Setting Gunny down on the counter, I pull out my laptop and get started.

The first order of business is pecking out an email to Knot explaining what Aaron told me about Avara since there wasn't time earlier. Next is a little research mission.

With my email sent, I pick up my phone and call the smartest person I know.

"Sup, Chicka?" Birdie answers.

"Can you hack into the security feeds at Aaron's apartment?"

"Um... is this a trick question?"

"Birdie!"

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm on it."

"Don't leave a trace. I won't be the last person asking."

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Amid her furious keyboard tapping, I hear, “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

Precious few seconds pass before Birdie declares, “Got it. How far back do you want to go?”

“Just since we returned from Afghanistan.”

“Ok... you should have them... right about... now.”

Right on cue, my email pings with an incoming message containing a link to a company file. “Got it.”

“I copied everything to our servers so you can use our system to review the footage.”

“You’re the best. Thanks, Birdie.”

“You want to fill me in on what this is about?”

“Not yet.”

I ring off with Birdie and dive right into the security footage. The place has several cameras set up, so I scan through the views to find the one aimed at the parking area nearest Aaron’s building.

The day we came back, he didn’t go home until late that night. That would have been after he found me at Mel’s and took me home. That’s several hours that I won’t have,

but I have to start somewhere.

Around eleven, I spot Aaron parking and walking to his apartment. He's backed into a space two spots down from a light. Dark enough for someone to approach but not dark enough for someone to be completely hidden from view.

While I'm speeding through the footage, a new email indication pops up on the screen. Knot got my message. His reply reads. I'm on it. Damn good news.

Returning to my surveillance task, I scroll through the hours of darkness, but no one even comes close to Aaron's truck. Daylight breaks, but I don't stop watching, even though logic says no one would attempt to plant evidence in broad daylight.

I'm still skimming the video when my phone dings. It's a message from Maxen. On my way. Be there in twenty.

"Oh shit!"

I slam the laptop lid closed and jump off the chair, stripping clothes off as I sprint to my bathroom. I pin my hair up and jump in the shower before the water is even warm., scrubbing and shaving as quickly as possible. In my haste, I nick myself twice.

Once I'm dry, I lotion up and apply a modest amount of makeup before tackling my hair. The auburn locks are being bitchy and not cooperating with my attempts to curl them with a flat iron. With less than ten minutes to go, I give in and pin it up in what I hope is an elegant twist.

I brush my teeth and dive naked into my closet, hoping for a miracle. Three seconds later, I realize I'm not getting one. My laundry basket is woefully full, and my lingerie drawer is quite empty. OK. Dress first. Then pick underwear.

Slinging hangers left and right, I work my way to the end of the bar, finding a dark gray halter dress with a split in the front from neck to navel. No bra needed. Ok. I can work with this.

I slip the dress on and notice a few wrinkles. “Dammit!”

Back into the bathroom, I go, dabbing some water on the chiffon and grabbing my hair dryer. A few minutes under the warm air, and the water is dry, leaving no wrinkles behind.

My doorbell rings, letting me know Maxen has arrived, but I still have no shoes or panties. I’m nearly breaking a sweat, racing back to the closet and pulling down shoeboxes for the right pair to go with this dress.

Meanwhile, the doorbell is ringing again. “Oh, for the love of god.”

I grab the first pair of black strappy sandals I come across, thankful I don’t have some complicated harness to secure to keep them on. The doorbell rings one more time, and I groan as I grab a simple black clutch off the top shelf of the closet.

After dumping all my shit out of my regular carry bag, I shove my wallet inside, but my knife won’t fit. Shit. Out of time, I toss the blade on my bed and finally leave my room. I’m feeling less than romantic as I open the door, and a cold blast of air up my skirt reminds me that I’m still not wearing panties.

My mouth opens to let loose an ashamedly unladylike curse, but the sight outside my door fries every working brain cell in my head.

Six feet of male magnificence is decked out in a tailored suit. No tie. Maxen’s wandering eyes are molten as he takes in my appearance, just as mesmerized as I am. The bouquet of pale purple roses in his hand is all but forgotten.

Maxen ogles a moment longer and clears his throat. “Were you about to say something?”

My thoughts return to my incomplete wardrobe, but I no longer care. “Trust me. You don’t want to know.”

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The sexy man takes a step closer, forcing me back into my entry hall. “You, Sadie, look ravishing.”

His enticing cologne teases my nose as he steps closer still, brushing the back of his hand against my cheek. A shiver works down my spine as those fingers continue downward, running through the slit in the front of my dress.

My breathing quickens, and Maxen’s hot breath on my neck sends a rush of heat straight to my core. Shit! No panties. “Ahh. I’ll just put these in some water,” I say as I reach for the flowers. “They’re beautiful. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Of course I did. This is our first date.”

“This is not a date.”

“A practice run for our first date, then.”

He offers me his arm, and I’ve never been more thankful for the genteel training sessions from Trish Knot before the Philippines mission. I hadn’t played the role of arm candy before and needed to look the part in order to guard a US ambassador.

Unfortunately, I played my part too well. That was the fateful mission during which I was kidnapped and had to be rescued by a group of Navy SEALs.

Shrugging off the memory of that jungle hell, I slip my arm around Maxen’s, and off we go. Outside, Maxen opens the passenger door of a navy BMW. Damn. Being in The Unit must have paid well. Knot isn’t exactly stingy, either. I suppose I could

afford something a little flashier than what I'm driving, but that's not my style.

I burrow into the soft seat and adjust my dress, thankful I could pull this off in such a short time. Maxen closes my door, rounds the hood to the other side, and drops in behind the wheel. "So, tell me about your family," Maxen says as he pushes the start button.

Maxen's hand is wrapped around my bare thigh during the drive to the restaurant, his fingers absently caressing my skin. Another first. And one I most definitely like.

Maxen's hand creeps pretty high up my leg at one point, and I bite my lip to keep from smiling. I'm almost disappointed when his hand lowers again without learning my secret.

By the time Maxen pulls up to the restaurant's valet stand, we've each shared a few of our most embarrassing childhood stories. Maxen's stories make him seem more human than the invincible former Delta I've always seen. Be careful, Sadie, or you might convince yourself to like this guy, my inner harpy warns.

Yeah, well... maybe I don't mind so much.

I turn and watch Maxen step out of the car, admiring the lethal grace with which he moves. Hot guy, manners Mrs. Bea would be proud of, and a distinct lack of awkwardness. If this were a date, I'd give the start of it a solid ten. However, since this is not a date, I'll refrain from making such claims.

An attendant opens my door and reaches for my hand. Instead of waving him off like I normally would, I remember to stay in character and accept graciously. I also remember that I'm not wearing any panties and take extra care not to flash everyone.

Still, the dress is quite short, and the twenty-something man obviously appreciates the



view as I swing my legs out of the car. The guy must look too long as a throat clears behind him, and Maxen growls, “I think I can take it from here.”

The attendant’s face falls, but he recovers quickly and bows, hastily stepping out of the way. Maxen moves in close to occupy the space vacated by the eager valet, positioning himself to block the view of the younger man. Hmm. Jealous maybe?

Once he’s helped me to my feet, his warm hand slides down my back, resting just above my ass, and we move toward the massive steel and glass doors. The moment is too good to pass up, and I want to play with the unflappable Maxen a little bit. “You know, that guy only wanted a lap or two around the block. It is a nice... car.”

Maxen’s growl makes a return appearance, accompanied by a side-eye scowl. His hand shifts from my back to around my waist, and he says, “I don’t share.”

A shock of awareness heats my middle at his possessive words and physical claim. A couple of trophy wife wannabes walk out of the restaurant just as we reach the doors, each of them eye-fucking my date—ahem—my partner on this mission. I stiffen in response, and Maxen, chuckling, leans close to press his lips to my ear. “And apparently, you don’t share either.”

His whispered words breathed against the sensitive area send shivers down my spine. God, how is every move that he makes so damned erotic? I squeeze my thighs together as Maxen returns his hand to the small of my back.

“Good evening. What’s the name on your reservation?”

“Phelps,” Maxen answers.

The maître d' checks his list and instructs one of his minions to escort us to our table. We’re led to an intimate booth in a part of the restaurant where none of the exits are

visible. It's on the tip of my tongue to ask for a different table, but Maxen, reading my thoughts, shakes his head once.

Being unarmed for tonight is hard enough for someone like me to handle. Being unarmed and blind is too much.

"Stay focused, Marine," Maxen orders. "A romantic, secluded table is a normal and necessary part of the proper dinner date."

"This is not a date," I remind him.

Maxen laughs and leans back in his seat, his whole body seemingly carefree and light. The moment transforms him entirely, and I find myself caught in a state of evection. Just like when the sun's attraction alters the moon's orbital motion, Maxen has knocked me off my axis.

The sexy man notices my lost expression and takes my hand, pulling me back into focus. Something in me shifts then, and I don't know if it scares me or not. Thankfully, whether it's his suit, the atmosphere, or his devastating smile, the sudden change puts me in a trance, and I can finally relax into my role.

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Like other lovers do on a real date, we discuss the wine list, signature cocktails, and the menu, though it's constantly on my mind to wonder when we'll be approached by Judge Fairhope.

We get through the meal and have ordered dessert when Maxen reaches across the table for my hand, lacing his fingers with mine. "I'm glad you finally decided that I wasn't full of shit and gave me a chance."

My raised brow says that I still very much believe he's full of shit, but I can't and won't deny that he had been right about me. To check his ego, I decide to tell him about my decision being helped by a drunk homeless man. Before I can get the first words out, a shadow crosses our table. Judge Fairhope.

"You're Ms. Phelps, correct? Sadie Phelps?"

"Yes, sir. That's me."

A genuine smile of gratitude graces the older gentleman's face. "I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner, but I thought I recognized you, and I didn't want to miss the opportunity to speak with you. My name is Ryan Fairhope. You saved my daughter's life in Myanmar. I'd hoped that I'd one day get the chance to thank you in person for bringing her home safe. May I have the honor of shaking your hand?"

Though the judge's words and behavior are sincerely appreciative, the little show is attracting attention. Despite how uncomfortable it makes me, I'm sure it's all part of the ruse.

Regardless of the setup, the sentiment that passes between father and rescuer is genuine. I'm humbled by the man's heartfelt gratitude and stand up to shake his hand instead of remaining in my seat. Fairhope takes my hand in both of his, giving me an energetic shake while passing along what feels like a flash drive.

He releases me after a second or two, and the drive is slipped, unseen, into the pocket of my dress.

I retake my seat and ask about his daughter. He reports that she is doing fine and insists that our dinner will be taken care of. With one last thanks, the Judge returns to his own dining party, and just like that, the operation is complete. Well, the active part, at least. Our orders are to remain and finish our meal as a sudden departure would appear suspicious.

By the time our server brings dessert, I'm so anxious to find out what's on this drive that I can barely sit still. Additionally, I haven't had the chance to tell Maxen about Avara yet and can't do it until we get out of here.

Just as I'm nearing the end of my patience, Maxen leans forward and places a flower in my hair, one of the purple roses. Before he sits back again, he whispers, "I've got a plan to get us out of here quick. Play along."

Our server comes by to freshen up our water glasses, and Maxen winks at me so the server will notice. "Pardon me, but could you fix up our dessert to go?" He gives the woman a look that could melt glass and adds, "I've got a craving for something a little sweeter than chocolate sin."

The server gives him a doe-eyed nod and more or less stumbles away from the table. The poor woman can be seen fanning herself as she walks toward the kitchen.

"Looks like she'd be more than ready to go a lap or two around the block," I mumble.

Maxen skims his hand over my thigh beneath the table. “But you’re the only woman I’d let drive me.”

I barely refrain from rolling my eyes, though inside, I’m swooning. God, it’s a good thing that Gunny isn’t here to see this. I’d never hear the end of it.

Maxen’s sultry look remains as our server returns with our packaged dessert and the compliments of the Judge’s table. With a salute toward the judge, Maxen drops a generous tip onto the fancy linen tablecloth, grabs the bag and my hand, and guides me out of the popular chophouse.

In the lobby, he says, “I messaged Knot. He’s on his way.”

We step out into the night air, and I’m not surprised at all by what I see. Well, speak of the devil. Knot’s Escalade is parked just down the sidewalk from the valet stand. Pulling Maxen to the side, I say, “I’ll get this to Knot, and we’ll start toward the compound. You get your car and follow.”

My gut tightens at the hungry grin that graces Maxen’s face. He adjusts the flower in my hair and caresses my cheek. “How’s our date going so far?”

I push against his chest and turn for my boss. With a last look over my shoulder, I toss back, “It wasn’t a date.”

Undeterred, he calls back, “The night’s not over yet, Sadie.”

The dirty promise in his words has my thighs clenching again, and I button my lip and turn back around.

The window Knot watches me through begins to roll up as I reach for the door handle. “How was dinner?” he asks as I drop into the heated leather seat.

My boss gets the big vehicle moving without waiting for an answer, and I pull on my seat belt. Shrugging my shoulders, I answer, “Eh. Once you’ve had world-class steak, all others are average at best.”

Knot chuckles, likely expecting that kind of answer from me. I pull the flash drive from my pocket and turn it over in my hand. “Have you spoken to Avara yet? Regardless of what we find on this drive, the prosecutor will want to talk to him.”

“Not yet. Avara’s on leave, so it’s going to take a little more time to find him.”

Diverting my gaze from the man behind the wheel, I stare out over the passing night. “These call logs are useless until or unless we find him.”

“He’s not a fugitive on the run, Sadie. He’s just a guy that lost his team and was granted time off because of it. We’ll find him, he’ll clear Aaron, and that will be the end of this shit.”

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:34 am*

I push the air from my lungs with a long sigh, knowing he's right but still worried. The two of us ride the rest of the way to Knot Corp in silence. Knot parks under the portico at the main entry and shuts the big machine off. "Send Gates to my office when he gets here," he orders the security officer, who walks out to greet us.

"Yes, sir."

Less than a minute later, Knot and I are in his office looking over the short call list from the phone found in Aaron's truck. "Aaron said he was with Avara from thirteen hundred until about eighteen thirty?"

"That's what he said. And his timeline matches up with what I know."

All but two of the calls made to and from that phone happened in that time frame. The sigh I blow out this time is one of relief. "Aaron's alibi checks out."

Knot shakes his head. "Only if Avara corroborates."

Dismissing his concern, I'm on my feet, practically buzzing with relief. "This is good news. I have to let Aaron know somehow."

Knot picks up his phone and reaches for the keypad. "I'll see what I can do to reach him. And now that we know Aaron didn't make those calls, I'll contact the prosecutor and give him Aaron's alibi. Good work, Sadie. Now, you and Gates get out of here."

Feeling lighter than I have since this morning, I float to the door just in time to see Maxen step off the elevator. I rush over, grabbing his arms. "Aaron's innocent!"

Maxen smiles. "Of course he is. We knew that. We just needed proof."

"Well, we have it. Or we will as soon as—"

Maxen touches a finger to my lips. "Work later. Date now."

I shake my head in silent laughter. "This wasn't a date."

He takes my hand and pulls me back inside the elevator. "It is now."

Outside again, Maxen deposits me in the passenger side of his car and then speeds off toward the central part of the city.

A short time later, we arrive at his apartment building. While the thought of exploring Maxen's body again is thrilling, I feel disappointed in the man that a midnight romp was his assumed ending. I realize that makes me a bit of a hypocrite, considering my no-strings dating life. Still, I'd come to expect different from Maxen.

Maxen parks, jumps out, and sweeps around to open my door. Though disappointment still thrums in my chest, I accept his hand and step out of the soft leather seat.

Maxen places my hand on his arm and escorts me like a gentleman to the lobby. During the elevator ride, I remain silent and stiff, my brows knitting together as I grow angrier at myself and Maxen. Him for thinking our date wasn't over just because he hadn't fucked me yet, and me for believing he'd be different than other guys.

Ready to insist he takes me home before things go any further, I lift my head to study his chiseled face. Maxen cuts his eyes to me as the corners of his lips turn up in amusement like he did the day we sparred for the first time. Like he was reading my



mind. He knew what I was thinking... again. That means I've been set up... again.

The elevator opens on the top floor, and Maxen guides me toward the emergency stairs instead of his apartment door. Inside the stairwell, he pulls out a ring of keys and unlocks a door marked Roof.

Maxen swings the heavy metal door open and ushers me through, pressing against my back as I move. His breath on my neck sets my heart pumping in overdrive, and slowly, my disappointment becomes anticipation.

The door at the top of the stairs swings out, revealing a private rooftop garden complete with a table for two, dim café lights, vined trellises, and a plush carpet of green grass to one side.

Set on the turf is a white blanket with an ice bucket next to it. A tray holding champagne flutes and chocolate-covered strawberries sits next to the champagne. I freeze in the doorway, taking it all in. For a moment, I feel guilty that I'd set an unfair expectation of Maxen and even more guilty because he met it.

Warmth envelops my back as Maxen presses against me again. His hot breath prickles my neck when he whispers, "What's the matter, Fate? Not what you were expecting?"

His lips touch down on my bare shoulder, and his tongue paints a lazy circle there, lighting my insides on fire. "You're worth more than fast fucks with forgettable men. You're a warrior and a treasure and deserve to be treated like both."

I spin in place, intending to attack his mouth, but Maxen steps back. "Uh uh. Treasure first." He steps around me and turns back, reaching for my hand.

His words leave me in a daze, and I absently place my hand in his, letting him pull

me toward the romantic scene. At the edge of the patch of grass, Maxen drops to a knee and begins unstrapping my sandals. Deft fingers slide off each shoe, and Maxen slowly rises and retakes my hand.

The grass is cool and soft under my feet. The spongy earth beneath is a soft cushion and contrasts with the concrete and gravel path we took to reach this point. Maxen indicates for me to get comfortable on the blanket, and as I drop down next to the tray of strawberries, he removes his jacket before stooping to remove his own shoes.

Maxen finally moves to join me, uncuffing and then rolling his sleeves as he does. His muscled body should be too big to move as gracefully as it does, but every move he makes looks like it was choreographed by the world's finest dance instructor.

If I weren't already seated, I'd feel as clumsy and awkward as a newborn foal next to him. As it is, I feel out of sorts and don't know what to say or do. Logic and my experience tell me that I should know exactly what to do with a hot male that wants me, but I don't know how to respond to this special treatment.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:34 am*

“Who...” I begin, but at the squeak in my voice, I stop and clear my throat to try again. “Who set all this up?”

Maxen answers while removing the cage on the bottle of champagne. “It’s maintained by the top floor tenants and only for our use, though I’m the only one that ever seems to come up here. Since I moved in, I’ve slowly customized it to my liking, and no one’s complained.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“And a lot more special than the inside of my apartment, right?”

A crimson blush fires up my neck and face, confirming that he’d figured out my earlier thoughts. Maxen reaches a finger under my chin, forcing my gaze back to his from where I’d turned away in embarrassment. “Just because you’ve always been treated one way does not mean that’s how you should be treated.”

He places a hand between my breasts, forcing me to recline on the massive pile of pillows. I do as he directs, stretching my legs and crossing my ankles. Maxen uncorks the bottle and then pours two glasses of pink champagne. After placing one in my hand, he leans forward and briefly touches his lips to mine. “To finding a diamond and helping her know how much she shines.”

He clinks my glass with his and takes a sip, never once removing his stare from mine. I mimic his movements, barely noticing the chill of the liquid as it slides down my throat. All I’m focused on is the burn in my middle and in Maxen’s eyes.

Setting down the flute, I grab Maxen's collar and pull him down to me. He comes willingly, offering me my first real taste of the champagne that went unnoticed earlier. The slight tingle and fruity flavor on his tongue explode in my mouth as my desire rockets up to the max.

Maxen lifts his muscled frame to hover over me, only touching me with his mouth. I want more, and since our position affords me the room to reach the buttons of his dress shirt. I claw at the fabric, nearly frantic in my rush to touch his bare skin.

Once I've popped the last button and pulled the tails free of his belt, he sits up long enough to slide the fabric off his broad shoulders. The expanse of smooth, tan skin on display makes my mouth water.

Maxen doesn't come back to me right away, so I trail eager fingers over his washboard abs to the trail of hair leading into his slacks. A rumble emanates from his chest at my slight touch, and his eyes drift closed.

That I could do this to him with the barest of touches is empowering. Emboldened, I sit up and taste his skin, immediately entranced by the scent of his cologne and the warmth against my lips.

Holding himself up with one arm, Maxen slides the other down my leg, uncrossing my ankles. He massages his way back up, pulling a moan from me. He only stops when he reaches the hem of my dress, which has ridden up almost high enough to reveal my secret.

I swirl my tongue around one of his nipples, and the former Delta groans hoarsely. "May I have you tonight, Sadie?"

"I think you've had me since you tackled me in the training room," I joke.

Maxen straight-up growls in warning. “Sadie.”

“Yes, Maxen. You may have me.”

That enormous body lowers to mine slowly, allowing me to adjust to his weight on top of me. He needn't have worried. I love the feeling, grounded, dominated. Some might be surprised by that admission, but giving yourself to someone you trust can be freeing.

Maxen licks the seam of my lips, urging me to open for him. I don't need much encouragement. He dips his tongue inside, consuming me with that little bit of contact. I open my body to him, allowing him to settle between my thighs. With him this close, all his hard ridges press against all the best places, making me squirm in anticipation.

He lifts a hand to my chest, settling on one fabric-covered breast and slipping his thumb into the dress's front slit. The thin material lets him feel my nipple pebble at his touch, alerting him that I'm not wearing a bra underneath. Wanting his hands on my skin, I reach up and loosen the tie at my neck, peeling the halter top down. The skin on my chest erupts in goose flesh once exposed to his eyes, the night air... and his mouth.

The instant Maxen lowers his head and closes his mouth over a taught nipple, my back arches off the stack of pillows. Maxen takes the opportunity to reach behind me, grabbing a handful of the fluffy supports and flinging them to the side. The result is me lying flat on my back, settling him even tighter against my aching core.

My hands go to his head, rasping my nails over his scalp. “Maxen,” I beg breathlessly.

The Adonis crawls back up to my mouth and whispers against my lips, “I know what

you need, baby girl.”

Instead of pissing me off, the endearment stokes the fire within me. Maxen’s tongue tangles with mine while his hand finally sneaks its way under the skirt of my dress. Finding me bare below the waist must surprise my lover as he lifts his eyes to mine, and a sly grin lights his face.

His nimble fingers resume their trek northward while Maxen holds my gaze. Finding me drenched and ready, Maxen withdraws his fingers only to dip them into his mouth. He sucks them clean and then slowly peels my dress off.

By the time the fabric is tossed away, my chest is heaving with the force of my excited breaths. Maxen doesn’t lift to remove his pants or touch me again other than to remove the flower from my hair. It gets tossed to the side like my dress, and then he releases my hair from its clasp.

Only now does he stand and unlatch his belt. His eyes, molten with desire, scorch a path over my skin as he skims me from head to toe. Maxen begins pulling his belt through the loops just as painfully slow as he’s done everything else. Meanwhile, I’m writhing on the blanket as the need to be filled overwhelms me.

The belt finally clears the last loop, and Maxen drops it to the turf. Upon the release of his button and zipper, his dick springs free, revealing that he was just as bare underneath his clothes as I was.

His slacks flutter to the ground, and he steps out of the puddle to stalk toward me with the dirtiest of intentions dancing behind his eyes. Having had enough of waiting around, I quickly rise to my knees and reach for him. Just before I wrap my fist around his cock, Maxen grabs my wrist, stopping me from touching him. It seems that since we’re back on his turf, we’re back to his rules. Too bad I’m not feeling very submissive at the moment.

I spin my arm out of his grasp and jump to my feet.

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“Oh, sweetheart, this is so many of my fantasies all rolled into one,” he purrs.

“Let’s see if you still think so when you’re on your ass.”

“The way I see it, I win either way.”

He lunges then, and I twist out of his path. The only problem is that I failed to anticipate how much the blanket would slip on the grass. My feet get tangled, and I end up facing away from Maxen with my arm wrenched up behind my back. “Give up yet?” he murmurs in my ear while circling a single fingertip around a nipple.

“Not a chance.”

I jump to take the pressure off my captured arm and spin to free it. When I land on my feet again, it’s with an arm around Maxen’s neck. I lean forward and drop, successfully managing to flip him over my back. Somehow, he’s able to control his landing enough to throw his own weight, pulling me right over with him. Through some acrobatic spin and throw action, Maxen lands me flat on my back on the cool grass with him between my legs again.

“I win,” he says just before he spears me with his massive cock.

Something cool and smooth brushes across my mouth as I laze in the rooftop oasis with Maxen. Keeping my eyes closed, I smile and lick the melting chocolate from my lips. At the next pass, I bite into the strawberry, and the sweet nectar melds with the chocolate, a decadent, almost sinful combination.



I'm sitting between Maxen's legs, reclined back against his bare chest. We're covered from the chill by a light fleece he had hidden amongst the stack of pillows. Keeping my eyes open, I follow Maxen's hand as he reaches for his glass of champagne, taking a generous sip.

He picks up another chocolate-covered strawberry, and this time when he paints my lips with it, it's him that licks it off. I chase him as he sits back up, but instead of being rewarded with another sensual kiss, he teases me with a chuckle and bites into the fruit.

The night has been the most decadent I've ever had, basking in one another's bodies under an open sky. By now, it has to be extremely late, and even though tomorrow is Saturday, I'll want to check in with Knot for an update in the morning.

Reaching for the last strawberry, I offer it to Maxen before pulling back at the last second and biting it myself. After I've swallowed it with a victorious grin, I shove off the blanket and reach for my discarded dress.

Fabric shifts behind me as I slide the wrinkled, shimmery dress over my head, and then Maxen is at my back, lifting my hair to the side to secure the tie at my neck. Considering all we've done, the act is oddly intimate.

I'm suddenly insecure about how mismatched we are emotionally and take a step forward out of his reach. By the time I turn around, Maxen has pulled on his pants and is watching me, wearing a guarded expression. He tilts his head to the side and asks, "Pulling away already?"

I feign annoyance to cover up my freak out over being read so well again. "Don't be ridiculous. I... I'm just surprising myself with all... this."

Maxen's shoulders fall, though the reaction is slight enough that I would have

probably missed it if he'd been wearing a shirt. What it means is that he doesn't believe me. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I think I hurt him.

"Come on," he says coolly. "I'll take you home."

He turns away, and I decide I will not be a coward. I don't want to miss my chance to experience something real just because I'm afraid. I step up and stop him with a hand against his heart. "No. I want to stay with you."

A small smile graces his lips, and Maxen lifts his hand to trace his knuckles over my cheek. "I'd like that."

Now that we've cleared the air, the two of us set out to gather our clothes and shoes. Underneath all the piled-up chaos is the flower Maxen put in my hair. I consider tucking the stem over my ear, but Maxen picks it up and places it in his pocket. No matter, I still have a large and beautiful bouquet of the roses in my apartment.

The pillows, Maxen's remaining clothes, and our shoes are tossed in the middle of the blanket, and the whole thing is gathered and tossed over his shoulder. I help by collecting the ice bucket and glasses, and we leave the garden terrace without a trace of our romantic exploits.

The two of us walk barefoot to Maxen's apartment, where the loaded blanket gets deposited on the sofa table. We continue deeper into the stylish flat, not stopping until we reach Maxen's bedroom. There, we strip down in the dark and get wrapped up in each other all over again in his bed.

My ringing phone wakes us at nine the next morning. Cursing myself for sleeping in, I fumble to grab the offensive device out of my clutch that sits on the bedside table. "Phelps."

“Get to my office. Twenty minutes.”

Knot hangs up without waiting for a response, leaving me staring at the now blank screen.

“Who was—” Maxen begins but is interrupted by his phone receiving a call. He climbs out of bed and pads naked to his pants on the floor. The call is on its third ring when he pulls the phone from his pocket. “Gates here.”

Maxen meets my dazed stare with one of his own. “Twenty minutes,” he affirms.

I glance toward the floor at my abused dress. “Hmm.”

“Walk of shame time,” my lover teases.

For that, he gets the finger. “Come on,” he laughs. “I’ll get you there fast enough that you’ll have time to change.”

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With his confident assurance, Maxen hops up and pulls on some gray sweats, a Knot t-shirt, and some Nikes while I slip my dress back on and strap on my sandals. Then, we're out the door.

At the compound thirteen minutes later, we step into the lobby with plans for me to divert to the locker rooms while Maxen goes up to the boss's office. Unfortunately, Dillan Knot must be particularly impatient this morning, as he's standing in the lobby when we walk in.

Knot takes in my rumpled appearance with a raised eyebrow but without comment and then abruptly turns on his heel toward the elevators. He's silent until the three of us are sealed inside and he's seated behind his modern desk.

His mood is dark, and a profound dread settles in my bones, waiting for the bomb he's about to drop. "Investigators went to interview Avara this morning. They found him dead. Executed."

Holy shit. That's not what I'd expected. It's worse. Way worse. Upon entering Knot's inner sanctum, I'd taken up a position standing next to one of the guest chairs because of my current state beneath this dress. At Knot's revelation, I drop onto the seat, rather unladylike, crushed by the news.

Beside me, Maxen sits up straight in response to my reaction, blissfully unaware of what this means. "What? Why? What does that asshole have to do with anything?"

I'm too stunned to speak, much less explain the situation to Maxen. My eyes are still glued to the floor when Knot starts to explain. "The hours Aaron went missing in

Afghanistan were spent with Avara. The calls made from the confiscated phone were made during that time.”

“Whoa. Hold on. Hours? With Avara? The man that attacked Sadie? Does someone care to explain why Hosfeld would spend even a minute with that dick?”

“Suffice it to say that Avara and Hosfeld had a come-to-Jesus meeting. That’s why he readily handed over operational control to Sadie during the rescue mission.”

Maxen slumps in his chair. “So, you’re telling me someone killed Avara to keep him from corroborating Aaron’s alibi.”

“Looks that way,” Knot concedes.

“Someone in Avara’s squad? If one of Avara’s men was involved, it makes sense that he’d want to make sure Aaron goes down for it. Who else knew about Avara? None of our people did.”

I lift my head and look Maxen’s way. “I knew. Aaron told me when I found him in Tennessee. As soon as I got home, I started looking for the real culprit.”

“What do you mean?” my boss asks, leaning over his desk, calling my attention away from Maxen’s look of betrayal.

“Aaron’s alibi and the call logs prove that Aaron is innocent. That means the phone was planted, and given the location of the traces, it happened after we got back. Figuring Aaron’s apartment building was a good place to start, I had Birdie hack in and get me the security videos from Wednesday night to Monday. I was about halfway through scanning the footage when I ran out of time.”

Maxen closes his eyes and turns away. “Someone set Aaron up to be the fall guy.

Someone who knew that Avara could clear him or at least cast reasonable doubt.” He shoves a hand through his hair and continues, “So, who are we looking for then? If I’d had to name someone before now, I would have guessed Avara was behind this.”

Knot leans back in his seat and taps a finger on his desk. “I suspect we’re looking at an inside job. My guess is someone in Avara’s unit. It wouldn’t have been anyone in Treasury.”

“How do you figure?” Maxen asks, still not looking at me.

“The two dead agents. The manner in which they were killed indicates someone was trying to get information out of them. Another FinCEN agent would have had access to the same information they did.”

I agree with Knot’s assessment of the federal investigators, but focusing only on Avara’s surviving unit is too narrow for me. “There had to be others that knew of the raid team’s purpose; couriers, drivers, pilots. After the first pile of cash was recovered, there’d be no way this was kept quiet. Anyone in Shindand could have had designs on those caches.”

Maxen finally looks my way, his demeanor giving me the impression that he believes we’re up against impossible odds. “Then what the hell do we do?”

“We find who did this,” Knot declares.

My boss glares across his desk like the answer is really that simple. Most of the time, with his resources, he’d be correct, but I’m not seeing any options here. “How are we supposed to do that? The US already thinks Aaron’s guilty. With Avara’s death, they’re going to be even more suspicious. Any move we make will look like we’re covering for him.”

“At this point, I'm not concerned about what the feds or the Army think. We'll find whoever is responsible and hand them over... Even if it is Hosfeld.”

Cutting off my denial, Knot holds up a hand and adds, “You two gear up. I'm sending you back to Afghanistan. You'll lead an investigation into the smugglers while the feds are spinning their wheels looking for Aaron. Someone was working with the terrorists to hijack these raids. I want to find out who.

“And I want this quiet. Get with Birdie before you leave. She's the only local person I want working with you on this op. Given that you'll have to sneak across the border into Iran, you'll need a lot of help from Sambi and his crew.”

“What about Aaron? Have you heard from him?”

“You let me worry about Aaron. You're going to have your hands full enough as it is.”

Knot stands then, indicating the conversation is over. We have our marching orders and are expected to carry them out. My stare remains locked on his for a moment, all kinds of questions and arguments rocking around in my head.

“Come on, Sadie,” Maxen goads. “This is our first real chance to clear his name.”

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My eyes fall, realizing he's right. No more waiting and hoping for the feds to get their heads out of their asses. It's time to get moving, do their job, and save my friend.

Maxen and I march through the building, separating at the locker facilities. I quickly shower, dress in Knot TDUs, and braid my hair. There won't be much to load out in terms of weapons this time. Since we're not under contract, we'll travel as civilians, subject to customs regulations. Any weaponry we need will have to be sourced from Sambi. All I can take with me are clothes, a sat phone communications system, and surveillance equipment. Fortunately, I have a large enough stash of clothes here that I won't have to go home before heading to the airport.

Maxen is waiting outside the locker room door when I walk out. He pushes off the wall and slings a duffle bag over his shoulder once I've joined him. Together, we walk to Birdie's office, finding her waiting behind her desk. She must have been called in right after we were.

"I've already been briefed on everything. The pilots are getting the jet ready, and I'm to clear my desk for you two. What do you want me doing before you land?"

Leaning over to snag a pen and her notepad, I scribble out a date and time marker. "You can finish scanning the security video from Aaron's place. Look for anyone messing with his car. It's a long shot, but we might catch something."

"What if I don't find anything?"

"It's possible you won't, but we have to check. I already know he spent the evening out that first night back."



Her head bobs in understanding. “Do you know where else Aaron went after the mission? I might be able to scrub through footage from other locations.”

“Mel’s on Wednesday night. Around seven to eight. Outside that, I have no idea.”

“Ok. You’ll have my report by the time you land. You two, be careful. I don’t think we’re dealing with amateurs here.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

Maxen turns and heads for the door, and I reach out to squeeze Birdie’s hand before rushing to follow. He hasn’t opened his mouth since leaving Knot’s office, and by the time we reach his car, I’m convinced he’s pissed.

He holds in whatever he’s thinking until we’re seated and buckled. With a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, he says, “I thought we were working together.”

He sounds miserable, like I let him down. Or worse, lied to him. “We were. We are. There was nothing but complete chaos from the time I landed in Norfolk until the Fairhope meetup. I was going to tell Knot about Avara first, but only because he picked me up at the airport. I didn’t get the chance because you called. He spent the rest of the trip on the phone, and when I tried to tell you guys in his office, he cut me off. He only knows because I sent an email to him laying it all out when I should have been getting ready to meet the judge.”

Maxen doesn’t move, doesn’t even crank the car. The tension is growing thick enough that I might choke on it. Finally, he opens his mouth. “We’ve had lots of time together since then.”

“Yes, we have. I couldn’t discuss it at the restaurant, and as for before and after...”

“What?” he presses when I don’t continue.

Well, Sadie, time to woman up and show your vulnerability. I pull in a deep breath and sigh. “I didn’t want any part of last night to be about work. I wanted it... to be a real date. I was always going to tell you, but when Knot messaged that he would look for Avara, I figured a few more hours wouldn’t hurt.”

Nothing but silence is coming from the other side of the car. I lean my head back against the seat, thinking I screwed up. I should have told him the second he showed up at my apartment. Feeling I should apologize, I roll my head in his direction and see a big, cheesy grin on his face.

“What’s that for?”

“I told you it was a date.”

We land in the Farah Province of Afghanistan around zero-eight hundred local time. The flight was fifteen hours, putting the time at home at six pm. We would have saved ourselves an ass-load of time if we’d flown directly into Iran, but that would have been one big hell no.

So, as the crow flies, we’re about equal distance from the Iranian border and Shindand Air Base. Legally, we won’t have access to either. Fortunately, we have no interest in getting on base. Any answers we’ll get won’t come through channels or by-the-book interviews. Our American traitor would see us coming a mile away.

Our only hope of nailing this guy is to find him by finding his associates. To do that, we’ll need to get into and out of Iran undetected. That’s where Sambi comes in.

“Ready for this?” Maxen asks as the plane rolls to a stop.

“I guess I’d better be.”

Maxen bends near my seat and wraps a hand around my neck. Pressing his forehead to mine, he says, “Look at us. Our first date and first couple’s trip in the same weekend.”

How he manages to joke around right now is beyond me, but I find myself chuckling and accepting the hand Maxen holds out to me. The two of us grab our gear and exit the plane to be greeted by a friendly face. “I did not expect to see you again so soon, my friends.”

Sambi keeps glancing toward the open door as if looking for someone. “Where is Grim? I have never seen one of you without the other,” he addresses me.

“He’s...” I begin but fail to come up with an acceptable explanation.

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“He’s on special assignment,” Maxen finishes, covering for my stumble.

I hadn’t planned on lying to Sambi, but I suppose withholding the truth keeps from muddying the waters.

Sambi gestures toward a banged-up van that looks to be from the stone age and beckons us to follow him inside. “It looks old, but no one will notice it near the border. We’ll meet my associate near Chah Sagak. He’ll have weapons and a vehicle that cannot be traced back to Mr. Knot. Even so, I recommend that you do not get caught. I assume this mission is one of great urgency, so I will personally be on standby to help you escape the country when it is time.”

“Thank you, Sambi.”

“You have no need to thank me, Ms. Phelps. Now, are you ready to depart?”

“Yes.”

We’re soon on the move, making the two-hour drive to the Iranian border. We can’t cross near any of the small towns that hug the boundary on either side and risk arrest for whatever bullshit reason the patrol dreams up. If that were to happen, Maxen would be lost in some undocumented prison, and I’d be married off to some terrorist goat-fucker.

Sambi was right about using a clunker to reach the border. Anything else would seem out of place in the impoverished area. As it is, no one pays any attention to this piece of shit rambling along the road between settlements. It fits in with all the other piece-

of-shit vehicles sharing the road.

Nearing the city of Damdam, Sambi instructs Maxen and me to hide ourselves to avoid being seen. We huddle in the tight space between the seats, staring at each other underneath.

I figure now is as good a time as any to plan our next move. Sure, we'd had plenty of time on the long flight to strategize, but after being up most of the night before and knowing we'd land just after daybreak, it was a better idea to get some sleep.

For privacy, I keep my voice around the level of road noise and ask, "What's our first stop? I don't think we'll find anything at the first raid site. At some point, we should check out the cave."

"I agree with you on the first site. Let's go to the cave first. I don't know what we'll find, but we have to start somewhere."

Three hours later, we've been safely smuggled across the border, gotten the wheels necessary to continue our mission, and been outfitted with weapons to keep our asses alive. My GPS shows that we're twenty minutes from the small settlement at the mouth of the smuggler's cave.

The cave where half of Avara's team was ambushed and killed.

And where Brock died.

Maxen stops the old truck a mile from the cave's entrance, so we'll have a chance to check in with Birdie again before storming the site. While I pull out my phone to call home base, Maxen slides his big hand across the bench seat to wrap around my thigh. That definitely never happened during deployment before. Well, it's never happened that I didn't knock the guy's ass out for it anyway.

Birdie's voice comes through alert and chipper, despite the time being after nine pm am where she is. "Ok. I don't see any moving cars or bodies. There's no chimney smoke indicating domestic activities. No thermal signatures outside the cave at all."

"At this time of the morning, we should see something unless the area is abandoned," Maxen surmises.

"I concur. I think it's safe for you to proceed. With caution."

"Ok. We'll sign off and get closer. You keep an eye on things and alert us if you spot any activity."

"Got it. You two stay safe."

Maxen puts the van in drive and rolls toward the collection of buildings, parking behind the farthest one. We link our satellite communication system with Birdie, even though we'll lose her once we step into the cave. Our earpieces go in, a specialized design that allows us to monitor environmental sounds and radio transmissions while also serving as ear protection. The system provides bionic hearing but with stop gate technology that detects and suppresses dangerous sounds that could damage eardrums.

Now that we're connected, we check our gear, focusing on the weapons, and start toward the center of town. "I'm still not seeing any movement between you and the cave entrance."

"Copy," Maxen responds.

Despite Birdie's assurances that we're alone, Maxen and I remain alert with guns drawn. A brisk dry wind gusts, stirring up a cloud of dust on the dirt path that leads through the collection of buildings. The sight is accompanied by an eerie whistling

sound as the breeze passes through the blown-out walls. A small dust devil forms where the wind splits at one stone structure, swirling the sand high up in the air. Though fascinating, I pull my eyes away to watch for more lethal dangers.

We soon reach the patch of dirt where the body of Corporal Masters was found. Blood from the corporal's wounds is gone, dried up and blown away in one of the many dust storms that frequent the area.

Without thinking, I touch the spot over my ribs that Masters patched up. Another good man lost. Turning away from the area, I look toward the mouth of the cave. "Come on. Let's keep going."

Maxen gives my shoulder a squeeze and walks with me to the last place I ever wanted to see again. "Birdie," his voice comes through clear and strong. "We're about to enter the cave, so you'll lose us for a while. Keep an eye on the road to at least five miles out. We'll make sure that one of us checks in at ten-minute intervals in case anything should come up."

"Birdie, can you run traces on the numbers from the call logs at the same time?" I ask.

"I can. I ran them as soon as the boss gave them to me, but none of the associated phones were powered on."

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“All right. Keep checking. We’re bound to catch someone eventually.”

“You got it.”

With nothing left stopping us, I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Let’s go.”

The morning sun reaches into the cave about twenty feet, but that’s where the light ends. All of the lights installed by the terrorists are dark, the power feed having been cut off at some point. I have no interest in wasting the time it could take to find and restart the source, so Maxen and I secure our headlamps and keep going.

Unlike the outside, where all traces of the massacre have been erased, the macabre scene inside the cave remains untouched. Spilled blood coats much of the opening tunnel, splattered on the cave walls in many places. The first inner chamber is even worse. This is where Colonel Heathman and his men were caught in a crossfire.

Our hope is to find a sign, some shred of evidence that will help us identify one of the players. I know chances are slim, given that Avara’s men wouldn’t have been thinking about the investigation when moving the bodies of their teammates.

It’s possible that whoever investigated could have found something useful, but we’ll never know about it. Whether it was CID, FBI, or the CIA, they wouldn’t share shit with us, especially since one of our operatives is on the hook for the slaughter.

If there was evidence here, I’m not finding a damned thing now and don’t have time for an exhaustive search. That means it’s time to keep moving. I get Maxen’s attention and guide him to the alcove entrance, where Aaron and I found the



discarded guns. I drop to my knees and crawl in first, having been the only one who has seen the area before. Scanning the floor as I go, I look for anything that could have fallen from a pocket or a box but come up empty. Of course, it's not going to be that easy.

Exiting the small tunnel on the other side, I rise to my feet in an empty room. Not surprising. The only question is who took the guns. We didn't leave anyone behind to guard the cache of weapons. I'm sure the army would have sent a team to secure the site for investigators. They probably took the weapons away. Unless the terrorists retrieved them first.

"Anything?" Maxen asks as he stands up in the small cavern.

I kick out at a perfectly preserved Army boot print in the dirt. "Nothing. The army's team likely wiped out anything we could use to find these bastards."

"It wouldn't have been intentional."

"I know that," I snap. "Come on. We're wasting time here."

Spinning toward the cavern's exit, my whole body sags when I reach the tunnel. I lean my head against the cool stone wall, feeling like shit for lashing out. Maxen's lights dance over the floor as he approaches. He splays his big hand over my back reassuringly. "I know, Sadie. I don't want to be here again, either. We're going to get through this. We're gonna clear Aaron and get justice for Brock, Heathman, and all the others. Now, let's keep moving. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

Nodding into the darkness, I drop to my knees to crawl back out.

After exiting the tunnel, I'm stuck, frozen, staring into the crevice leading to the spot where Brock was killed. I keep seeing his face the moment he knew no one could

save him. I close my eyes, letting the pain wash over me, and reach up and touch my cheek where he did before he died.

In those last few breaths, Brock wasn't afraid. Knowing what I know now, it's clear what was hiding in his eyes that night: love and regret.

I can't go in there.

I'm still frozen in place when Maxen clears the small tunnel. The beam of his flashlight sweeps over my still form, and he steps up to my side. "It's time to check in with Birdie. Why don't you go outside while I look around in there?"

As team leader, I should never ask something of someone that I'm unwilling to do myself. I shouldn't accept his offer. But I'm going to. "Thanks."

We part ways then, Maxen to the deepest, darkest part of the cave and me back out into the light.

"Birdie, do you copy?" I ask as I shield my eyes against the sun's brightness.

"Right here, and I've got news. One of the phones linked to the call logs just went active. I'm already running a trace and should have a location for you soon."

"That's great, Birdie. As much as we needed to come here, it's been a waste of time. We'll wrap things up and be ready when you get a location."

"You got it."

I turn back to the cave entrance only to see Maxen walking out. "Everything's gone."

"We had to try. Anyway, Birdie's got a lead. Someone connected with that phone has

gone active. Birdie's running a trace now."

Maxen's body stills, every muscle tense and battle ready. "I don't believe it. We need to find this guy before he goes dark again."

We abandon the neglected site, heading for the borrowed truck. Though we get tucked inside, Birdie hasn't yet reported a location on the smuggling associate. We don't know if this guy is to the north, west, or south, or even if he's back across the border. Going in any direction until we have a location would be a waste.

Leaning my head back against the passenger seat, I shut my eyes and picture Brock's sad, smiling face as he held his secret to the end. The memories threaten to be my undoing, so I open my eyes and stare out the window. Can't think about him just now. Have to keep it together. To focus on something else, I say, "I'm betting this guy was under orders to keep that phone dark, if not ditch it altogether."

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“Probably.”

My sat phone rings, and I rush to answer it, placing the call on speaker. “Tell me you found him.”

“I’ve got him. He’s about four hours from your location in Afin.”

Maxen loads the city in the GPS and sets off. Meanwhile, I focus on the intel Birdie can get on the fly. “What can you tell us about the area?”

“Afin is in a small valley surrounded by about a thousand small foothills. Your guy is situated in a hotel on the edge of the city.”

“Get eyes on that hotel and send us everything you’ve got on the city.”

It’s two-thirty local time, and jet lag is a bitch. But we’ve gone a lot longer than twenty-four hours without sleep before. And this is the most important mission of my life.

Since Maxen is driving, I reach back for my bag, retrieving two bottles of water and four protein bars. Handing some water and two of the bars to Maxen, I settle back in my seat again and open the first of my bars.

From my left, a snicker tickles my ears. “What?”

“Nothing. Our first date, our first couples’ trip, and now you’ve made me din—”

Maxen stops at the knife I've unsheathed and now press against his dick. "I wouldn't finish that statement if I were you."

Unconcerned by the cold steel at his nether region, he rears back and laughs. Despite the gravity of our situation, I find myself smiling with him.

Throughout the four-hour trek through the numerous mountain passes, Birdie feeds us intel on our new target. While Maxen doesn't have the advantage of studying the satellite maps she sends, I know his tactical mind. By description alone, somehow, he can grid off an area, constructing a realistic model in his head.

Our target appears to be traveling alone, simplifying our kidnap plans. Making things easier still is the hotel the man chose. The town only has two. The other is in the busiest area, right next to a mosque. We lucked out. The only thing behind our guy's hotel is a tree-covered hillside.

The white building is square-shaped, with no more than two levels, and features an open atrium in the center. Our approach won't be invisible, but by Birdie's account, foot traffic in the area is minimal.

It's nearly dusk when we reach the northwestern extent of the town. Five more minutes pass, and we park along the side of the hotel. We'll have to wait for dark to fall before relocating to the grassy knoll off the southwestern corner of the property. From there, we'll be able to see the front and rear entrances and our guy's window on the first floor.

From our current location, all we can see is the back of the property. That only helps us if the target comes and goes from the hotel through his window. "How long do you figure we have before it's safe to move?"

Maxen cranes his neck to look up through the windshield. "Maybe another half-hour

or—”

“Guys, your target is on the move. His phone is stationary, but I just watched him walk through the atrium on the live satellite feed I’m monitoring. I’ll track his movements as much as I can, but it’ll be too easy to lose him if he goes into any of these covered or connected spaces.”

Maxen pumps his fist, anxious to make some real progress in our investigation. “Let’s go before he vanishes.”

“Wait,” Birdie says. “Conventional wisdom would say to follow the man, but in this case, I think we stand to gain more from his phone.”

I’d be out the door already, but my instincts tell me that Birdie is right.

Seeing my reluctance to move, Maxen doesn’t even try to hide his surprise, instead appealing my decision. “I want this guy, Sadie.”

I’ve got to hand it to him. Unlike most other men I’d worked with in the Marines, he didn’t try to mutiny or force me to see things his way. Though Maxen won’t be happy about it, I’m with Birdie on this one. “He’ll come back. Let’s get his phone for Birdie.”

Maxen’s jaw clenches, but he nods. “You’re the boss.”

Further showing his submission, he pulls out his own phone while leaning over to talk into my speaker, “Birdie, watch him. Sadie, you should probably cover your head, just in case. I’ll update Knot.”

I grab a long, black scarf from my bag for just such occasions. I get all wrapped and covered and scope out the hotel rooms adjacent to our target’s. Time is on our side

right now, as our target is likely seeking dinner before evening prayer time.

With my luck, he's not devout, and we'll still need to hurry. "Your guy has stepped into a little café about a hundred meters from your location."

"Ok. We're switching to radios now. Patch us in and keep an eye on him and us as much as possible," Maxen orders as he exits the truck.

Maxen returns just as I've stepped out of the rugged, old vehicle. He positions his radio inserts in both ears and secures his own head wrap. "I've informed Knot of our plan. He agrees with Birdie's assessment of the phone and is joining her to monitor the situation."

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The two of us set out from our spot in the empty drive, encountering no humans or animals on our path. Our black uniforms stand out against the white plaster of the building, but we haven't seen a soul on this side of the hotel.

The target's window is shut, but Maxen works his knife inside the gap, successfully shoving the latch upward and out of the way.

I've kept an eye on our surroundings, and we're still clear. "We're in," Maxen whispers.

The window slides open with a lot of effort, but thankfully, not much sound. With the opening clear, Maxen stands back to let me enter first.

My feet hit the floor inside without a whisper of sound. Maxen comes in next, just as quiet.

"Oh shit," I hear Birdie say through the radio.

"What?!" I whisper yell.

"Your boy must not have liked the menu. He's leaving the café and is headed back in your direction."

"Dammit. Sadie, let's go."

"Not without this guy's phone. Birdie, stay on him. Maxen, go through the door and set up somewhere you can watch in case this guy is expecting company."



“I’m not leaving you alone. I’ll watch, but I’ll do it right here in this room. Now go find that damned phone!”

“Target taking a different route back to the hotel,” Birdie reports.

“Don’t lose him,” Maxen says as he pulls his gun and takes a sentry position at the door. I jump into action, opening bedside drawers, looking under pillows, and everywhere else. I hit pay dirt when I find a bag underneath the bed. Carefully pulling open the zipper, I peer inside, finding an off-brand smartphone sitting on top of the man’s clothes.

“Birdie, I’ve got a phone here. Can you send an untraceable message to confirm I’ve got the right device?”

“Already on it. You should see something right about... now.”

A message pops up on the screen reading, “Gotcha!”

“This is it. Let’s go, Smoke.”

I zip the bag back up and return it to his hiding place under the bed, hoping it’ll be a while before the guy needs the phone.

“I’ve lost visual of the target under a large awning in an alley access,” Birdie reports.

Maxen heads for the window, looking outside for anyone that might see us. “Find him, Birdie.” To me, he says, “Let’s go, Fate.”

I need to make sure we’re not leaving a trace of our presence, or the guy will sound the alarm to his associates. I smooth out the bed covers, but Maxen is growing anxious. “Fate, move it!”

The room is soon back to the way we found it, and I rush through the opening as Maxen sets a length of dental floss over the window latch. On his order, I shove the sliding pane closed, and he pulls on the floss, lowering the latch into the locked position.

Footsteps echo through the alley beside us, and our only chance at concealment is a row of shrubbery behind the hotel. We make a run for it, vaulting the bush to land in a low crouch on the other side.

“Birdie, check the rear of the hotel. Is this our guy?” I whisper.

“No, and the target hasn’t left the alley. I’ll keep watching the neighboring buildings in case he comes out that way.”

“Copy. We’ll return to the truck to uplink the phone and be ready to move on your command.”

Maxen climbs in behind the wheel again as I pull out my satellite uplink device and plug the phone in. With the push of a button, the phone’s entire hard drive begins uploading to a secure, quarantined server at Knot Corp for Birdie to examine later.

While all this is being set up, Maxen is moving the truck to another part of the city. Likely, closer to where our guy disappeared.

The vehicle stops a short time later, but Maxen doesn’t get out or speak. The uplink screen shows the transfer progress to be almost complete. Maxen sounds strained when he asks, “Birdie, has there been any movement in the alley?”

“None. And your guy hasn’t gone through any of the exits in the buildings flanking that access.”

“I don’t like this,” he says.

The uplink light flashes green. Done. “I don’t either. It’s dark enough now. Let’s go take a look. Birdie, map us to that alley and get back to watching the hotel. It’s possible that we just missed him.”

Maxen seems satisfied that we’re finally going on the hunt. He adjusts my head covering, and the two of us inspect our immediate area before stepping out onto the street. “Here, this way,” Maxen urges.

I walk close to his side in consideration of local customs, though I shouldn’t have worried. Maxen parked in an area with virtually no traffic. We’re at the rear mouth of the alley in minutes.

From this end, we can’t see through to the other side. Lights from the public end only reach about twenty feet under the canopy. Without our night vision goggles, we wait and listen for movement until our eyes adjust enough to see that no one is waiting to ambush us. When no one does, Maxen pulls out a flashlight to inspect the area.

He first checks the walls on either side of the narrow alley, finding no doors to the adjacent buildings. Maxen passes a look my way, one that I take to mean I think Birdie must have just missed our guy.

While it’s possible, I have a little more faith in her abilities, which means something much more sinister is happening here.

I urge Maxen to step deeper into the darkness and scan the ground. The length of the

alley is littered with empty tables, crates, and a few garbage bins. In the daytime, this alley must serve as a marketplace. It's completely abandoned after dark.

Halfway to the front, Maxen freezes with his beam on a large stack of wooden crates. "Shit."

We just found our guy... with a big-ass hole in his gut.

"Well, all I can say is that I hope that guy's phone is a fucking gold mine."

Maxen turns on his heel, leaving me to check the guy for a wallet or anything else that might be useful. The guy has nothing on him except local currency. "Birdie, we found our guy. Somebody else got to him first, though."

"I'm sorry, Sadie."

"Don't be. He probably wouldn't have told us anything, and we would have wasted hours trying. I believed it before, and I still do, that his phone is our best chance at good intel."

"I'll get right on it. You two, go find a place to rest for the night."

Birdie disconnects, and I call up the fingerprint scanner on my phone, documenting the dead man's right and left prints. I use the camera to get a shot of his face and then collect a hair sample. With nothing more I can do here, I clear the area before someone happens by.

Maxen is leaning against the wall around the corner when I step out of the alley. His frustration at losing a mark is written all over his face. I don't know if I expect an I told you so moment or what, but for now, he's keeping his thoughts to himself.

Despite his disapproval of how things turned out, I don't engage. I made the best call I could based on the manpower and intel available to me, and I won't apologize for it.

At the same time, I know I'm not infallible. If history shows my decision to be a mistake, I'll own up to it. I only hope my choices don't end up hurting Aaron's chances.

Maxen pushes off the wall as I approach, and we walk back to the vehicle in silence. It isn't until we're inside that someone finally speaks. Maxen's voice is tight when he suggests, "We should go back and get our guy's shit from his room, get some food, and then find a place to sleep."

"There's one more hotel in town, and any of these cafes will work," I reply softly.

After retrieving the dead man's bag, we drive to the hotel on the other side of the city, and Maxen goes inside to check in. He returns to the truck minutes later with one key. We get settled in a single room and agree it would be better if I weren't seen outside for the rest of the night. Female military types tend to stand out.

Maxen doesn't have any jokes for me about going to pick up food for us, another sign that he's not happy about losing our target. And that's what you get for mixing business with pleasure.

Once Maxen leaves, I take my bag into the bathroom for a shower. The hot water washes away the sand and dirt but fails to rid me of a pervading sense of wrongness weighing me down.

The feeling is still with me as I braid my damp hair and pull on an oversized Marines t-shirt. In a battlefield situation, I'd stop and evaluate my surroundings, targets, and supposed innocuous persons for anything I might have missed or for the enemy hiding in plain sight.

My current situation is not so simple. I'm living in a house of cards. One wrong move, by either of us, would be enough to bring the whole thing crashing down, Aaron right along with it. I won't ignore my intuition, but I will remain focused like any good Marine.

I glance down at my shirt, the Marine insignia bringing Aaron to mind. I'm worried. For as long as we've worked together, his logic and confidence have always served to temper my concern. That I haven't spoken to him in two days is not normal. Not only am I worried about his future should I fuck up, I miss my friend.

Grabbing my phone, I turn out all the lights and step out onto the balcony. My first message is to Knot.

I'm afraid I fucked up today.

It's early in Virginia, but I don't wait long for his reply. You put your trust in your team and made a call. If you'd had more people, you would have sent a team after the target while you secured the phone. No one could have known this guy had a second target on his back. Stop second-guessing yourself.

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I know he's right. I've just got to get over myself. My thumbs furiously peck out another message. Has Aaron contacted you?

I'm managing things on this side of the planet. You handle things over there.

He's managing things... He's heard from Aaron, meaning Aaron is getting his messages. I just don't know how since he'd have his phone off to keep it from being traced.

I turn the phone over in my hand a few times before opening the encrypted messaging app and calling up Aaron's thread to test my theory. You should be here. We should be working together. My phone clicks with each letter entered, but in the end, I clear out every word. The message I end up sending is a simple one. I miss my friend.

Expecting Maxen to return any minute, I go back inside, securing the balcony door and turning the lights back on. I'm perched on the bed with my knees drawn up when a knock sounds at the door. After confirming it's Maxen, I unlatch the chain and let him in.

He produces two plates of Persian kebabs and rice that we both scarf down like it's our last meal. Conversation is nil during dinner, and afterward, Maxen goes to take a shower.

I check my phone one last time in case Aaron replied to my message. My text still shows as sent. Not delivered or read, just sent. Sighing, I set the phone down and burrow under the covers.

I must doze off, as I'm startled awake when Maxen slides into bed. I'm stunned when Maxen slips his arm around my waist and pulls me against his chest.

"You haven't written me off for making a wrong decision?"

Maxen's five o'clock shadow scrubs against my shoulder. "Me being pissed about losing our target doesn't mean that I think you made a wrong decision. As much as I hate to admit it, had we gone after the guy first, his killer might have gotten to his phone. The phone would be an easier nut to crack than a terrorist."

He leans up to turn off the lamp and presses his lips to the top of my head. "Now, get some sleep."

During the night, I dream of gunfire, dark caves, and watching Brock die all over again. It's only Aaron's voice that pulls me from the nightmare. I've got you, Mein Engel.

My eyes fly open to stare at the wall, pulling me from the dream world. Aaron's words are unfamiliar to me. I don't recall hearing them in that cave. All I remember is the screaming in my head. Being held tight by someone seems right, as if it might have happened, but I can't be sure. Not that any of it matters now.

Maxen shifts, rolling over to face away from me. With his arm no longer wrapped around me, I climb out of bed, grab my phone, and sit on the only chair in the room. I still haven't received a reply from Aaron, not that I expected to get one.

The murmured words from my dream seem more real now that I'm awake, as though they were more of a memory surfacing in my sleep. Aaron had never called me that before. I'm pretty sure it's German, a language I don't speak. I could look up the translation, but I'd rather wait and ask Aaron.



With Aaron on my mind, I open the messaging app for another futile attempt at reaching out. Are you safe, at least?

Over the next few minutes, I send him several messages outlining our progress on the Iranian side of the investigation. Even though Aaron isn't here, imagining him somehow reading this calms the rage in my mind.

After sending one final message, I place my phone face down on my bare leg and lean against the chair to stare out the window at the dying moon. I'm working out our next move when my phone vibrates an alert. Expecting the message to be from Birdie with an update, I open messages to see an incoming text from an unknown number.

The text reads I miss my friend.

My heart swells at hearing from him. We've never gone this long without speaking, even when one of us was away visiting family. Being separated is harder than I could have imagined.

Aaron's message lights a fire under my ass. For the next little while, I surf US news sites, relieved that his manhunt hasn't gone mainstream yet. I won't even bother wondering why. Next, I message Birdie for any news on the phone we retrieved.

The phone was a great find. I found a long message thread with one contact. I've been translating the texts for hours. The dead guy was in logistics. Our new target installed lights. Most recent messages revolve around scouting for a new location. They need something out of their network because of the raids.

This is the break we needed. I message back. Great work. Keep me posted.

I get up and walk back to the bed, waking Maxen when I climb back in. "Any news?"

“Yeah. Birdie’s got a lead on a new target and their plans. She’ll let us know as soon as she’s got something more concrete.”

“Sadie, I don’t know what finding these guys will accomplish. It’s not like we have the manpower to invade and capture them. Even if we managed to get our hands on this new target, we probably wouldn’t get anything out of him. You said that yourself.”

“I owe it to Aaron to try. No one else is going to. Besides, I’m not above asking the Army for help. I’d gladly turn over our intel and our target if it means someone will collar these assholes. At least then, we could use it as leverage to get the feds to look for evidence to clear Aaron.”

“All right. Let’s get a few more hours of sleep, and hopefully, Birdie will have more information by the time we get up.”

Maxen’s hand goes to my hip, and I let him pull me against him as he did earlier. Sleep doesn’t come as easily this time, but Aaron’s whispered words eventually pull me back under.

I’ve got you, Mein Engel.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:34 am*

Morning brings with it the anticipated text update from Birdie. The location scouting report lists three places. I hacked the guy's phone and turned on location services. I've got him near one of the places listed. Sending you the coordinates now.

Maxen is pulling on his pants when I look up. "We've got a location."

He glances over and grins. "Then let's ride."

We dress and gather our stuff in a hurry, anxious to find the next piece of the puzzle. There's no guarantee, but I'm convinced that we'll eventually get a lead on the American asshole involved through this guy.

Birdie's coordinates point to a town about ninety minutes north. "With this new target being in logistics, the new location probably isn't ready yet, and we've only one guy to deal with."

Maxen agrees. "I like our chances then."

Near the end of the trip, Maxen says, "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

I snicker. "What could be more personal than your face between my legs?"

Seeing that he isn't laughing, I dry up and answer, "I guess it's ok."

"Why have you and Aaron never...?"

Maxen's question catches me off guard. First of all, because of why he might be

asking. Second of all, because I've never thought about it. Well, I never thought about it past the moment I noticed his wedding band. "Um. Aaron was married when we met in basic training. Not that any recruit has the time or energy, but he was unavailable.

"By the time Aaron's wife divorced him, all our focus was on the Corps, making it to the Raiders. We depended on each other to stay alive for years after. There just wasn't room for anything else."

"But you weren't celibate."

Voice a little tight, I explain, "I'm not talking about sex, Maxen. When I wanted sex, I went out and found it. No complications. Nothing I had to make room for."

Maxen's next question is asked quietly. "Did you ever have sex with Aaron?"

"No," I answer, louder than necessary. "Aaron wasn't disposable. And in my mind, I guess I still saw him as a married man. What's this all about, anyway?"

"I'm just curious. Honestly, I don't see how a man could spend any length of time with you and not fall head over heels in love."

My throat seems to squeeze shut at his words. He's not saying...

Fucking Maxen and dating Maxen are one thing, but love is something else. It's too soon, but could I see myself loving this man? The truth is... I don't know.

"Sadie?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Maxen. I'm me, not a man. I do know that now is not the time for this. I need my head on straight for more reasons than just to

keep my ass alive.”

Annoyed with the timing of his questions, if not the subject of them, I turn my eyes forward again and set up radio communications with Birdie. Is this me running and hiding? Maybe. Do I care? Hell no. “Talk me through what we’re walking into, Birdie.”

She describes a town located at the base of another tall, narrow rock face. Another damned cave. This one can’t be too big as the rock containing it is a small one at the end of a mountain chain. “The entrance is about three hundred yards from the busiest part of town. And trees. There must be a spring in the cave, as a copse of trees shields most of the space between the buildings and the small mountain. There’s a second grouping of trees on the eastern side along a small creek. The creek indicates a rear access, but I have no line of sight to confirm this. I can report zero activity on that side. Fortunately, I have about a fifty-foot clearing in front of the cave to monitor activity on the city side. Only one person has shown up during my time monitoring the area. He was only in there for a short time before he came back out and left.”

“I’m guessing it was recon. He’ll be back to set up shop.”

“Or we could be wrong, and our guy will move on,” Maxen says.

“Whether he does or he doesn’t, we’ll be one step closer to him.”

Before long, Maxen is pulling up beside the building closest to the tree line. We’re hidden from foot traffic on the street but would probably be noticed if we stayed here for too long. For a while at least, we’ll watch the path through the trees and the area closest to it since it’s the only place on this side of the rock that Birdie can’t monitor.

Two hours pass, and our guy hasn’t returned yet. I call Birdie for an update. “Birdie, tell me we haven’t wasted four hours on this shithole town.”

“You haven’t. I’m watching the guy’s phone. He’s in town gathering supplies. You’re in the right place.”

Maxen leans in and asks, “Birdie, have you seen anyone meeting up with our guy? Maybe someone going to some of the same places he is?”

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“No. Your man is working solo. I’ll contact you when he starts back toward the cave.”

“Thanks, Birdie.”

“We’re going to need to wait until dark to make our move,” Maxen points out.

I glance down at my watch. Hmm. Six hours before dusk. “That’s a hell of a long time for the game to change.”

“I prefer to think that gives us a hell of a long time to... prepare,” he says with a wink.

I roll my eyes as Maxen cranks the engine. He drives around the city until stopping beside a roadside food stand near the outer boundary. In perfect Farsi, he orders food and pulls away as soon as it’s delivered.

With food in hand, I’m instructed to find a hotel for us to hide out in for the rest of the daylight hours. Of the three here, I pick the one closest to the cave’s entrance.

I don my scarf again, making sure my arms are covered. This town has a heavy presence of religious law enforcers compared to the last settlement. For this reason, I’m even more careful to remain unseen.

Maxen carries all the gear, and I take the food. Now, all we have to do is wait.

We scarf down the shawarma wraps, and Maxen gets on the floor to do some

pushups. Needing to do something with my own muscles, I sit on the bed to do some stretching.

“What are your plans, Sadie?”

“Plans?”

“Yeah. What does the future look like for Sadie “Fate” Phelps?”

I stop stretching and stare at Maxen’s muscled back, rising and lowering in perfect form. “I like where I am. This is all I’ve ever wanted to do. I guess I’ll do it as long as I can. When it’s time to retire from fieldwork, I’d like to become the next generation’s Spatch.”

Maxen freezes and shudders. “That’ll give me nightmares.”

I bend at the waist, grabbing my feet. “What about you?”

“Well, that depends on the reason,” he answers without stopping his pushups.

“Huh?”

“The reason. My reason for staying or going. The bureaucrats in the Army gave me a reason to leave the Unit. Knot gave me a reason to join his company. I figure I’ll stay until I have a reason to leave. Right now, you’re a good reason to hang around.”

Ignoring the tingle in my cheeks, I resume stretching, facing away toward the bathroom door. “What about your desires? What drives you?” I ask in return.

I lift my chest off the bed in a snake pose, and a firm hand grasps my hands, where they’re joined behind my back. “My desires revolve around a certain redhead and my



ability to make her scream.”

Maxen turns my head, taking my lips and making the most of my trapped hands to pull my shirt from my pants. That hand manages to undress me below the waist and then dips down between my legs to tease my clit, all while I’m trapped on my stomach.

Not once does his gaze leave mine. The silver specs in his eyes seem to sparkle and dance the more turned on he becomes. There exists a mystery behind those dark blue irises. Something dangerous and thrilling but otherwise lost to me. Maxen grins as though he’s challenging me to see it but knows I can’t.

I don’t like playing these games.

Even though Maxen has me close to orgasm, I roll out of his grip, pull my hands free, and shove him to his back. If we’re going to play a game, then we’ll play by my rules this time.

My shirt and bra are pulled off and tossed to the floor, and then I undo Maxen’s belt and pants, freeing his thick cock. Fisting him in both hands, I pump his shaft and move to straddle his middle in reverse. Next, I inch toward his boots until the head of his cock is at my clit.

Sliding forward and back, I use Maxen’s body to bring me to orgasm. While this isn’t the most intimate position, I don’t have to worry about Maxen teasing me with his knowing eyes or roguish smile. As the first tendrils of lightning curl through my body, I brace my hands on his shins and arch my back.

Only after the pulsating aftershocks end do I move again, and only far enough to line up the head of his cock with my entrance. I don’t slam my body down, choosing to tease and torture him as he did me. Firm hands grip my hips but don’t try to force me

to take him inside.

Ever so slowly, I rock my body backward an inch, pulling right back off a second later. After doing this several times, Maxen's upper half springs upward, and he grabs my braid, forcing me to sit upright on his lap. He shoves me down, impaling me all at once. One hand wraps around me to cup my breast, and the other goes to my slit, touching the spot where he and I connect.

Across the room, our reflections are partially visible in the mirror through the open door of the bathroom. The image is one I won't soon forget. Apparently, that's the point, Maxen proves as he growls in my ear. "You'll never be able to bare your skin again without feeling my touch everywhere."

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He pulls almost all the way out and shoves back in before stopping altogether. I push against him to make him move, but steely arms hold me still. Keeping me locked in place, Maxen slides a hand down to strum my clit while his other hand pinches and tugs on my nipples. He doesn't release me or stop until I'm shaking with the force of a powerful orgasm. Then he stands, carrying me straight into the bathroom. I throw out my hands when he shoves me forward, supporting myself on the vanity counter.

Maxen returns his hands to my hips, holding me off the floor, and begins thrusting. I drop my head, but he stops, grips my braid, and yanks. "No, you watch as I ruin you for all others."

He's still fully dressed and looking very much like a dark angel as he roughly claims my body. Maxen is back in total control, and I'm just along for the ride.

"You're mine, Sadie," he says, his voice gruff and primal.

Trapped in his spell, I can't agree or disagree. I can only hold on as he drives into my body with all the gentleness of a Sherman tank.

Maxen thrusts forward several more times before going stiff and spilling himself inside me. His grip on my hips tightens to the point of pain as he groans through his climax. Only then are my feet allowed to touch the floor. Maxen slips out, and it takes all my concentration to keep from crumpling to the cold tile

The echo of possessiveness in Maxen's words causes me to shudder. I drop my head, unable to withstand the intensity pouring off him. He meant what he said. That he would be so sure of me is arousing but, at the same time, terrifying.

I'm not afraid of commitment. I just don't think I'm ready for it. Or maybe just not with Maxen. I think the inner bitch harpy is right... for once. Perhaps, I am holding back. I only wish I understood why.

Wanting to avoid discussing Maxen's heated claim, I reach over and turn on the shower. "I think I'm going to clean up. Why don't you go check in with Birdie."

Maxen runs a heavy hand down my spine and nods, leaving me in the privacy of the bathroom. I stand up and lean against the door, tipping my head back and closing my eyes for a moment.

To say that I'm overwhelmed is an understatement. After my brief check out, I step into the shower, using only water and my hands to scrub down. I could have gone back out to get my bag, but I didn't want Maxen to read my mind like he always seems able to do.

Once I finish and dry off, I wrap the towel around me and walk out to put on clean clothes. Maxen looks up from his phone and winks, returning his attention to his screen just as quickly. If he has any clue about what's going on in my head, he's not worried.

I pull on everything but my boots and lie down as if to get a few hours of sleep before we set out for the cave. Ten minutes in, I'm finding it impossible to relax. You're mine, Sadie. Three words from Maxen have me freaked the hell out. Am I ready for this?

Despite my turbulent thoughts, I somehow fall asleep, though my rest is disjointed at best.

The light in the room has dimmed significantly when I open my eyes again. It's growing late, meaning it's close to go time. I sit up and scan the room, finding Maxen

where he was when I came out of the shower.

“Feel better?” he asks.

I avoid meeting his eyes, and with a nod, I scrub a hand over my face and smooth down my frazzled hair.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m not trying to tie you down. But now, you know how I feel, at least.”

“Look, Maxen. My focus is too divided right now to handle something so monumental. Let’s get through this mess, and then we’ll have all the time in the world to explore this thing between us.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Good.”

The two of us repack all our stuff, separating our mission gear into wearable packs. We’ll wait to load out until reaching the edge of the forest in case anyone is milling about near the edge of town. “Birdie says our guy came back, driving right up to the mouth of the cave and unloading a shit ton of supplies. He’s still alone.”

The news works like a shot in the arm. I’m juiced and ready to go. “That confirms the smugglers aren’t too far behind. Let’s go nail this guy. With any luck, we’ll clear Aaron and get the Army back on our side again.”

We’re loaded up and on the move in under two minutes. Maxen drives while I check in with Birdie. He takes a meandering path toward a new stakeout location to avoid being noticed.

“Birdie, any change?”

“Nothing. No new arrivals, and your guy is still there.”

I take a deep breath, knowing it’s time to make our move. We situate our radios, even though they won’t work in the cave. “Ok, Birdie. I won’t commit to regular check-ins this time. When or whether you hear from me will depend on how long it takes us to pin our guy down. I’ll check in when I can. Stand by in case one of us reaches out.”

“You’ve got it.”

I pull on my body armor and a long sleeve black shirt, and then I slip gloves on my hands and a balaclava over my head.

Maxen is dressed similarly by the time I step out of the truck. He rounds the hood to my side, and we activate our night vision monocles. “You ready for this?” he asks.

“I’m ready.”

Maxen guards my six as we move like ghosts through the trees. A small amount of moonlight pierces the thick canopy, made lush by the mountain spring. We stick close enough to the dirt road that we won’t miss any newcomers. Otherwise, we’re invisible to the town and anyone in the cave.

About fifty yards from the clearing at the rock face, we run across materials to make a trip wire warning system. I point it out to Maxen, who forms up with me. “If we’re lucky, we’re getting to him before any anti-intruder measures are in place.”

He pats my back and turns toward our objective again. “Let’s keep moving.”

We cover the last fifty yards to the tree line, pausing briefly before sprinting to our terrorist homemaker’s van. I peer through the side windows to see if I can get an idea of the weapons our guy may be packing. “Shit. He’s unloaded everything already. He could have cotton balls, a lion, or a small nuke in there, and we wouldn’t know it.”

“Come on,” Maxen tuts. “Birdie watched this guy’s every move without him having a clue. If he had anything we needed to know about, we’d know about it.”

His point is valid, so I step around the back of the truck to study the rocky arch entrance. A generator sits just outside, the noise of its engine masking anything going on inside the cave. In the artificial light, our blackout gear is no longer helpful. We strip off the coverings, leaving our body armor on, and shove the rest into our packs along with our NV scopes.

Maxen peers around me at the entrance. Like me, all he can see from here is a string of lights on the ground stretching into the mountain. I'm guessing this setup is temporary until mounts can be positioned in whatever caverns are inside.

We check our weapons one last time before stepping out from behind the truck. I watch the opening for a while to ensure our guy isn't in sight and then signal advance. We reach the right side of the entrance, where I check the tunnel with a mirror—no sign of our guy.

The passage is about ten feet high, four feet wide, and full of jutting rock formations. The lights along the ground shining upward cast gnarly shadows on the ceiling. I have no idea what's behind this first tunnel, as about thirty feet inside the mountain, the path continues around a bend.

“What do you think?” Maxen asks over the rumble of the generator.

“Beyond thirty feet is a blind spot, and thanks to the generator, we won't hear him coming.”

“Any places to hide?”

“None.”

Maxen picks up a loose stone and rolls it around in his hand. “I'm going to try something.”

He moves to stand in the mouth of the cave, throwing the rock inside and immediately diving out of sight. The two of us freeze and watch the image in the small mirror. A full fifteen seconds pass with no reaction from inside.

“Guess that means it's safe.”



“Maybe, but I’m taking point anyway,” he insists.

We both step inside the tunnel, and Maxen moves ahead of me with a lethal grace I can’t match. We stop at the bend and repeat the process, this time looking into a relatively large cavern.

More lights are strung along the ground in this area, but some have already been attached to tripods set to a height of about seven feet. A quick scan of the hollow finds our guy to be missing, but the lights continue through one of the three additional passages that lead from this room.

Whatever he’s doing, he’s not loud enough to be heard over a small waterfall nearby. Maxen gestures to the lit tunnel. “At least we know which way he went.”

He steps out in front again and follows the string of lights. This tunnel is long and winding, sometimes becoming low enough that we have to stoop. It must lead to a hollow large enough to be useful, or our guy wouldn’t have wasted his time stringing lights through it.

The sounds of the falls become louder the deeper we go. The steady stream of water splashing into a pool below would typically be a peaceful thing to listen to, but it hides the enemy from me.

About sixty feet in, the lights shut off, plunging the tunnel into darkness. Oh shit. Our NV won’t work in conditions with no visible or infrared light, so I stop to get a light out of my bag.

Ahead of me, Maxen yells in pain, his cry followed by three rapid shots from his gun. The lights come on again just a few heartbeats later, revealing a body face down on the ground. In one hand is a large knife stained red.

Maxen is also on the ground, sitting against the tunnel wall. A rapid examination of his condition finds bloody hands pressing against his left thigh and his gun on the stone floor next to him. “Oh, shit.”

“I’m sorry, Sadie. He’s dead, isn’t he.”

He’s bleeding and thinks I’m worried about losing the asshole that stabbed him. “Don’t worry about him. Let’s get that leg fixed,” I say as I reach back into my pack for my bag of medical supplies.

I get my hands on the bag and pull it out, only for Maxen to take it from me. A frown creases his forehead, and his voice is soft, resigned. “I’ve got the leg. You need to contact Knot. We don’t know how far out this bastard’s friends are, and I think he hit...” Maxen’s voice fades out as he looks pointedly at his leg. A lot of blood is seeping through his fingers, but I shake my head anyway. “You are not dying on me.”

Though I don’t want to leave him, our target is dead, and Maxen is right about Knot. I remove his body armor, pull the belt free, and use it for a tourniquet. “Hold this tight,” I tell him after wrapping it around his thigh.

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Next, I pull out his flashlight and press my lips to his in a brief kiss before turning and running toward the cave entrance.

In a flurry of motion, I yank my phone out and call Birdie the instant I shoot out of the cave opening.

“Did you get—”

“Birdie, we’re fucked!” I interrupt her. “We may have been set up. The target got the drop on us after killing the lights, and Maxen took a knife to the leg. There’s so much blood, I’m thinking he hit an artery.”

Instead of Birdie, Knot’s thunderous voice breaks in. “Is he secure? Where’s the target?”

“Dead. Maxen got three shots off before the lights came back on. I had to leave him alone inside to contact you.”

Knot is nearly frantic when he hands down orders for me. “Sadie, I want you to listen to me. Get back inside and try to help Gates out of the cave. If he loses consciousness due to blood loss... you leave him. Get your ass away from there. Do you hear me?”

“But... I—”

“You know as well as I do, there’s nothing you can do to save him if he’s that far gone, and I don’t want to risk you still being there when the others show up.”

“Do you have intel bringing them here?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time. And we won’t see anyone coming until it’s too late. Now go. Do what I say.”

I don’t answer fast enough, and Dillan Knot does something he’s never done before. He raises his voice to me. “Dammit, Sadie. That’s an order!”

My voice cracks when I answer, “Yes, sir,” though I don’t know if I’ll be able to leave Maxen behind.

With no further words needed, I hang up and rush back into the cave. I find Maxen leaning against the wall just outside the long tunnel where the attack happened. There’s a pool of blood under his left boot, and his eyes are closed.

I don’t know what he was thinking or how in god’s name he’s even on his feet. “What are you doing?!” I bark as I drop to my knees in front of him.

Pulling my first aid bag from where it’s tucked under his arm, I call up my medical training for a bit of field surgery. I may or may not be able to stop the bleeding, but I’ll be damned if I don’t try. And so will he.

“I can’t die, pretty Sadie,” his voice slurs as I begin unwrapping the long straps keeping pressure on the bandage.

“If I did, your sweet pussy would weep.”

A laugh bubbles out through my panic, and I peel the bandage off to inspect the wound. I’m searching for the hole in Maxen’s pants when he says, “Because once you’ve had world-class dick, all the rest are just average.”

My hands freeze as I struggle to process what I just heard. “What did you just say?”

“World. Class. Dick. You know. What I’ve been giving you.”

His words are even more slurred as he throws mine back at me, words that were spoken in jest during a private conversation with Knot in his Escalade. Why Knot would have shared that with Maxen is a mystery to me. I shove that worry into the background and focus on saving Maxen’s life.

I pull my knife from its sheath and cut away his pants, thinking the fabric held as the dull blade gouged into his flesh. With the pants cut away, shaking fingers probe the bloody mess.

“Maxen... where? I can’t find a wound.”

With a voice no longer slurred, he answers, “That’s because there isn’t one.”

My brittle heart shatters as realization dawns—that sense of worry, the wrongness. My sixth sense had been screaming at me, but I’d attributed it to this whole clusterfuck of a mess.

Maxen is the asshole behind all of this. That means he’s the son of a bitch that killed Brock. I slide my hand back slowly and draw my gun, prepared to end his life or die trying, but I never get the chance.

Maxen reaches down, grabbing me by the throat with one hand and catching my gun hand with the other. I’m lifted off the stone floor and slammed against the cave wall. My feet dangle above the ground, and Maxen presses himself against me to ward off any kicks I might launch.

I use his proximity and my free hand to grope around his belt, looking for any

weapon he has on him. He must have anticipated me, as there's nothing useful to grab. Maxen shoves his groin against my hand. "You just can't get enough of me, can you?"

"Fuck you, asshole!"

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His eyes dance in amusement. “You did, remember? Several times.”

With his crotch within my reach, I grab hold and squeeze. Maxen tightens his fingers around my throat in answer, cutting off my air. Choosing life over revenge, I let go of him and reach up to try and pry his fingers off my neck. At the same time, I’m attempting to pull my right hand from his grip.

Spots dance in my vision, and Maxen begins slamming my wrist against the stone wall to dislodge the gun from my grasp. Only when the pistol clatters to the ground does his grip on my throat ease.

I cough and gasp for air, but my reprieve doesn’t last long. Maxen spins and tosses me against the opposite stone wall. The impact is jarring, with several large rocks gouging into me, some breaking the skin.

Body racked with pain from the harsh landing, I’m slow to push up onto my hands and knees. “So, guess you’re going to kill me now.”

“It’s a shame, too. You’re a great lay. Unfortunately, you’re part of my escape plan, which you set up beautifully. I followed you just close enough to keep in radio range. Thanks to my supply of theatre blood and your performance, Knot probably thinks I’m already dead. He’s probably also thinking you’ll sacrifice yourself to protect me. When he finds your broken body near the falls, he’ll assume the terrorists killed you and sent my corpse downriver.”

I ball my hands into fists in the dirt, cursing myself for not seeing this coming. How did I miss this? How did Knot? Why the hell is this even happening? “Tell me one

thing. How long have you been the Guard Corps' bitch?"

Maxen's air of superiority returns. "I'm nobody's bitch. These guys want to keep their cash. I use my many contacts on both sides to help them do it and am rewarded handsomely."

"You fucking killed Brock, framed Aaron, and are about to kill me for blood money?"

"No, I killed Brock because the stupid asshole we found in the cave called out my name. I couldn't let Brock blow the whistle on me. I framed Aaron because I hate the asshole. You are the only part I regret."

Maxen steps closer to me. "Now, I need this to look real, so I'm afraid you're going to take one hell of a beating."

"You're a fucking monster."

"No. If I were a monster, I'd let my friend in the cave have you. He'd do a lot worse before he killed you. Lucky for you, I'm a jealous bastard and don't want anyone else touching what's mine."

He pulls a knife from behind his back as he continues his slow approach. "Now, fight me, Sadie. I won't be fucking around this time."

His eyes are calculating and cold, daring me to attack. I still can't beat him, and we both know it. I need a weapon. My pack is still in the tunnel where I left it after thinking Maxen had been stabbed, my knife is discarded several feet away, and now, Maxen stands between me and my gun.

With no weapons, nowhere to run, and virtually no chance to walk out of this cave, I



should give up and pray for a quick death. Too bad I've always been a stubborn bitch.

I scramble backward, spinning to my feet after gathering as many decent-sized rocks as possible. One by one, in rapid succession, I throw them at Maxen, aiming for his head. None make solid contact, but I didn't expect them to.

The attack was meant to put him on defense and allow me to work around him, getting closer to my gun and the cave's exit.

I run out of rocks long before I'm close to either of my targets, and Maxen lunges. The knife slices across my shoulder, but my dive roll saves me from a more severe wound.

Coming out of the roll, I reach for my knife, but Maxen grabs my ankle and pulls, dragging me just out of range. Fingernails rip and break as I fight for purchase, but the unforgiving ground has no holds to grab onto.

I'm nowhere near ready to give up, so I roll over and kick out with my other foot, dislodging his fingers. Then, I scramble back to my feet and dive for the knife again. My gun would be better, but I hope to, at least, slow him down with my blade.

Executing a spin, I reach for the knife and come up ready to throw. The cold steel flies, burying itself in Maxen's bicep. He roars, pulls out the seven-inch blade, and then comes barreling at me with a knife in each hand. The knives scissor in the air, catching me on my arms as I throw up a block to protect my face.

The slices burn like fire across my skin, but I refuse to quit. I drop to the ground and tangle my legs in his, sending Maxen somersaulting over my head. Seeing a rock the size of a small melon nearby, I grab it and hoist it over my head, planning to slam it down against his skull.

Maxen rolls away at the last second, stabbing upward as he does. His knife enters my hip, the tip lodging in bone. I drop the stone, which lands on his stomach. Needing to protect my vital organs, I spin away to avoid another strike, feeling the tip of Maxen's blade snap off in my hip.

The pain is excruciating. Maxen snaps to his feet, catching me with a kick to the middle as I crawl toward my gun.

Using his boot, he rolls me over and lowers to straddle my bloody stomach. My gun is mere inches from my fingertips, and I refuse to stop reaching. Maxen slams his fist down on my forearm arm, where it's stretched over a rock. Both bones snap, the sound echoing off the cavern walls. For a moment, all my body knows is immense pain, causing me to scream out.

"That's enough, Sadie," he says, breathing heavily.

"What's the matter, Maxen? You too much of a pussy to go ten rounds with a woman?"

His response is to throw a punch, slamming it into my face. Blood pours down my throat from my broken nose. I turn to the side to spit it out so I can breathe. Movement from the entry tunnel catches my eye, and I think I must be going crazy. I'd almost swear I just saw Sambi's ugly ass shoes beneath a small stone projection.

It's probably just a concussion and blood loss making me see things. I turn back to Maxen, glaring as my left hand reaches for his boot and the knife I know he carries there.

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I'm about to die, but if I'm going to, I'm determined to take this asshole with me. "Maxen, I hate to tell you this, but I don't think it's going to work out between us."

He chuckles and leans forward to press a kiss on my forehead. Now's my shot.

I get enough of a grip on the hidden dagger to pull it free and slam it into his side. Maxen howls, pulling out the blade and shoving it into my left shoulder. I scream as he pulls it free and presses it against my throat.

"Goodbye, Sadie. Though you were never going to win, you put up a hell of a fight."

"Drop the knife!" a familiar voice commands from the tunnel.

Maxen and I look in that direction, and the move burrows the blade into my skin. My vision is swimming, but I'd swear Aaron just stepped into the cavern and is now leveling his carbine at Maxen's chest. "I said drop the knife!"

"Well, if it isn't our little boy scout. Mr. Nobility. I'd say I'm surprised to see you here, but with the way you've been up Sadie's ass for the last decade, I guess not."

Aaron looks like a death angel, fury emblazoned on his face. "Get off her, Gates. I'd hate to bathe her in your blood when I blow your fucking head off."

The knife cuts deeper into my neck, making me whimper. "I think you should throw down your gun instead. We both know you will. You'd sacrifice anything for Sadie here, wouldn't you?"

Maxen looks down at me again, grinning like a madman. “Did you know that about our boy, Sadie? He thinks himself a martyr. He’s been pining for you for so long, but you never even noticed.”

“Shut your mouth, Smoke,” Aaron seethes.

“No, really. How does it feel, Grim? You gave up your marriage for a woman, wanted her for years, and then found out that she’s been fucking me. Emasculating, isn’t it? It was a hell of a lot of fun rubbing your face in it too.”

“Stop,” I beg weakly.

“What’s the matter, Fate? Don’t like me shattering your Make Believe life? You’d rather Just Pretend those closest to you haven’t been lying all these years. I bet you didn’t know what Grim’s been hiding all this time. His wife didn’t request a divorce, as he told you. When you two were stationed together, she wanted him to transfer.

“She already knew what you’re too naive to see. Aaron chose you over his wife and divorced her. That’s what’s been the best part of all this. Taking from Grim the one thing he wanted most in this world.”

Tears begin streaming from my eyes, mixing with the blood and the dirt. “Why?”

“Why? Knot pays well, but who could pass up an opportunity like this? You asked what drives me, Sadie. The simple answer is, I do. The US gave away more than a billion dollars to the very terrorists I fought my whole life against. I figured I was due a cut of that. Besides, if the US wants to be friends with these guys, who am I to say boo?

“If you’re asking about why Aaron, that’s much baser. A little bug told me that your boy was spilling some bad feelings to Knot about me. The same kind of bug that

heard your conversation with Knot about Avara.”

The flower he put in my hair. My eyes sag closed, and my body goes limp under Maxen’s weight.

“Since everyone at Knot Corp but you knows that Aaron worships the ground you walk on, Knot likely passed off his concerns as jealousy. I sure as hell made it clear to everyone there that I had intentions where you’re concerned.”

“It was you. You killed Avara.”

“Not exactly. If you remember, you were sucking my cock right about the time Avara was killed.”

“Please stop,” I sob, squeezing my eyes shut.

At this point, I don’t know where Aaron is or what he’s doing. The only things I’m sure of are that Maxen isn’t going to let me walk out of here, and Aaron will blow his head off as soon as that knife severs my carotid. And live with this nightmare for the rest of his life.

Having made his point and done enough damage, Maxen goes back to negotiating with Aaron. “So... we’re at a bit of an impasse here. The way I see it, you can either carry both Sadie and me out in body bags, or all three of us can walk away from this cave.”

“I don’t plan on ever letting you see the sun again,” Aaron threatens.

“Hmm, then maybe I should slit her throat now. When I die, at least I’ll go knowing I’ve destroyed you too.”

He pushes onto his knees, straddling my hips while keeping pressure on the knife at my neck. “Actually, I think that’s the way to go.”

Maxen grabs my hair with his free hand, pulling me off the cave floor. I bite my lip as my broken arm drags across the ground, and the wounds covering my body make it difficult to stand on my own strength. The blade never leaves my throat as Maxen wraps an arm around my waist and begins walking backward toward the tunnel that passes by the falls. He’d only be doing this if he knew there was a back entrance.

Aaron follows, never once lowering his gun. My shame pains me as I look into his eyes. All at once, I read the fear, hurt, and longing there. That were always there. There’s so much I wish I could say that I’ll never get the chance to. All I can do is try to ensure that Aaron will live. My voice cracks as I beg, “You need to leave while you still can. He probably has help deep in the cave.”

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Aaron gives a tight shake of his head. "I'm not leaving you, so don't ask again."

Another tear slips out, and I want to beg him, knowing he won't listen. To Maxen, I ask, "Did you even kill our target?"

Maxen pulls me through the narrowest part of the passage, slamming my broken arm against a small outcropping. I hiss in agony as Maxen answers, "Of course not. Those were blanks I shot. Abdul's job was to act as bait, and after playing dead, he was to give the green light for the next cache to be moved. With me presumed dead, you confirmed dead, and Aaron in federal custody, I'd be in the clear.

"This location was always just supposed to serve as a decoy to stage my death. I'm still getting out of here because lover boy doesn't want anything to happen to you. So, here's my offer. Get out now, Grim, and I might leave her alive for you to find."

Gun still up and knees slightly bent, Aaron continues to stalk after us. "I'm not leaving her, so you'll just have to find a way to kill me before I blow you away."

We've now passed the part of the tunnel where Maxen faked his attack. It's growing harder and harder to remain upright, meaning Maxen is having to spend more and more effort to keep moving. Blood soaks my pants and shirt from the stab wounds and multiple cuts, and my body vibrates with every inch I'm dragged.

I'm going to die in this cave and don't want my best friend going with me. My eyes find Aaron's again, and more tears flow at the hurt and betrayal he must feel. God, I've been so stupid.

Aaron shakes his head. “Don’t you take any of this on yourself, Sadie. We’re both going to get out of here, and then we’ll figure it out.”

We cross several more yards, and it’s getting harder and harder to hold my eyes open. Maxen pulls me through a stone arch, and a blinking red light above it catches my eye. My muddled brain takes a moment to register the small bomb, but then I summon every bit of strength I have left and drop my full weight to the ground, yelling for Aaron to get back as I do.

Aaron shows absolute trust in me, responding instantly to my command. He dives to safety just before the blast goes off right above where his head would have been. Maxen maintains his hold on me, but the blade cuts deeper into my neck as he lifts me back upright. Still, I turn enough that the cut misses my artery and isn’t deep enough to cause significant damage.

The problem now is that I’m unable to fight back as Maxen removes the knife and rears back to drive it deep one last time.

A loud shot catches me off guard, as I know it didn’t come from Aaron. Maxen’s chest blooms red, but he still turns around in disbelief. He releases his grip, and I collapse to the ground just before he does. My body begs to check out for a while, and I don’t fight it. The last thing I notice before closing my eyes is Sambi’s fugly shoes creeping up behind Maxen. I guess there’s a rear access after all.

I lie in a heap of agony, wishing I could escape into sleep. The rushing of the falls fills my ears, but I don’t miss the scratching and clatter of a gun being kicked across the cave floor or Sambi’s disgusted tone. “I never liked you anyway.”

I want to go to sleep, but Aaron is yelling my name. I force my eyes open as he climbs out from under the rubble created by the blast. “Sambi, go call Knot! Get a chopper here now!”



Sambi takes off running toward the front of the cave, and Aaron hits his knees next to me. I whimper in pain when Aaron rolls me to my back and cuts my chest armor off. He rips my shirt open at the neck to reach the wound at my shoulder.

Right next to me, Maxen is snickering, the sound coming out coarse and wet. “Nice move, Grim. You may save her, but you’ll never have her. I’m in her skin. I’m burrowed so deep in her mind that she’ll never be rid of me. Every time you look at her, touch her, I’ll be there.”

Aaron doesn’t even look up, but his jaw clenches as he works to stem the flow of blood from my shoulder. I turn my head toward Maxen to see a pool of blood growing beneath him.

At that moment, Maxen flinches, rolls, and swings a large blade down in a wide arch toward my middle. I’m powerless to react, but Aaron throws his arm up to block the shot. At the same time, he draws his pistol and fires repeatedly.

Aaron pulls the blade from his arm, throws it to the side as if nothing happened, and then slices my belt open to reach the sopping area of my pants and the wound behind it.

“Maxen,” I rasp, even though he’s dead. “Shut the fuck up.”

And then everything goes dark.

“Stay with me, Mein Engel. You can’t die on me now.”

Every brush with the tunnel wall, every unsteady step sends agonizing jolts through my body, redefining what pain means. My broken arm swings uselessly by my side, occasionally bouncing off Aaron’s leg as he rushes to god-knows-where.

In between the brushes with the jutting rock formations, I black out again, too weak with blood loss to remain conscious. Each time a blow to my arm wakes me, I wish for all of it to end, but then Aaron's soothing voice pleads for me to stay.

I try, but I'm afraid one of these times I black out, I may not wake up again. I don't want to die, but even more, I don't want to die with Maxen's words burning through Aaron's mind. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Don't you do that, Fate. Don't you dare. I..."

Whatever he says next is lost to the blackness.

A sharp tug on my broken arm pulls me out of the blackness, screaming. Only the loud sounds of helicopter rotors dampen out the sound. Sambu and another man set my arm in a splint as Aaron presses bandages to the deep cuts in my arms.

A lifetime of tears not shed still pour from my eyes. My right arm is bound, so I reach for Aaron with my left, ignoring the ache in my shoulder. "He killed Brock."

Aaron bends down and cups my cheek, brushing away the tears. "I know, baby. Please don't talk now. Rest but try to stay awake."

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I do try. Try to focus on Aaron's softly spoken words, but the blackness creeps in, too strong for me to push away. When I wake again, I briefly open my eyes to see three men posted as sentries around the little room where I'm hooked up to various machines— Knot, Aaron, and Sambu.

My head is so fuzzy I can't seem to make sense of any of the images or memories floating around in my head. I open my eyes again, determined to keep them open for long enough to ensure I'm not dreaming or dead.

My first attempt at speaking comes out as a croak, and Aaron is at my side the next second. He lifts a cup with a straw to my lips, and I take a small sip. "How?" is the only word I can get out.

Knot walks over, the rigid set to his shoulders broadcasting his current state of mind. "You made it out of that cave because Aaron is a stubborn prick. A resourceful, stubborn prick."

"I monitored my text messages online," Aaron admits. "One from Knot said that you and Maxen had taken on the investigation from the other side. I figured that meant Iran, so I called in a favor. Sambu managed to get me from the US to Iran undetected."

The Indian man in our group steps forward. "I knew he could not be guilty of what he was being accused."

Aaron squeezes Sambu's shoulder and continues. "You were talking out your thoughts through text, unknowing that I was reading every word. My thoughts were

to join up with the two of you, and Sambi helped with that, even though he didn't tell me why."

"When I asked Gates where Grim was, he lied to me. I do not like lies. I was afraid for you and kept track of my vehicle's location."

"In the tunnel, we heard what Maxen said but didn't have a clear shot to take him out. Sambi snuck back out to find the cave's secondary entrance, indicated by the spring in the rear. We figured a crossfire was our only shot at getting you out alive."

Sambi places his hand on my uninjured shoulder. "I'm sorry we didn't get there sooner."

Maxen's words taunting Aaron begin playing on a loop in my head, and I turn my eyes away from the group. "Maybe it would have been better if you hadn't been there at all."

The shame of my stupidity will be prominent in the aftermath as it plays out for the federal prosecutors, whatever press gets wind of the news, and my team.

"Don't you dare say that," Aaron growls, pulling my gaze back to him.

Knot places a hand on Aaron's bandaged arm, dousing the fury burning in his eyes. Voice flat, I change the subject. "Where are we?"

"Hospital in New Delhi," Knot answers. "You were in pretty bad shape. You've been asleep for thirteen hours."

"Maxen is dead? You're sure."

"Yes, he is," Sambi answers proudly.

My face falls, and Sambi's does in response. "I do not understand. Why are you sad?"

"With Maxen dead, the truth died with him. How are we supposed to prove Aaron's innocence now?"

"About that," Knot says. "You know your satellite watch can uplink and upload live audio."

"Yeah. We use it all the time."

"Right. What you don't know is that we have the ability to remote activate that uplink. This is the first time it's ever been used. And to protect operatives' privacy, it takes two passcodes to do so. The only ones with the codes are me, Birdie, and our attorneys. Birdie and I activated your device when you came out of the cave. I figured you wouldn't leave a man behind and wanted audio in case you were taken and separated from your watch.

"In this case, the uplink died as soon as you were out of satellite contact. Your device would have continued recording anyway and transmitted as soon as the uplink was re-established. Basically, we've got all we need to have Aaron cleared of the charges. I just didn't expect to hear what was recorded."

With my face flaming red, I lower my eyes at what my boss and friend must be thinking. "At least you'll get your life back now," I whisper to Aaron.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I squeeze my eyes shut, mortified because I knew so little about the person that has meant the most to me my whole adult life.

"Sadie."

Aaron's one word pleads with me to look at him, but I can't do it.

Knot leans in and places his hand on my head, brushing his thumb over my temple. “Let’s go so Sadie can get some rest.”

Two sets of footsteps head for the door, and Knot says, “You too, Hosfeld.”

I’m held at the Indian hospital for two more days. The only visitor I’m allowed is my boss. It’s not the hospital staff keeping Aaron out, but Knot. Despite not being able to look him in the eye, Knot seems to understand that my mind is not in a good place when it comes to Aaron.

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It's not anger that I'm harboring for my friend. I don't blame Aaron for anything that's happened. It's not his fault his best friend is too stupid to see what's happening right in front of her. I don't know how I will ever face Aaron again, remembering all the things Maxen said to hurt him. Thankfully, Knot hasn't had anything to say about or ask about what he heard in the recording.

Three pm local time rolls around on Thursday, and Knot has just walked into my room with a nurse carrying discharge papers and rolling a wheelchair. As glad as I am to be going home, I'm not looking forward to avoiding Aaron's face the whole long flight. That will surely make things worse than they already are.

The nurse parks the chair, and Knot hands over a bag from a local boutique before stepping out of the room again. In the bag are a short-sleeve maxi dress, a wrap for warmth, and some slip-on shoes.

I direct the nurse to pull undies from my duffle bag, and she helps me get dressed. She opens my door once we're finished, and Knot walks back in and helps me to the wheelchair. After placing the wrap on my shoulders, he straps my bag over his shoulder and wheels me outside, where Sambi waits beside a sparkling Mercedes.

Besides the Sentinels, I've never seen him with such nice wheels. His fugly shoes are missing, replaced with something a little more expensive. The sleek and shiny footwear goes well with his tailored suit.

"I guess you aren't what you seem either," I tell him.

Our Indian procurer bows slightly and offers a rueful smile. "You are the only

completely truthful one in the group, I'm afraid."

Sambi opens the door for Knot to help me into the back seat, and then we're driven to the airport. Aaron is nowhere around when I step into the jet's plush interior.

Reading my thoughts, Knot says, "He's not here. I sent him home yesterday, making Sambi sneak him back out the same way he got him in. I sensed it would be better this way."

I drop my ass into a seat and my head into my left hand. "God, I don't know how to get beyond this. I know by now you heard what Maxen said to him."

Knot dips his chin in somber acknowledgment.

"How will I ever be able to look him in the eye again? How are we going to work together and him not hate me after this?"

"Sadie, you've got to give the man some credit. And don't be so damned hard on yourself. If anyone should feel like shit, it's me because I hired the sonofabitch. If I'd seen through his bullshit, none of you would be in this position to begin with."

"Yeah, except I'd still be bat-fucking blind to those around me."

I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes. I don't want to talk anymore.

A hot mouth closes around a nipple as sharp rocks dig into my back. "I've got you, Mein Engel," is whispered in my ear. The voice is Aaron's, but when I open my eyes, it's Maxen licking his way down my middle.

The moment his tongue glides through my slit, my back arches off the cave floor, but my arms won't move. As his tongue swirls around my clit, I tilt my head back to see



giant stones sitting on my wrists, holding them in place.

Maxen's mouth brings me to orgasm, but my skin ignites in fire and ice instead of pleasure. I scream through the agonizing sensation and still wrap my legs around Maxen as he shifts upward, settling between my open thighs.

He holds himself up on one arm, and the other hand is holding a knife that he twists and rolls around like a toy. That is until he begins to move.

The tip of the blade touches my skin, sinking deep as he thrusts inside me.

My eyes fly open to darkness and the sound of jet engines. Everything hurts, and I have to pee. Pushing off the seat with my one good hand, I stumble toward the lavatory, every step pulling against the wound in my hip, making me breathe through clenched teeth.

The tip of Maxen's blade is still there, buried in my ilium. I wanted it out, but the doctor feared doing more damage to the bone to retrieve it. Maxen's vow, though it sickens me now, will hold, it seems. You'll never be able to bare your skin without feeling my touch everywhere.

The memory makes me shudder as I lift the dress, thankful Knot had the insight to select something I could manage with one hand. My efforts in the lav are a little uncoordinated, given that I'm not left-handed, but I get through it. For a while after washing, I stare in the mirror, studying the battered face looking back at me.

The woman in the mirror should be familiar to me despite the two black eyes, bruised nose, and split lip. Still, I don't feel like I know her at all. I'm beginning to think I never really knew anyone.

Outside the lav door, Knot waits, holding a cup and some pills in his hand. "I expect

you're about ready for these."

Trusting my boss, I take the pills from his palm without question and swallow them with the offered water. Fidgeting with the cup, I stare at the floor as a single question consumes my thoughts.

Sensing my internal debate, Knot stands patient, waiting for me to speak or head back for my seat. I pull in a fortifying breath and ask, "Do you think I'm naïve?"

The former SEAL chuckles. "In short, no. We all have our blind spots, Sadie, and now, you have one less."

He gestures to my seat and steadies me as I lower into it. "Get some sleep. We still have a ways to go."

The next time I open my eyes, Birdie is reclined in the seat next to mine. I gingerly stretch my legs and ask, "Where did you come from?"

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“The jet made a short layover in Virginia to pick up some things for you. I insisted on tagging along.”

I reach up to rub my eyes but rethink my plan when I touch the bruises. Through a yawn, I ask, “Tagging along where?”

“Tennessee. We called your dad, and he insisted. And since you’re going to be incapacitated for a while, that was the best place. And don’t worry about Gunny. I called Bonnie. She’s going on vacation next week, so I’ve got him. Bonnie sends her love.”

Birdie reaches over to adjust my blanket and adds, “I didn’t tell her anything, so I’m sure she’s going to have questions.”

“Not as many as my father.”

The jet touches down in Pigeon Forge, and all five Phelps men are there to greet the plane. Knot and Birdie help me down the steps and are quickly replaced by two of my brothers.

My dad walks up to Knot, jaw clenched, obviously holding back what he thinks about me being in this condition. “Thank you for bringing her home.”

He accepts the bag Birdie hands him, and my friend walks over, gingerly placing her arms around my middle. “See you in three weeks, ok?”

Three weeks... This should be interesting.

My father turns away from my boss and steps close to where Brandon and Blake hold me steady. “Are you all right, Sadie Kate?”

My chin wobbles, and my father drops my bag on the tarmac. His big arms wrap around me carefully, and he whispers in my ear. “Are you sure you need to keep doing this to yourself?”

Wes and Mike walk up to stand in formation behind dad, and I debate how to answer. Ultimately, I decide to tell a version of the truth that won’t lead to them trying to pressure me out of my career. “Work didn’t do this to me. My... boyfriend did.”

With the way my family responds, you’d think world war three just started. All at once, the five of them begin shouting questions and promises of a slow death until I whistle to get their attention again. “You won’t get your chance. He’s already dead. Now, it’s over, I feel stupid, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

My father, not to be denied, reaches for my chin and inspects my face. He leans close and asks, “Please tell me it wasn’t him. That I didn’t let the man that hurt you walk away when I could have killed him.”

“It wasn’t Aaron, Dad. Aaron is the only reason I’m still alive.”

I turn to my boss and Birdie then. “Thanks for... everything.”

Knot hands me my phone and says, “I don’t want to see or hear from you until three weeks is up. If I need you, I’ll be able to get you.”

He steers Birdie toward the plane, and my father urges me toward Brandon’s Suburban. During the ride to my dad’s house, Mike is the first one to break the oppressive silence. He leans up from his seat on the third row and asks, “Has there been any change in the Aaron situation?”

I lean my head back against the seat and sigh. Of course, dad told them everything. “Yeah. The man I was with turned out to be the one that killed Brock. He set Aaron up to take the fall, but that’s all been cleared up now.”

Mike whistles but otherwise doesn’t respond.

At my dad’s house, the dining room has been cleared out and made into a bedroom in consideration of my many injuries. The guys brought my bed, dresser, and nightstand down to keep me from having to use the stairs.

That first night, no one sticks around for a boisterous meal which would be the norm for our family. Dad shoos my brothers out and fixes a simple meal of grilled cheese and tomato soup for the two of us. My dad successfully holds in the questions churning in his gut, and I manage to eat half my meal before taking a dose of pain pills and crashing early.

Dad skips work the next day in case I need any help getting around. Though my whole body hurts, I make do mostly on my own. He does refuse to let me step foot in the kitchen, adamant that he “can make a sandwich for his little girl, dammit.”

Dinner company consists of just my father and me again. I help out a little this time, using one hand to form some freshly kneaded bread dough into rolls. They aren’t shaped right, but they’ll eat just fine.

After the pot roast dinner, Dad and I sit on the back porch to stare at the fall colors on the mountain. He’s been patient, wanting to give me time to open up about what happened. Holding back only the naked moments, I tell my father everything from my first encounter with Avara until I woke up in the hospital in New Delhi.

My father is quiet after the long story. For a good while, the only sounds to be heard are the crickets and the creaking of his old rocking chair.

The rocking stops abruptly, and my father shifts strained eyes to mine. “Did you love this man, Sadie?”

My answer is what solidifies my guilt in all of this. “No. I kept pulling away like he said. I guess I felt something was wrong, even if I didn’t understand what. What kills me is that I let him use me to hurt people I care about, even though, deep down, I had doubts.”

“What about Aaron?”

My head is in a massive tangle regarding Maxen’s revelations about my best friend and partner. I don’t even know where to start unraveling the mess. The best, the only answer I can give to my father is, “I miss my friend.”

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Aaron

It's been two weeks since Knot put me on a plane back to the states. Two weeks of texting, calling, and leaving messages without a response. Two weeks without Sadie.

I haven't gone a week without seeing her in the last decade. Not once. And never more than a couple of days without at least talking to her. I'm worried about her. Maxen did a lot of damage to Sadie's body, mind... and her heart. She nearly died at his hand, and I have no idea how she's doing.

All I do know is that I miss my best friend. That, and I have no more secrets from her. She knows everything, and I've not had the chance to talk to her about any of it.

Damn that bastard! I throw my wrapped fist into the bag again, wishing it could be Maxen's face instead. Or maybe my own for being a coward all these years.

I don't know how the hell that asshole learned the details of my divorce or why he was so dead set on punishing me by hurting Sadie. I hate that I let him do it.

Spatch nods as he walks by on his way out. He doesn't try to get me to leave, having lost that argument a time or five in the last two weeks. Except for my team, everyone here has been walking on eggshells around me since word came out about the treason and Maxen being responsible.

Thankfully, the sordid details are known only to Knot, our top company lawyer, and the federal prosecutor. The charges against me were dropped immediately, and the feds switched their focus to Maxen "Smoke" Gates.

The feds spent a day here going through his equipment locker and grilling any and all employees that had direct contact with the dick. Ever since then, the whole place has felt different. People aren't as quick to joke around, no one taunts each other on the training floor, and... Sadie's not here to settle everyone down.

She'll be back, though I don't expect things at the compound will ever be the same. Knot's PMCs are still suffering the loss of Brock and now Maxen's betrayal. Each day, whispered questions about Sadie's return make the rounds through the company.

People know that she nearly died at Maxen's hand and that she's holed up at home, healing from her injuries. What I worry most about is her mind. She knows I lied to her about the reason behind my divorce. She also knows, thanks to Maxen, that I've harbored some intense feelings for her basically the whole time I've known her.

Neither Knot nor Birdie has spoken to her. I've asked. God knows, she may not want to talk to anyone wrapped up in this for a while. She may not want to speak to me at all.

She'll need someone, though. Sadie may not have known all the secrets I carried, but the woman is an open book. Isolation is not her friend. She's always needed a team, even when it was just Brock and me. I'm just worried that I might not be a welcome part of her team anymore.

The punching bag absorbs several more violent blows, and then I step back, bending at the waist to pull a few deep breaths into my lungs.

The sound of leather smacking leather nearby draws my eyes upward again. Knot is standing in the middle of the training floor wearing punch pads. "You look like you could use a partner."

Pushing up off my knees, I ask, slightly winded, "Your doctor clear you for this yet?"



Knot took a bullet to the back about eighteen months ago that nearly paralyzed him. The doctors managed to save him and his legs, but then infection set in. An infection that almost killed him. He's come a long way in his recovery, but I don't expect he'll ever go into the field again. Even so, he's determined to return to regular training.

Knot waves off my concern with a padded hand. "I'm not worried about him. Just don't tell Trish."

Trish Knot, the CEO's wife and the only person on the planet this big man answers to.

Planning to take it easy, I join my boss under the lights and throw some easy punches. He presents the padded targets for some quick jabs and crosses and then swings them at my head for me to duck and uppercut.

"You know, I had you pegged on day one when it comes to Sadie."

My hands drop, and I stand upright. "What?" I ask, stunned.

Knot reaches out and smacks me on the head with one of his pads. I drop back into a fighting stance and send a cross to the other pad. "I kept waiting for you to make a move since the Marine rulebook was no longer keeping your hands tied. At first, I admired you for upholding that standard, but eventually, I started thinking you were insane."

I duck under Knot's arm and swing at the target he presents. "Why is it so hard for people to understand this? I checked my emotions to respect Sadie's position and what she was building for herself."

"Hey, I understood it perfectly. Where you fucked up was in not realizing that Sadie had already built the career that she wanted. Besides, the whole fraternizing thing was

a Marine rule, not mine. “I think what’s really going on is that you’re scared. Sadie became what she set out to be, and you’re afraid there won’t be any room left for you.”

I still my feet again. This time, Knot leaves me alone. “You think it’s so easy. Tell me this. We all know how people are. What would have happened the first time someone accused Sadie of sleeping her way up or of preferential treatment because we were together?”

Knot laughs. “Well, I imagine Sadie would have kicked their ass and put them in their place. Sadie doesn’t need help from you or anyone else when it comes to her career. And I think it’s about time you figured that out.”

He unstraps the pads from his hands and adds, “What Sadie needs more than anything right now is a friend. Someone who knows her well enough and is strong enough to pull her out of the hole Maxen buried her in. Be that for her. Whether she wants more or not, be that friend.”

The owner of Knot Corp heads for the door, stopping at the opening to toss over his shoulder. “Go home, Hosfeld. Think about what I said.”

Knot walks out, and I’m left staring at the mat as if I’ll find answers there. Minutes later, I haven’t moved, and memories parade through my mind of all the times Sadie and I faced off on this same floor.

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We both kept up a running commentary every fight, calling out each other's anticipated moves. Because of that, we were forced to be more mindful and not rely on muscle memory so much not to be predictable. We made each other better in more ways than just on the battlefield.

And I need to make sure she knows that I'm here for her, whatever she needs. If she even still wants me to be.

Pulling off my gloves and tape, I decide to take Knot's advice and call it a night. I shower and change before leaving, and I stop at Mel's for a bite on the way home. "Hey, Wanda," I say in greeting as our favorite waitress waves me over.

"Hi, Hun. Sadie comin' later?"

"Uh. No. She's—"

Wanda's face goes white as a sheet, and she nearly drops the tray of beers she's carrying. "Please tell me something didn't happen to her too."

"No, Sadie's ok. She got a little banged up during our last deployment and is resting at home."

Wanda presses a hand to her chest. "Oh, thank god."

The motherly woman delivers the beers and heads straight for my table. She pulls out her order pad and fans herself for a moment, still working on controlling her heart rate. Poor thing. She'd only recently learned about Sadie and me working as PMCs.

And only then because Brock was killed. “What can I get for you tonight, honey?”

I order my usual and head straight home after I’ve scarfed down the monster burger. I’ve got something to take care of before work tomorrow.

The following day, I march into a crowded situation room and drop an unmarked envelope onto the table in front of my boss. “What’s this?” he asks without even looking at it.

“I want to be reassigned to another team.”

The room goes deathly silent at my demand. Some will take this the wrong way, but I need my request to be out in the open. I’ll handle the fallout later.

Knot leans back in his chair, his wide eyes and slack jaw telling me I’ve shocked him. “You sure about this?”

“Sir, I’ve only ever been sure about two things, the Corps and... her.”

Knot slides the envelope to the side of the table without opening it. “Anything else?”

I clear my throat and say, “Yes. I want a few days off to go visit a friend.”

Knot’s lips turn up in the barest hint of a smile. “Granted. See you next week.”

Ignoring the shocked faces of mine and Sadie’s team, I race outside to my truck for an eight-hour drive to Tennessee.

Sadie

I’m beginning to rethink my decision to move back into my room as I walk down the

stairs for the first time. All the bandages are gone, and the only sore spots left are the stab wounds in my left hip and shoulder.

My face has healed, and only faint bruising remains around my right eye. I've also been able to lose the sling supporting my right arm. At least I don't have a cast to worry about. The breaks were complete and had to be surgically repaired. I've got plates and screws in both bones in my right forearm, negating the need for exterior stabilization.

And, of course, I still have the blade tip in my left hip. With all the hardware floating around inside me, I bet I look like some steampunk puzzle on x-ray.

So far, my time in Tennessee has been peaceful. Odd but peaceful. My brothers come around a lot, bringing food and making me laugh. They've all asked questions here and there, and eventually, I even answered some.

When I healed enough to walk without too much pain, I spent a couple of days at my dad's business, puttering around the office or letting my dad show me the advancements in architectural stone.

By now, I'm about ready to go home. I'm not yet healed enough for close combat training, but I want to be back where I belong. Even if it means facing my humiliation head-on. I'll have to deal with the stares and the gossip eventually. May as well get it over with. Well, I will if Knot will let me back in the building. The man said three weeks. I'm sure he meant three weeks.

Though he likely won't shorten my forced sick leave, I can open the lines of communication with Norfolk for the first time since leaving India. Outside Knot and Birdie, I mean. Those two wouldn't dream of letting me cut them out. I've spoken with my boss a few times and with Birdie nearly every day.

She seems to think that Gunny disapproves of her extracurricular activities. I didn't ask what they were, and she didn't offer. Whatever it is that she's into, I'm not surprised about Gunny. He's rather judgmental for a fish.

Feeling somewhat like there's a firing squad waiting in my email, I sit down at my little desk with a borrowed laptop and log in to my personal account. I probably have a shit ton of messages on my work phone, but I'll leave those on ice for a while.

Besides the usual commercial emails, which all get deleted, I have only a few personal messages. This is no surprise. There are precious few people on this planet that I consider friends.

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The first email is from Bonnie asking if I'm ok. Chelsea is next. Her message hits me like a throat punch. She went to Brock's funeral with several other operatives.

Dammit! I had already known that I'd missed it. Brock was laid to rest with full honors while I was laid up in that hospital in India. I lean back in the wooden chair and scrub my hands over my face. I'll make time to visit his grave soon. I'm sure Aaron and Knot will want to go too.

The last message is from Cade, one of my longtime teammates at Knot Corp. "What's going on, Sadie? Aaron just marched up to Knot and demanded that he be assigned to another team. In front of the whole damn company."

I reread Cade's message, and what little is left of my heart shatters into a million pieces. It seems that everything I feared has come to pass. Aaron has written me off.

I slam the laptop's lid shut and shove my chair away from the desk. Well, Maxen, you got what you wanted. I hope you're happy in hell.

By now, everyone has learned all the spicy details about what happened and knows that my best friend no longer wants to work with me. It's likely that none of them are going to want to work with me again, and I can't blame them. Who wants to serve under a leader whose blind spots could get you killed?

At this point, I don't even know what I'd have in Norfolk to go back to.

Rising from the seat, I go to my closet and pull down a bag, haphazardly throwing clothes and gear inside. I grab some books and my toiletry bag and leave my room.

Downstairs in the kitchen, I fill a box with non-perishable foods, fruit, and a bottle of whiskey from my dad's bar. I load all the supplies and an extra gas can onto one of the ATVs and go back inside to leave a note for my dad.

Gone to the cabin for a couple of days. Please don't worry.

Sadie

The last thing I take before walking out is my dad's old Colt 45. The gun gets tucked into the back of my jeans, and I set off for the mountain pass, taking the trip slower than usual to keep from bouncing my sore body around too much.

The air has a distinct chill to it as the sun sets, a clear indication that winter is well and truly on its way. I get all the supplies inside and haul in enough firewood to keep the place warm through the night.

Once everything is squared away, I start a fire, pull the copper bathtub next to the wood-burning stove, and use the well pump next to the counter to fill a large pot with water. I set the pot to warm on the stove while a can of soup warms next to it.

It takes half an hour and several buckets to get the tub ready for a bath, but by then, I've finished my soup, tied up my hair, and stripped out of my clothes. Sliding a small table over to the side of the tub, I set out the whiskey, a towel, and everything else I'll need.

The steam from the tub fogs over the two small cabin windows, not that it matters. I'm not worried about privacy. There's no one around for miles. With only lantern light to see by, I step into the near-scalding water and sink down to my chin.

The heat of the water seeps into my bones, as comforting as it is relaxing, and the high temperature ensures that the bath should stay warm for a long time. After several



minutes of soaking and many failed attempts to blank my mind, I grab the bottle of Jack and take a swig.

The amber liquid burns going down, blending just the right amount of misery to go with the pleasure. With that first shot down, I reach for the soap and scrub the bar over my battered body, careful not to use too much, or else I'll have to heat more water to rinse off.

After I'm done, I take another sip of the whiskey and lean my head back against the tub. The combination of the Jack, my exhaustion, and the feel of the water loosens my head enough that I start talking to the ceiling. I'd talk to Gunny if he were here, but he's not, so the wood slats will just have to do.

I stare at the small cross-section of beams above me and mumble, "Ah, fuck it. You'll probably judge me too."

Grabbing the bottle, I take one last shot of whiskey and decide I've had enough. Enough of the booze, enough of the water, and enough of the lie I'd been living in Norfolk. I don't know what I'll do here, but I guess it's time to start over again.

My legs are a little wobbly when I push out of the tub. I use both hands to steady myself, so I don't fall on my ass. Keeping close to the stove, I dry off quickly and dress before hooking up the drain hose to the tub.

The drain leads to an underground pipe connecting to a cistern buried about fifty feet away. The cistern has holes in the bottom, so the water absorbs slowly, filtered by the dirt before returning to the water table.

Once empty, the hose and tub are put away, and I hang the lantern over the rocking chair. From the stack of books I brought, I pick one without looking and wrap myself in a blanket. Then I settle in the rocking chair and pretend to read before falling

asleep to the sound of the crackling fire.

The stove is still warm when I wake up in the morning, though the fire has gone out. I don my coat, go outside to handle some business, and load up on firewood on my way back in.

In no time, the fire is roaring again, and I crack the seal on a can of ham for breakfast. My thoughts are no less tortured today than they were last night.

Damned whiskey. You weren't any help.

After the simple breakfast, I clean up the mess and grab the fishing pole from the hooks over the door. There's a creek about half a mile from here, where I used to sit and listen to the water. With any luck, the babbling brook will bring me some peace as well as some dinner.

I'm not holding out much hope for either. I was always shit as a fisherman.

Sadie

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There's more smoke than there ought to be coming from the stack when I break through the tree line on my return from the little fishing trip. My steps falter as I run through the possibilities. That wouldn't be my father. He'd understand that I need space.

There's only one person that could be. Providence. I guess it's a good thing that I kept both of the trout on my stringer. Steeling myself for what's coming, I take a deep breath and the next step toward the cabin.

Aaron is standing at the stove when I push open the door. He glances at the trout, nods his approval, and then, just as quickly, returns his attention to his dinner prep. "Those will go great with dinner."

The simple, matter-of-fact greeting is so not the reception I was expecting. My brain suffers a major malfunction because of how... normal Aaron is acting.

Aaron turns and holds out a tray to me, and my system comes back online. I set the fish down on the tray but otherwise remain where I am, still at a loss for words.

I don't understand. Aaron is acting as though Maxen didn't just blow up our entire world. "What are you doing here, Aaron?"

He stops chopping the potatoes he must have brought and leans against the stove handles. "I guess I just needed a friend and thought maybe you could use one too."

A few drops of rain ping on the tin roof, indicating a coming shower and making me glad I came back when I did. They also mean neither one of us will be leaving for a

while.

“I don’t understand. How can you even stand to be in the same room with me after the things that Maxen said?”

Aaron puts the knife down and turns in my direction. “Sadie, you did nothing wrong. Nothing. If either one of us should be angry, it should be you. Everything Maxen said about me was true. That means I’ve lied to you all these years. If anything, you should want to kick me out.”

He gives me his back again as he picks up the knife and resumes cutting vegetables, adding softly, “And I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

“I... I’m sorry.”

Aaron turns his face to the side, cutting his eyes to me. “What for?”

“For not seeing. I never knew.”

My friend grins sadly. “I wasn’t ready for you to see. I might never have been ready. I think I was scared.”

I take a step closer now, not quite believing what I’m hearing. “You afraid? You’re never afraid of anything.”

“Yes, I am. I’m afraid of losing you. I’ve always been afraid of losing you.”

“But I’m—”

“You’re Sadie. Human. Warrior. Friend. Nowhere in the manual does it say that you have to be perfect.”

Damn these men that can read my mind. “Aren’t you worried that every time you look at me, you’ll see him, hear what he said?”

“A little, but I’m more afraid of never seeing or talking with you again.”

Thunder sounds in the distance, and the rain falls harder on the metal roof. “Aaron, I don’t know me anymore. I feel like I don’t know you anymore.”

“You know me, Sadie. You know me in every way that you’ve always known me. And now, you know me a little better. Look, I’m not asking anything of you. You be the woman you’ve always been. Let me be the man I’ve always been.”

Aaron returns to the stove once more. “Now, do you want to clean the trout, or should I?”

Feeling like I’m lost in the twilight zone and needing some space to think, I grab the tray and the fish knives and step outside.

The rain, pouring now, spills from the porch’s shed roof like a beaded curtain all around the edges. I sit at the small table and scale the two fish before trimming and fileting them. Holding the fresh fish filets in my hands, I stretch my arms out under the cold rain to rinse off any remaining scales.

I do the same to clean off the tray and tools and then take everything back inside. Aaron pulls the pan of potatoes out of the oven and sets it on top to sauté with a bit of butter, garlic, and parsley.

Aaron is his typical self, making me wonder if I’ve been worrying too much. If Aaron can get past this, I have to, as well. The alternative would be like punishing him worse than he’s already experienced

Clearing my throat to gather some nerve, I pull out a second iron skillet and set it out for the fish. “I don’t think this little cabin has ever seen such gourmet cooking before. You’ve always been a food snob, though. I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“I’m not a food snob,” he counters. “Ever since the Corps, I just like my food to have a little taste.”

“Right. Food snob.”

Aaron grins at me, then returns his attention to the roasted potatoes. Maybe I can do this. Clearing my throat again, I ask, “Do you want to snob the fish up before I cook it?”

Now he rolls his eyes. “I’ll handle the fish. You can set the table.”

The so-called table consists of the small wooden stand I used last night, which will be pulled between the bed and the rocking chair. I grab two enamel camping plates from the shelves next to the stove and remove two forks from their mason jar holder.

Aaron soon serves up the meal, and we eat, serenaded by the ongoing thunderstorm. Once we’re both finished, the cabin goes quiet except for the rain. With the storm raging on and the sun setting, it’s clear we’ll both be staying the night.

The thought shouldn’t scare me. Aaron and I have had to share sleeping quarters more times than I can count. The air has just never been charged like this before. When the silence between us grows louder than the storm, I ask, “Aaron, if you don’t hate me, why did you ask to be reassigned?”

He shrugs. “My answer doesn’t seem to make sense to anyone but me. I was afraid that making a move on my partner would cause static in the ranks. I didn’t want that for you or me. Maybe it’s just the Marine regs still too ingrained in my head, but I needed to remove that barrier before I could even talk to you about all this.”

All this... murder, betrayal, unrequited—ahem, unrecognized love. Love that I’m no

longer sure that I'd be capable of reciprocating. Still, his answer is somewhat of a relief, bringing me to my next question, which has been haunting my dreams. "Aaron, what does Mein Engel mean?"

His face grows tight, and his lips pinch together. "It means... my angel."

I nod, having expected the meaning to be something like that since that night in the cave. Aaron pulls the little table out of the way and stands up from the rocking chair. After crossing the short distance, he pulls me to my feet and looks into my eyes. "I've always treasured you as a friend and then as so much more. Nothing Maxen said or did will ever change that."

"But—"

Before another word leaves my mouth, Aaron hooks a hand around my neck and pulls my mouth to his.

Time slows to a crawl. Memories of so many moments with Aaron over the years now seem different. Something more.

His kiss feels like coming home. I can't explain it, but my whole world suddenly feels right, like I'm no longer listing, in danger of tipping over. I pull away, stunned by the sudden and unexpected longing that grips my chest.

I stare into Aaron's warm eyes, trying to make sense of this sudden depth of feeling. Just as quickly, I decide that I don't care about the where, what, or how. This is right. So unexpected but so right.

I breathe his name, and my hands slide up his chest as I return my lips to his. Careful of my still-healing injuries, Aaron squeezes me to his chest and brushes his lips tenderly over mine.



I sink into his embrace, and Aaron lifts his mouth from mine to press a kiss to my temple. “I’ve got you, Mein Engel.”

Aaron

Glowing embers in the ancient stove provide the only light in the room. The tiny sliver of moon hides behind thick clouds, and the lanterns were extinguished hours ago.

Last night’s storm has calmed to a steady rain, which pounds against the tin roof, trapping me in this small hunting cabin. I don’t mind. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Sadie sits across my lap on the oversized rocking recliner. She’s asleep against my chest, covered by the quilt from the bed. I’m wide awake at what I’m guessing to be around five. Again, I don’t mind. The woman I’ve loved for more than a decade is in my arms. Last night, when I kissed her, she didn’t pull away. I surprised her. That much was obvious.

But then, she kissed me, surprising herself.

The moment she pulled back, her brow tightened. She searched my eyes, looking for answers. “Why?”

Sighing, I decided it was time to tell her the truth. I took a chance and pulled her with me to this chair and into my lap. “Brittany didn’t like that we were going to be stationed together. I don’t know if she saw you as a threat or if she already knew what I didn’t.”

“Knew?”

“I was in love with you back then, Sadie.”

She grimaced, and her face fell. Forcing her chin back up, I shifted my hand to cup her cheek. “Hey, you did nothing wrong.”

I swallowed my pride and told her everything, all the way up to my request to be reassigned. Sadie listened, withholding judgment while gradually surrendering as I drew her against me.

By the end, Sadie’s body relaxed into mine, but the tightness around her eyes remained. She had questions, I know, but she didn’t ask them. She sat with me in front of the fire, listening to the storm rage outside and dealt with the storm raging in her mind. At some point, the thunder and lightning calmed to a steady rain, and we fell asleep.

Sadie shifts in my lap and wakes, realizing she’s not in a bed. Her eyes find mine, and in them, I read concern... and regret. Whether it’s regret for whatever she believes she’s owed blame or because she kissed me, I don’t know.

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Simply explaining away the guilt she feels won't work. I've already tried. If she regrets kissing me, I don't want to know yet. I'd rather enjoy this moment as long as possible. I'm generally not a coward, but I'll gladly wear the title in exchange for a few more precious moments in this little cabin.

After we leave here, I won't do anything to make her feel trapped. The existence of my feelings for her doesn't mean she returns them. Or that she ever will. And if Knot ever makes my reassignment official, I won't have to worry about Sadie feeling pressured to act a certain way.

Those beautiful eyes turn away, unable to hold my gaze. Sadie pulls out of my lap, the quilt falling to the floor as she rises to her feet. Her aloofness makes me want to roar and rail at the asshole that put us in this position.

I can't blame Maxen, though. This is my fault. Knot was right. If I had manned up and talked to Sadie after leaving the corps, Maxen wouldn't have had any reason to target Sadie in his sick game.

As much as it kills me, especially after tasting Sadie's lips last night, I sense it's time to leave. I'm making her uncomfortable. "I guess it's time for me to head back to Virginia."

I turn away from the best friend I've ever had and grab my bag. A long ride in the cold rain might do me some good.

As I step from the porch, the water leeches from me every bit of the warmth I'd taken from Sadie's body. By the time I reach the four-wheeler, all I know is cold, inside

and out.

Sadie

The rain comes down harder now, but with the sun coming up, there's nothing to stop Aaron from leaving.

My head and heart go to war over what the hell I ought to do. I should probably let him go. The trouble is, I don't want to.

What's it gonna be, Sadie? The blinders are off now. Aaron's kiss last night was the most real thing you've let yourself experience in over a decade. Are you going to miss this chance and die in regret as Brock did? Or are you going to hitch up your lady balls and go after him?

Over the pounding rain, I tell my inner harpy, "You're such a fucking bitch."

I rush across the floor and throw the door open. Aaron stands next to his four-wheeler in the early morning light, stowing his bag in the waterproof cargo box.

My heart pounds loud enough to drown out the storm, and I step off the deck before I realize I'm doing it. The rain covers my approach, and when I reach Aaron, I run my hands up his cold back.

He starts and turns around, eyes widening when he sees me standing there, rain soaking my clothes. I press my body against him without hesitation or reservation. I want Aaron. I think I've always wanted Aaron, and that's why I always held back. And now, nothing is stopping me from having him. Not even me.

My hands go to his chest as if I've done it a thousand times. "I'm yours, Aaron, and you're mine. No more excuses and no more wasting time."

I don't wait for him to reply. My hands lift to cup his face and bring his lips toward mine.

"Wait," he says, grabbing my wrists to stop me, though it pains him to do it.

The rain runs in rivers over his face, dripping off his nose and chin. Chaos swirls in his eyes, and his jaw of granite is clenched hard enough to break teeth. "What are you doing, Sadie?"

Staring into his green eyes, I swallow the massive lump in my throat. "I didn't hurt Brock."

Aaron's forehead wrinkles in confusion, but he shakes his head in agreement. "No, you didn't. Brock did that himself."

"And I didn't hurt you."

Understanding dawns, and Aaron's face relaxes. "No. I did that."

"Maxen betrayed us all."

"Yes."

Aaron posed that one word as a question, wondering where I'm going with this. The moment stretches between us while I take a deep breath. "Your lips are the only ones to ever feel right on mine. Last night was the first time I slept next to someone feeling completely relaxed."

Aaron looks up at the angry, gray sky. His Adam's apple bobs, and he returns a hard glare my way. "I'm not looking to be your safe option, Sadie."

“You’re not my safe option, Aaron. You’re my only option. I just didn’t realize it until now. You’re the reason why I never let anyone in.”

I tug my hands free from his grip and slide them up his wet chest again. “Maxen somehow knew and used it to try and destroy us both. I’m through letting Maxen win.”

Aaron’s eyes go wide as I shove against him, knocking him back a step. “And I’m done with people trying to do my thinking for me. You included. Now, do you want me or not?”

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The shock on Aaron's face warms to a roguish smile just before he yanks me to his chest. "You're all wet, Sadie Kate. And I do want you. More than my next breath."

He pivots on the wet ground, swinging my legs up into his arms and stalks toward the tiny cabin. Despite the continued assault of the icy rain on my skin, heat from Aaron's solid chest threatens to burn me up inside.

Under the cover of the porch roof, Aaron sets me on my feet and lifts away the damp hair plastered to my forehead. His smoldering eyes hold me captive as that same hand trails down my arm to take my hand. "Your skin is like ice."

"I don't feel it," I whisper.

"Let's get you out of those wet clothes."

I suck in a sharp breath as Aaron reaches for my waist. Grabbing the hem of my shirt, he peels the fabric upward, forcing my arms with it. Aaron tosses the drenched shirt over the railing, where it lands with a wet smack. He then walks around to my back, slowly unhooking my bra and sliding the straps down my arms. The cups hadn't yet soaked through, and the sudden exposure to the cold has my nipples pebbling instantly.

My sweats cling to my legs, but that doesn't stop Aaron from shoving them down my hips. Behind me, he stoops and lifts one of my feet, sliding the cold pants the rest of the way off before repeating the act on the other side.

Left in only my blue cotton panties, I shiver when Aaron walks back around to face

me again. His green eyes lock onto mine, not once straying to my nakedness. I'm not shy. Aaron's already seen everything in that god-awful shack in the Philippines.

His hands reach for my waist again. This time, gliding downward until sinking beneath the blue cotton. The instant those fingers brush over the fresh scar, the place where part of Maxen's blade remains, I scrunch my eyes closed and flinch away.

Aaron's hands freeze, and soft, warm lips touch mine for two heartbeats. "What we have is more powerful than anything that asshole planted in your mind."

My eyes remain closed, and the sound of boots clunking to the deck precedes the rustle of fabric. Seconds later, a warm chest meets mine. "Open your eyes, Sadie."

Green eyes burn hot, merely an inch from my face. Aaron steps back, takes my hand, and leads me inside the cabin, grabbing a towel from the shelf on the way to the stove. He wraps the warm cotton around my shoulders, and I avert my gaze while he grabs another, winding it around his waist.

I pull the tie from my hair and use the towel to squeeze out some of the water while Aaron builds the fire in the stove back up. He finishes, and I can only stand there, holding the towel partially in front of me. For the first time since Aaron and I became friends, I don't know how to act.

Aaron stands up from the fire workings, water dripping from his wet hair. An intensity rolls off him in waves as he faces off with me, standing with his feet braced apart. He pulls his towel from his waist, running the soft cotton over his chest and arms.

I'm spellbound, seeing Aaron through the eyes that first laid on him so many years ago. Time, it seems, has been his friend, sharpening and refining his body to near perfection. His brown hair could do with a cut, but the waves look soft. I once



wondered what it would feel like to run my fingers through it.

Muscles ripple and flex as he lifts the towel to his head. I try not to look below his waist, but I fail. No part of Aaron is small or weak. Feeling my cheeks flush, I lift my eyes again to see that he's finished and is now staring at me. There it is. The face that first caught my attention. The one that no other could replace.

Moss-green eyes set over a square jaw that's currently clamped shut in restraint. I want that restraint gone. I want Aaron as I've always known him, but now, I want more.

I keep my eyes up and step closer to the stove, though the shudder racing over my body has nothing to do with the chill in the air. Aaron tosses his towel away, dropping his eyes to the hands fisting mine.

My skin warms under his watch, and Aaron reaches for the towel I'm still holding to my breast and pulls it from my fingers. Only when the last bit of fabric slips free does his gaze roam from my face, heating me from head to toe.

An ache begins to build and overwhelm me until I'm fighting against squeezing my thighs together. Aaron turns away to discard my towel with his, but the brief reprieve from his ravenous eyes does nothing to lessen the electric shocks zinging across my skin.

Striking green eyes find mine again, and I take a step back at the hunger rolling off him. Aaron advances a step, and I retreat farther. I'm not afraid of him. I'm a little afraid of what I feel inside, the depth of which is so much bigger than anything I've ever experienced.

The backs of my legs reach the full-size bed as Aaron draws near and grasps my chin. "If we do this, it's with the understanding that there is no before. Only after. No

regrets. No guilt. Only us. Can you promise me that, Fate?"

His eyes plead with me to take this chance. "Only us," I whisper.

Aaron lifts me in his powerful arms, gently depositing me on the old quilt. Rounding the bed, he plants one knee on the mattress and crawls up to my hips. There, he stops, resting on his haunches.

His erection juts high and thick, pulsing with the racing beat of his heart. I swallow hard, wholly unprepared for the powerful stab of desire at seeing all of him. I lie still, paralyzed, as Aaron lifts a shaking hand, hovering his fingertips just over the base of my neck. "For years, I've fought the urge to touch you, to tell you how beautiful I think you are."

My voice is hoarse and breathy. "I thought we weren't looking back."

He shakes his head. "You're right. I'm done."

Aaron finally lowers his fingertips to my skin, reverently trailing over my collar and between my breasts. My chest begins to rise and fall more rapidly at his touch, and I fight to remain still, sensing Aaron needs this moment.

The way he skims his hand over my stomach and the tops of my thighs seems almost like an act of worship. Aaron leans forward, drawing his hand back up to rest on one of my breasts and touching his lips to mine.

My back arches, pressing harder into his hand as I part my lips in invitation. "Sadie," he breathes against my mouth before diving in.

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Aaron's kiss is like gasoline to flame. I can no longer hold still. My hands sink into his hair, holding him in place while he plunders my mouth. Powerful fingers massage my breasts, alternating soft touches with rolling and pinching my nipples.

Each tug of the stiff nubs sends lightning straight to my core. I'm soon writhing, my body begging for release. Aaron swallows each of my pitiful whimpers until I shove against his shoulders. "More, Aaron."

Aaron pulls back, his eyes blazing, the awed devotion reflected in their depths, leaving me captivated and breathless. He isn't using cockiness or a bombastic attitude to dominate. His strength doesn't need an audience. Aaron is steady, unwavering, a rock. His quiet confidence is dominating enough.

That's the reason men like Maxen couldn't tame my heart. They'll never be half the man Aaron is.

Time freezes for a moment, so many things unsaid passing between us. Something inside me clicks, finally releasing a part of me that I never realized I was holding back. Needing to touch him, I push up onto my elbows to capture his lips, but the kiss is short-lived. Aaron shoves me back to the bed and lowers his mouth to a taut nipple. My awareness is reduced to the soft flicks of Aaron's tongue and the gentle pulls of his suckling mouth. Within seconds, I'm trembling with need, ready to implode if I'm not filled soon.

I'm already in sensory overload, but then a warm hand slides down my middle, sinking lower until a single, big digit tests my wetness. Fingers slickened with my arousal withdraw just enough to swirl around my clit.

Aaron's hot mouth leaves my breasts, but he doesn't return to my lips. Opening my eyes to seek him out, I find him resting on his haunches again, watching me as he sinks two fingers inside me. Those fingers rock back and forth, and his thumb takes over the job of teasing my clit.

A powerful orgasm rips through me, stealing my breath. I want to reach for Aaron and pull him to me, but my whole body feels like lead. Electric shocks zap my system as Aaron removes his fingers and reaches for a condom he must have placed next to me.

My body is still singing as Aaron settles over me, dropping to rest on his elbows. Hungry lips latch onto mine the moment he plunges inside. He freezes, buried to the hilt, and lifts his face to stare into my eyes.

Aaron

The moment I'm fully seated inside Sadie's welcoming body, I hold still a moment, caught up in a sense of awe. Voice hoarse and strained, unplanned words tumble out of me. "You feel like home to me."

I drop my head, watching the place we connect as I pull out and slide back inside her tight heat. Sadie arches off the bed and moans, drawing my eyes back up and shredding what little control I was holding onto.

Bracing on both arms, I hover over Sadie for a clear view of all of her. I've waited a long time for this and don't want to miss a single moment. Sadie's eyes lock onto mine, and she meets me thrust for powerful thrust.

I almost can't believe we're here. Sadie is everything I've ever wanted, and I'm a fool for hiding behind my so-called honorable intentions for so long. No more. She's mine now, and I won't allow anything to come between us.

Sadie's breathing quickens, and her body draws bow-tight before she cries out and locks her hands around my biceps. Sadie quakes through an orgasm, her inner muscles squeezing so tight that I have to fight my way in each time I pull back.

The sounds Sadie makes sink into my chest, wrapping around my heart. I'm so lost in watching her face that I ignore the fire burning along my spine until my whole world explodes.

I come hard, groaning her name as quivering arms struggle to hold me up. Sadie opens her eyes, and I soak in the absolute serenity on her face and the slight upturning of her lips.

My arms finally give out, and I collapse onto Sadie's heaving chest, luxuriating in the feeling of her soft skin and of still being inside her. I can't move. My climax has left me momentarily paralyzed.

Sadie hums beneath me, a blissful, satisfied sound. She lazily drags her fingers up and down my back, and I've never felt more right. Even more, I know deep down that the sex we shared was the best I've ever had. Loving the one you're with does make all the difference.

Lifting my weight off her, I can't help but stare. Sadie's auburn hair is a mess on the pillow, and her sleepy eyes blink lazily over a contented smile. In the glow of the rainy morning light, she looks like an angel. Mein Engel.

This moment, this woman, is what I want my forever to look like. For now, I'm happy to be holed up in this tiny cabin until the storms pass.

I take a moment to deal with the condom and return to the small bed, lying on my side and gathering Sadie to me, chest to chest.

Sadie

I've been in Aaron's arms for hours, and not once, have I felt the need to bolt. This is where I belong. Always have. I just hate that I couldn't see it. Brushing my lips across Aaron's neck, I promise myself to make up for lost time. Starting now, I think as I roll him to his back.

Having spent the early morning hours navigating this new dynamic—and each other's bodies—Aaron and I decide it's time to go home. We take advantage of a break in the rain and grudgingly leave the peaceful cabin. I follow Aaron to the four-wheelers, pausing when I recognize the machine Aaron rode here.

“Conspiring with my father, I see,” I say, gesturing to the twin machines.

Aaron winks and adds my bag to the weatherproof box on the back. “He always did like me.”

“Including that time he aimed a shotgun your way?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “So, he likes you better.”

An hour later, Aaron and I arrive at my father's place and pull the machines into the barn, the noise drawing dad from the house. He descends the porch stairs, deceptively calm. “I'm going to work. I expect you'll be going back now.”

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“Yeah,” I answer. “It’s time.”

My dad studies Aaron and me for a moment and nods. “Hosfeld, you saved my daughter’s life more than once. It’d be a damned shame if I had to kill you.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dad walks over and wraps his big arms around me. “I love you, Sadie.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

He waltzes off, whistling as he goes. Once he’s gone, Aaron places our bags in the back seat of his truck and then reaches for my hand. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

After spending the weekend at Aaron’s place, he delivers me to my apartment Sunday night, so I can drive to Birdie’s house to pick up Gunny. She must have been waiting by the door because the door swings open before I can ring the bell. Birdie drags me inside, shoves me toward the sofa, and places a full wine glass in my hand. “So, talk.”

“I don’t want to talk about Brock or Maxen.”

Birdie’s face softens, and she places a hand on mine. “I know, but I wasn’t asking about them. I want to know what’s going on with Aaron. I know he went to Tennessee after his big announcement.”

I can’t stop the flush that heats my face and colors my cheeks. Damned redhead genes. Birdie grins. “So, the bastard finally went for it.”

“Went for what?”

Now, Birdie rolls her eyes. “Please. Everyone on this hemisphere knows that Aaron has been in love with you for, like, forever.”

“You’re shitting me.”

The tech genius shrugs her shoulders and grimaces. “Sorry, but you were the only one in the dark.”

I shake my head, polish off the rest of my wine, and stand, reaching for Gunny’s bowl.

Finally, back in my own apartment, I set the fishbowl down and plug in the heater. Bending to glare at Gunny, I say, “Go ahead. Let me have it.”

He flashes his tail at me as if to say congratulations. You stopped being an idiot.

Warm fingers sneak beneath my shirt, pulling me back toward a solid body. I never heard him, but I wouldn’t unless Aaron wanted me to. Gunny turns back around, suddenly interested and rather animated. “You dick. You knew all along, didn’t you?”

Aaron laughs and presses a wet kiss to my neck. “Of course, he knew. We men have to stick together. Don’t we, Gunny?”

The damn fish burps a bubble in agreement.

Sadie

It’s still dark on a chilly Monday morning.



I pull into the Knot Corporation parking lot early, even for me. My plan is to spend some time with a gun in my hand, but I end up punching a bag in the gym. It hurts like hell, so I focus more on form than power. About ten minutes in, the gym door opens, and Dillan Knot walks in dressed in workout gear.

He's changed over the years, especially since being shot during that SEAL rescue mission in Estonia. It's nice to see him getting back to the gym again.

Knot drops his bag onto a nearby bench and detours to the boxing gear. He pulls on two target gloves and gestures for me to join him. He ducks into a fighting stance and holds out the targets. "How's the shoulder?"

I send a quick jab into his left. "Not as stiff as it was ten minutes ago."

"What about the rest of you?"

Involuntarily, my eyes drop to my hip, where part of Maxen's blade is still embedded. Knot smacks my head with a target, and I get set again. "I want this thing out of me."

"I understand that."

I guess so. The man lived with a bullet in him for three months until it could be safely removed. "How did it go with Aaron?"

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I drop my hands and stand up straight. “Let me guess. You knew too?”

Knot smiles. “I’ve always known. So?”

“So... if you’re through playing matchmaker, let’s get back to work.”

My friend grins wide, and I can’t help but mirror him. “It’s about damn time,” he says.

Knot and I are still going at it when Spatch and the other operatives begin filtering in for the morning’s training. Aaron winks at me, and Knot kicks out for my legs. Unlike with Maxen, I remain focused and jump over his leg sweep, knocking the boss on his ass.

The whole room freezes, knowing that this is the most physical Knot has been since nearly dying in Estonia. “Hosfeld, get your ass over here!” he bellows.

Aaron races over, and the two of us help Knot off the floor. Shocking the hell out of all of us, Knot moves like a freak of nature and puts Aaron in an arm bar. The crowd closes in, and Knot makes a very public announcement. “Aaron, your request for reassignment is hereby denied. You are to remain with your team. We’ve had enough upheaval for a while.”

Knot lets Aaron go, taking advantage of him being off balance to drop him to his knees. Several people in the room, including my team, clap and laugh until Spatch lets out an ear-shattering whistle. “If we’re done with this episode of the love boat, it’s time to get started. Knot, get your ass over here. I’m ready to see what you’ve

got. Hosfeld, you take Phelps. I want to see if her head's back on straight."

Knot cracks his knuckles and steps over to spar with Spatch, leaving me to face off with Aaron. My best friend, partner, and lover grins and assumes a fighting stance. "You ready for me, Sweetheart?"

Tossing away the boxing gloves, I lunge for him. "Sweetheart, my ass."